

A long time ago
In a galaxy far, far away ...



THE DARK SIDE

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This is a work of noncommercial “fan fiction”.

FOR LILITH
WITH LOVE BEYOND THE GALAXIES

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PREFACE

Updated 2002

This series of stories is called *The Dark Side*, in that it is what might be called a view of the *Star Wars* scenario of George Lucas from the perspective of the Dark Side of the Force. And this undertaking has a long and curious history:

When I first saw George Lucas' 1976 film *Star Wars*, long before it would be retitled *Episode IV: A New Hope*, my first impression was that it was a subtle science-fiction treatment of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. After a 7/24/77 letter of mine:

In *The Lord of the Rings* a small but vital object (the One Ring) capable of destroying the Great Enemy (Sauron) accidentally falls into the hands of a restless youngster (Frodo) anxious to travel beyond his isolated, uneventful country home (Bag End, the Shire). From a chance meeting with a seemingly- innocuous old man living under a modest assumed name (Gandalf) instead of his revealing real one (Olorin the Maia, one of the Istari), the young hero learns about the origins of a growing evil empire (Sauron and Mordor) while its forces are attacking his home (the Black Riders in the Shire) searching for the vital object (the Ring). The hero evades them, however, and travels to the nearest town (Bree), where at the local pub ("The Prancing Pony") he meets a gruff but friendly adventurer (Strider). The forces of the evil empire (the Black Riders) come looking for them in the pub, but miss them. However they are spied upon and betrayed by one of the locals, and narrowly escape into the wilderness. At a council (in Elrond's house) they learn more from the good wizard about the vital object. They try to take it directly to a place where its evil can be thwarted (over the Redhorn Pass), but are deflected into a dark maze (Moria), wherein the good wizard is killed by a monstrous being (the Balrog) while enabling them to escape. They flee to the greatest stronghold of resistance against the evil empire (Minas Tirith), whereupon they are attacked by an overwhelming enemy force led by a black-helmed sorcerer (the army of Mordor/the King Ringwraith). But the young hero evades the agents of the enemy searching for him, and even a last-minute attack by the enemy's evil sorcerers (the Ringwraiths), and manages to use the vital object to destroy the enemy threat by casting [the Ring] into the fiery heart of the threat (Mount Doom). The threat (Mordor) dissolves, and the evil leader (Sauron) is cast off into space. The young hero and his friends return in triumph to the stronghold (Minas Tirith), where they are honored with an awards ceremony by the monarch (King Elessar). Oh, and the good wizard turned out not to be dead after all, but secretly helped turn the tide by his use of secret magic (the Red Ring, Narya).

In *Star Wars* a small but vital object (a computer program) capable of destroying the Great Enemy (the Death Star) accidentally falls into the hands of a restless youngster (Luke Skywalker) anxious to travel beyond his isolated, uneventful country home (his farm, Tatooine). From a chance meeting with a seemingly-innocuous old man living under a modest assumed name (Ben Kenobi) instead of his revealing real one (General Obi-wan Kenobi, a Jedi Knight), the young hero learns about the origins of a growing evil empire (the Galactic Empire) while its forces are attacking his home (the Stormtroopers at his farm) searching for the vital object (the program). The hero evades them, however, and travels to the nearest town (Mos Eiseley), where at the local pub (the Cantina) he meets a gruff but friendly adventurer (Han Solo). The forces of the evil empire (the Stormtroopers) come looking for them in the pub, but miss them. However they are spied upon and betrayed by one of the locals, and narrowly escape into the wilderness. At a council (in the Millennium Falcon) they learn more from the good wizard about the vital object. They try to take it directly to a place where its evil can be thwarted (to Alderaan), but are deflected into a dark maze (the Death Star), wherein the good wizard is killed by a monstrous being (Darth Vader) while enabling them to escape. They flee to the greatest stronghold of resistance against the evil empire (the Rebel Headquarters), whereupon they are attacked by an overwhelming enemy force led by a black-helmed sorcerer (the Death Star/Darth Vader). But the young hero evades the agents of the enemy searching for him, and even a last-minute attack by the enemy's evil sorcerer (Darth Vader), and manages to use the vital object to destroy the enemy threat by casting [a proton torpedo] into the fiery heart of the threat (the Death Star). The threat (the Death Star) is obliterated, and the evil leader (Darth Vader) is cast off into space. The young hero and his friends return in triumph to the

stronghold (the Rebel Base), where they are honored with an awards ceremony by the monarch (Princess Leia). Oh, and the good wizard turned out not to be dead after all, but secretly helped turn the tide by his use of secret magic (the Force).

And I had the feeling that I had heard about the decadent galactic empire and the Rebellion against it before too ... in Isaac Asimov's famous *Foundation* trilogy. I might have thrown in Arthurian legend and Wagner's *Ring* for good measure, what with the youth who, aided by his magic sword, rises from obscurity to greatness.

But all of this proves nothing except that humans are fascinated by certain themes and character archetypes. There is as much art in synthesis as in creation; indeed it is difficult to cite **any** idea that someone else hasn't had before in another context.

So I tried to stop being a movie critic [I despise all movie critics except, of course, myself!] and just enjoy *Star Wars*. The action scenes were thrilling, the characters were delightful, and the special effects were dazzling. What does one **want** out of a movie, anyway?

But back then in 1977 I nevertheless found myself somewhat dissatisfied with the way in which the film had developed the character of Darth Vader and the notion of the Force - which George Lucas' original novel described only as "... an energy field generated by living things ... Some men believe it directs our actions, not the other way around. Knowledge of the Force and how to manipulate it was what gave the Jedi his special power." Intriguingly the Force had the quality of being morally disinterested: It could be wielded by friend or foe, and it did not guarantee the triumph of one side over the other [as in the "stacked deck" conflict between Jehovah and Satan].

And Darth Vader made the story. As a magician with a purpose entirely beyond mere power politics, he gave the conflict a transcendental importance. It was not a war between a social establishment and a guerrilla movement; it was a contest between the Forms of what humans vaguely refer to as "good" and "evil".

The "good" side (Leia and the Rebels) represented egalitarian principles of government, symbiosis with the natural environment of the Universe, and tolerance for individual personality quirks as long as the collective security of the Rebel band was not jeopardized.

The "bad" side (Darth Vader and the Empire) represented authoritarian government, the manipulation of the natural environment, division of beings into masterminds and slaves, and intolerance of non-conformity.

And the moral of *Star Wars* was that the "good" side could and did triumph over the "bad" - and that its philosophy gave it the absolute right to do so, above and beyond purely political considerations.

Why was Darth Vader so fascinating? [Why are **all** of history's and fiction's Darth Vaders so fascinating?] The answer is that he represents **the Form of intellectual separateness from the inertia of the cosmos**. While the Rebels in the film seemed to be fighting for the cause of individuality, in fact they were doing so in a superficial sense - in the way that an animal might struggle to escape from a trap. The real individualist was Darth Vader, who determined to bend the Force to his purposes rather than to disintegrate his Will and surrender it to the inertia of the Force [as Ben advised Luke to do]. Intellectual separateness from the natural order is a frightening notion to humans; hence they define it as "evil" and conjure up Satans to personify it in mythology. But, because their minds contain elements of independence whether they like it or not, they find "evil" alluring. And so Darth Vader became a cult object.

Darth Vaders can be destroyed only by greater Darth Vaders, or by accident. Again this was illustrated in *Lord of the Rings*, wherein a direct challenge to Sauron by Gandalf would have resulted merely in Gandalf's replacing him. The Saruman sub-plot explored this hypothesis. It was necessary for Sauron to be destroyed "by accident". But then Middle-earth became more primitive and less magical, because a high level of intellectual separateness from nature had given way to a lower level. Who cares what happened in Middle-earth after Sauron? No one; we know it was bound to be dull.

Star Wars dutifully followed *LOTR* here as elsewhere. Responsibility for the overthrow of the Dark Lord was taken by the Force; Luke simply surrendered to it at the crucial moment. His preeminence in the awards ceremony was "safe" because, like Frodo, he was a Common Man who had been brave and lucky. He would have been unacceptable to audiences had he demanded Darth Vader's prerogatives for himself.

In September 1977 I decided to explore these ideas by trying my hand at an imaginary sequel - *Secret of Sith* (chapters "Mission to the Senate" through "The Secret of Sith"). I wrote it over a weekend and surprised Lilith by writing her into it as well - in the character of Krel Atlan. I sent photocopies to a few friends and put it out of my mind - until mid-1978, when Forrest J Ackerman asked me if he could use it for a special Darth Vader issue of *Famous Monsters of Filmland*:



The Ackermonger's introduction took it from there:

Long, long ago ...
In a galaxy far, far away ...
In an alternate universe similar to but not identical to our own ...
There lived a talented filmonster fan named Michael A. Aquino.
And it came to pass that, for Lilith, the Lady of his Life, he told a tale to entertain her, giving no

thought to a wider audience except that, since his story was an homage to Another George Lucas in that parallel world, he felt that the Great George also should have a copy.

“Well, I have a few sci-fi friends too who might be interested,” he reasoned, so altogether he ran off 30 copies. Fortunately for the Editor of *Famous Monsters* (in that Other World) this Aquino, Historian of Events Imaginational, regarded EEEE (4E) as a friend and sent him a copy, saying “I recognize that I am not a professional writer - you should look upon this as no more nor less than fan fiction of the type that frequently appears in the *Star Trek*, *Perry Rhodan* & *Dark Shadows* fanzines - but nevertheless I thought you might derive some fleeting entertainment from my little offering.”

The Other Forry Ackerman (Forrest C. Ackerman was his full name rather than Forrest J) did enjoy the pseudo-history, so much so that he dispatched his copy via time-warp space-o-gram to our present day solar system, Planet 3, Hollyweird, Karloffornia, and I read it with great interest and said to myself, “Why, this is much too unusual an item to simply let languish in limbo like Stuart J. Byrne’s *Tarzan on Mars*,” so I am presenting it here as a curiosity from which I believe you will derive an exciting reading experience.

Bearing in mind that these events do not follow the path of George Lucas’ history nor the late Leigh Brackett’s nor any other authorized historians of *Star Wars* but are, as he puts it, “a personal fantasy” of Michael Aquino’s, read on!

Letters began to arrive from people all over the world telling me how they had enjoyed the story. So I followed up *S.O.S.* with *Pantehnikon* (Chapters “Crossroads” through “End of the Rebellion”), dedicated to Forry Ackerman and presented to him on New Year’s Day 1979.

Scheduled to follow *Pantehnikon* in 1980 was *Xronos*, a titanic “ultimate conflict” set in not one but **two** galaxies. The mathematics, research and writing filled bank after bank of my hardworking PolyMorphic 8813 computer, Glinda, and *Xronos* became such a horrendous mass of data that meeting the anticipated date was impossible. [**You** try working with two galaxies sometime!] Four initial chapters from *Xronos* appeared in the 1981 compilation, then withdrawn in 1988 for further revision. With this 2002 compilation I have updated and re-included them

Additionally, as I still have no idea when I may enjoy the leisure and luxury to fully finish *Xronos*, to this 2002 compilation I have added my 1981 synopsis of the rest of the story. Hopefully this will at least alleviate reader curiosity somewhat until I can expand it into full narrative.

Also added is an appendix concerning music - which, because of the obsolescence of some of the original recorded media, may be more frustrating than helpful to the reader. Still I thought it might be of some lingering “archæological” interest.

As I became more and more deeply enmired in *Xronos*, I found that knowledge of Andromeda’s more ancient history was necessary; hence Glinda and I assembled the chronology preceding the events of *Star Wars*. You will see that it “expands” to semi-text in places; eventually that entire chronology may give way to full text.

Next I found myself back at the very beginning, as certain events that went forward and backward from *Star Wars* came to critical importance in the “*Star Wars*” episode itself. So, for *Dark Side* consistency, I added to the 1981 compilation what might be called the “Dark Side” of the *Star Wars* movie events. I tried not to refer to texts of George Lucas’ film or novel while writing it, because I have sought to “paint an impressionist portrait” rather than merely “take a photograph”. Hence readers will encounter different dialogue here, as well as modifications of various familiar scenes and the addition/elimination of others.

Despite the later commercial publicity suggesting that *Star Wars*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, and *Return of the Jedi* were conceived as an integrated sequence from the very

beginning, an examination of both the first film and George Lucas' original novel suggests that this was not in fact the case - that *Star Wars* was originally conceived as a single movie/book and that the sequels were tacked on to it only following its staggering box-office success.

In my opinion the first film towered over its successors by the sheer strength of its 19th-century Romanticism; it was nothing less than a twentieth-century *Ring of the Nibelungen* in drama - and music! By contrast, *The Empire Strikes Back* degraded the three principal characters - Luke, Han, and Leia - into a tawdry soap-opera love triangle, turned Darth Vader into a mindless slave, contradicted *Star Wars* concerning Luke's parentage, hurriedly added the required racial minority presence conspicuously absent from the first movie [unless you count Darth Vader's voice], and served up a preposterous "Jedi initiation" for Luke presided over by a green gnome better suited to *Sesame Street*. The Freudian omelet of *TESB* gave way to comic-book slapstick in *Return of the Jedi*, wherein the last remaining vestiges of the original *Star Wars* atmosphere were submerged beneath a motley parade of absurd aliens and panda-bear Ewoks, and dealt a terminal blow by the grotesque "Darth Vader Born-Again" finale.

As for the second series of Lucasfilms - *Episodes I/II/III* - for me they have departed so far from the original first movie that I have no interest in them whatever.

The lesson to be learned here is that great art depends upon the capture of an original, ecstatic vision (Plato's *næsis*). If that vision is then degraded through filters, such as Freudianism, soap-opera sex, or silly social moralisms, its image progressively disintegrates until it vanishes altogether.

In *The Dark Side* I have sought to retain and develop the themes of the original *Star Wars* vision, and to disregard completely its two sequel films. Since both *Secret of Sith* and *Pantechnikon* were written prior to the release of those sequel films, this was not difficult. Moreover the elapse of time since all three of the first series of *Star Wars* films were released now enables *The Dark Side* to "play" to an audience without the unwelcome intrusion of the sequel-films' contrasts and contradictions.

Ultimately this peculiar history of the Dark Side of the Force might expand to five "books" as I am able to research and write them:

- I. **Andromeda:** The origins and early years of Andromedan civilization (years 1-3999 on the chronology).
- II. **The Republic:** The formation and growth of the Galactic Republic (years 4000-5075).
- III. **The First Star War** (the Clone War): Events during the Clone War, later known as the First Star War (years 5076-5082).
- IV. **The Second Star War** (the Alderaan Rebellion): Events from the beginning of the Star Wars film episode to the end of the Rebellion (years 5083-5084).
- V. **The Third Star War** (the Xronos war): The final conflict between the Andromedan and Milky Way Galaxies (years 5085-?).

In the tradition of the original *Star Wars* film, *The Dark Side* is not really a novel, but rather a "movie set to prose". [Alternately it may be considered as a Greater Black Magic laboratory or even a type of Erotic Crystallization Inertia (ECI) working - a tapestry exploring the designs created by the interweaving of many different threads.] The reader is intended to **experience** it, not just read it - as I experienced it when recording it. For I did not "author" it; rather I observed the events taking place and then recorded what I saw.

Similarly I did not “create” the characters. As each of them entered into the story, I merely observed what he or she did in various situations and then recorded those actions. As I spent more and more time with the characters, I grew to know them very well, and today count several of them as close acquaintances. [Perhaps you will too.]

Since *The Dark Side* is a “movie in text”, I “cast” it with professional actors and actresses as well. It is an advantage of magic that one can not only take one’s pick of casting, but can move various personages backward or forward in time/age to the precise appearance, age, and manner desired. Thus the *dramatis personæ* for *The Dark Side*:

I have retained five of the original actors of their age and appearance in the original *Star Wars* film: Mark Hamill as Luke Skywalker, Harrison Ford as Han Solo, Sir Alec Guinness as Obi-wan Kenobi, Carrie Fisher as Leia Organa, and Peter Cushing as Moff Tarkin.

In *The Dark Side* the role of Princess Leia is played by Carrie Fisher specifically in the graceful, regal style she adopted for the third Lucasfilm movie *Return of the Jedi* -and not with the abrasive mannerisms she employed in *Star Wars* or *The Empire Strikes Back*.

How does a young woman behave under the responsibilities of sovereign royalty? Here I took for my model a fairy princess whom I met in my own childhood: Ozma of Oz.



[Methinks I saw more than a hint of her in the way that the *Star Wars* Leia was dressed and coiffed.] Like Leia, Ozma regularly confronted weird and fantastic perils, aided by creatures who were at least as bizarre as some of those appearing in this history. Despite such trying circumstances she was always able to maintain her poise and dignity. And if Leia occasionally behaves a bit more like Dorothy Gale than Ozma, let us recall that Dorothy often jumped in to solve problems which at least temporarily would have dismayed her fairy friend.

A second “study” for Leia was Elizabeth I of England, who was similarly catapulted into the turmoil of sovereignty at a young age and forced to use her wits not just to become a capable ruler but also to survive the intrigues swirling around her.

Darth Vader is portrayed by James Mason of the age, appearance, and manner he presented as Captain Nemo in Walt Disney’s *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*:



This is all the more important because during much of *The Dark Side* he appears free of his protective armor. [And if you think you detect the ghost of the *Nautilus* in the Sith Starship, well ... you’re right!]

In George Lucas’ original *Star Wars* novel, the galactic emperor was a senator of the “old republic” by the name of Palpatine who had seized power by means of a coup. In the second and third Lucasfilms, however, the emperor was turned into a sort of “Sauron” - an ugly, grouchy, malevolent sorcerer. Not so in *The Dark Side*. My Palpatine is portrayed by Sir Laurence Olivier of the age, appearance, and patrician manner he presented as Crassus in the film *Spartacus* - an analogy all the more appropriate because of Crassus’ military venture against Spartacus’ revolt at a time when the Roman Republic was transitioning into the Roman Empire. [No “Crassus” photo available, but this will do:]



Imperial General Tharrud Terclis is modeled on [and his name is an anagram of] a terrestrial personage, Colonel Richard Sutter, one of the U.S. Army's foremost authorities on Special Operations - and a longtime personal friend. Similarly Terclis' MindWar Center is an idealization of the U.S. Army's Special Warfare Center at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. It should perhaps be established here that neither Sutter nor the Special Warfare Center are to be held accountable for the doctrines or practices of their Andromedan counterparts - though, after reading of General Terclis' adventures in the Second Star War, Sutter kindly contributed Terclis' speech to the graduating cadets of the MindWar Academy.

[Students of philosophy will note a strong Aristotelian influence in Terclis in contrast to the Platonism apparent in the Jedi. This too is intentional; Sutter - a Political Science Ph.D. - is a noted authority on Aristotle.]

In our *Dark Side* film, Terclis is played by Yul Brynner of the age, appearance, and manner he presented as Rameses II in *The Ten Commandments*:



In *The Dark Side* you will also be meeting two very singular characters: Lorin Xanpol the Pantechnikon and Wingrace the Valkyrie. Lorin Xanpol is a study of Paul Lorin Kantner, Captain of the Jefferson Starship and a composer of extraordinarily beautiful hymns to space and magic:



It seemed only fitting that, since he has taken me on so many journeys to the stars since 1966, and since he forecast the magical vortex of 1975 so crucial to the Æon of Set, I should now transport him to his beloved Andromedan Galaxy.

The Pantechnikon cyborg may be seen on the jacket and sleeve of the Jefferson Starship's *Dragonfly* album:



... and many of his characteristics may be studied in David Rorvik's *As Man Becomes Machine: The Next Step in Evolution* and Pamela Corduk's *Machines Who Think*.

Valkyries occupy a strange and mysterious role in ancient European legend, and in *The Dark Side* we meet one of the actual beings whom those Earthly legends would dimly recall:



Flashing in and out of the Pantechnikon's life in Andromeda, as on Earth, is Wingrace the Valkyrie, otherwise Grace Wing Slick of the Jefferson Starship:



Like the saga of Antony and Cleopatra, the story of Paul Kantner and Grace Slick is not a tranquil one - but when they have created music together, such magic results!

The Jedi Order (whose name I assume George Lucas originally adapted from the “Jeddaks” of Edgar Rice Burroughs’ Martian novels) is of course an essay on the Temple of Set, and a hint concerning the initiatory characteristics of each Jedi may be found in the color of his or her lightsaber blade.

What may I say about Krel Atlan, the sorceress with the crystalline eyes? There are women who flourish in the brilliance of sunlight and those who can be seen only in the delicate shimmer of the stars during the hours of darkness. Lilith Aquino, as Krel, is one of those whose path through the Dark Night of the Soul is dictated both by hazard and by her own ecstatic embrace of the divine mystery of her future.



Such women are never possessed by lovers or mates; rather they come and go as dreams, bestowing upon those fortunate enough to glimpse them the whisper of love’s immortality. Krel lent one of her names to that great civilization of pyramid/crystalline beings who inhabited Altair-4 ages before the events of *Forbidden Planet*, and her other name to that most ancient civilization of our own planet - as addressed in *Xronos*.

* * *

I will now, in 2002, confess to three heretofore “private secrets” of *The Dark Side*:

(1) I am impatient with the tedious inevitability of graphic sex scenes in so many contemporary novels, implying that (a) no one will buy or read the book unless such is included, and that (b) subtle eroticism simply cannot be written. I therefore resolved to develop any affectionate atmospheres in *The Dark Side* without ever once resorting to the coarse or the crude.

(2) Speech in modern novels has also frequently lapsed into slang expressions and fragments of sentences, echoing the degeneration of the English written and spoken language generally. In *The Dark Side* I have sought to translate the characters’ Andromedan dialogue into as grammatically-precise English as possible, including not a single obscenity or vulgarity throughout the narrative. This was particularly challenging in high-tension scenes, where it would be all too easy to resort to expletives for cheap emotionalism.

(3) The Lucasfilm *Star Wars* films are [in]famous for their carnage. [Well, the title is not “*Star Peace*”!] A great many humans and aliens are slaughtered, evidently with little or no concern. Accordingly I decided that in *The Dark Side* personal or military conflicts would be resolved with minimal death. [This was quite a task, considering that the main plotline revolves around a **galactic** war!] While some key plot elements, such as the destruction of Alderaan, could not be removed without critically impacting the storyline, much more sensitivity to such consequences has been added.

And now, before you begin your journey on the Dark Side, I would appreciate your giving a few moments of your time and attention to General Raj Dakkar of the STF, who has graciously consented to summarize some of the scientific aspects of this history. Then embark, if you will, for the Galaxy of Andromeda ... a long time ago and far, far away ... and **MAY THE FORCE BE WITH YOU!**



Imperial Stormtrooper Force
MindWar Center - Hub Four
Office of the Chief of Staff

TSGD19880401

TECHNICAL NOTES: *THE DARK SIDE*

Astronomical Points of Reference

Future Terran students of *The Dark Side* will note that the galaxy in which these events took place is that known to them as the Great Galaxy in Andromeda (M-31). The internal arrangement of Andromeda is coincidentally quite similar to that of your own Milky Way Galaxy, and in fact you may find it convenient to use a map of your galaxy to better understand the Star Wars.

The entire galaxy is approximately one hundred thousand light-years in diameter and approximately twenty thousand light-years in breadth. It contains approximately one hundred thousand million star systems. At the time of the Second Star War, the Galactic Empire extended along some thirty thousand light-years of what would correspond to the *Cygnus Carina* arm of the galactic spiral, with its outermost colonies located in what would correspond to the *Beta Doradus* spur of that arm.

The Galactic Hub is located in *Cygnus Carina* in roughly the same location as the *Sol* star system in your galaxy. The planet Tatooine is some four thousand eight hundred light-years down the spiral arm from the Hub, on the periphery of the arm towards the galactic nucleus. The Planet of Sith is located on the outer periphery of the *Sagittarius* arm, about three thousand six hundred light-years down that arm from a star corresponding to your *Iota-1 Scorpi*. [It is the only location in the Second Star War which is not located in the *Cygnus Carina* arm.]

The aim of the Rebel forces in the Second Star War was not to conquer the Galactic Empire, but rather to establish an independent territory for a new Republic. Thus they sought to isolate and control the *Beta Doradus* spur. The planet of Bralane is located in the approximate position of your *Beta Doradus* itself - about nine thousand six hundred light-years from the Hub, six thousand light-years from Tatooine, and eight thousand four hundred light-years from the Planet of Sith.

The diameter of the *Beta Doradus* spur at the point where the Rebellion sought to cut it off from the Empire is approximately 3,600 light-years. Across a 40-light-year band that embraces some 333,000 star systems. In Andromeda only about two percent of those

systems are capable of supporting life, reducing the number of contested systems to some 6,660 star systems. Even so one can appreciate the magnitude of the task the Rebellion set for itself - together with the difficulty the Empire faced in trying to anticipate and counter its specific operations.

Translite Velocity Flight

At the time you will be receiving this transmission, your own understanding of velocities will probably still be based upon the misapprehension that faster-than-light travel is impossible. Many years ago one of our own academicians, a Professor Unistone, drew the same conclusion. He said in his Special Theory of Relativity that all velocities were relative except that of light, and it followed from this assumption that material objects could not accelerate past that velocity and remain material.

The fallacy in Unistone's Special Theory is that it postulates a similar characteristic (relative velocity) for everything in the Universe **except** one thing (light). An exception to a theory invalidates the theory as a general law. A corrected Special Theory provides for relative velocities of **all** phenomena, light included.

What makes the original Special Theory acceptable and even demonstrable is that it **does** hold true for evidence of actual phenomena **that is conveyed by light waves or slower media**. In other words, the **detectable** results of experiments - including those which have supposedly validated the original Special Theory - are conveyed to observers via sensory impressions which are functions of wave emissions or reflections. As actual object velocities increase, our senses and those of test instruments register distortions of mass and energy. But this is a distortion of the **transmission process** and **not** of the actual object. In the three-dimensional space in which it exists, it undergoes no mass/energy transformation whatever (save, of course, loss of propulsion energy).

Hence it is entirely possible for our starships to travel faster than light. Such a ship merely accelerates past 186,000 mps (relative to its point of departure), and in the process of doing so it remains unchanged (to itself). To an observer standing on a platform against whose motion the relative 186,000 mps is being measured, however, certain peculiar things would seem to happen:

From the rear the ship would seem to undergo mass-conversion and then to vanish altogether upon reaching relative light-speed, because the detectable emissions receding from it towards the observer would arrive at a slower and slower rate of speed and finally cease to come altogether once the ship exceeds relative light-speed. At that moment the net direction of the emissions would be away from the observer ... in the same direction as the ship.

Seen from the side, the ship's image would undergo other distortions stemming from the high lateral velocity - again relative to the observer - of the emitted waves of energy. And seen from the front, the ship's image would also appear distorted, because the emitted waves would be approaching the observer at more than 186,000 mps.

One of the implications of these facts is that the acceleration or deceleration of time, which follows from the original Special Theory, is also wrong. Time would appear to be distorted as the emissions or reflections by which an observer on the ship or the platform measures the time of the other object became slower (receding) or faster (approaching). But again this would be a distortion of the transmission process and not of the objects themselves. On each object time would pass at the same rate. A spaceship traveling away from your Earth would seem to be populated by "slower" astronauts as seen through an Earth-telescope or television. On its return trip it would seem to be populated by "faster"

astronauts. Upon returning to Earth the astronauts would be found to have aged at precisely the same rate as their terrestrial counterparts.

Assuming relative velocity for light also means that a ship would never accelerate relative to a “fixed” light speed. Its acceleration past the speed of light could only be measured against the relative velocities of light-emissions from other objects - stars, orbiting planets, etc. Were a starship to exceed light-velocity traveling away from your Earth, it would seem to an Earth-based observer to vanish. To an observer on the ship, however, Earth would appear to exceed light-speed and vanish.

Once you understand the foregoing, you will also be able to resolve the apparently paradoxical mathematics of “black holes” - which, in the Unistonian sense, do not exist. What your astronomers and physicists have identified as “black holes” are in fact ordinary neutron stars.

The ion-engine starships used by both the Rebellion and the Empire were generally capable of cruising velocities of 101,000 times the speed of light. Representative travel-times would thus be approximately a month of your time between Tatooine, the Planet of Sith, and the Hub [which are located in a rough equilateral triangle]. From the Planet of Sith to Bralane takes about seven weeks, while a trip from Tatooine to Bralane takes only three weeks. Because of the curvature of the *Beta Doradus* spur, it took General Terclis’ forces from four to six weeks to reach their respective initial positions in the Second Star War. Terclis’ Death Star reached its own initial position approximately four weeks after leaving the Hub. [These time factors are all incorporated into the events of this history, of course.]

Translite Channels (TLC)

Because of a translite starship’s inability to take coherent readings of objects of mass whose relative velocity compared to it is greater than that of light, it is essentially “blind” once it achieves translite velocity. The risk of collision with objects of mass became a real danger to translite ships for this reason. Despite the vastness of space, a ship traveling at several hundred thousand times the speed of light runs the risk of encountering various particles in its path. And striking even a single small meteorite at that relative velocity would mean instantaneous destruction for the ship and its crew.

In order to achieve safe translite travel throughout the Galactic Empire in Andromeda, therefore, we developed a network of “Translite Channels (TLC)” - essentially long vector-paths through space that were kept free of matter by stringent computer monitoring and destruction of objects which might intrude into the channel. Translite travel outside of these channels was too dangerous to be practical, with the exception of long-range probe ships equipped with AMPs.

Anti-Matter Projectors (AMP)

Anti-matter projectors (AMP) are devices designed to emit harmonious streams of positrons and antiprotons through the bombardment of matter by proton beams energized at a level of several billion electron-volts. When the antimatter particles are accelerated via electromagnetic coils, they combine with and annihilate particles of matter in their path, producing zero mass and a great deal of radiation. [The process of annihilation releases energy many hundred times greater than that caused by a matter-fusion bomb of similar weight - for instance, your hydrogen bombs.]

Small AMPs were therefore mounted on the noses of our explorer and courier ships to enable them to travel at translite outside of the regular translite channels. In effect the AMP created a continuous matter-antimatter neutralization in front of the ship, obliterating any objects with which it might collide. Due to the potential danger to life-forms which might lie in the path of AMP-equipped ships, however, use of the devices was kept to a necessary minimum.

The large AMP mounted on the Death Stars operated on the same principle. The massive stream of antimatter particles emitted from the projector simply combined with and obliterated the matter composing the target planet or fleet of ships.

Lasers

Our large, triangular Class-13 Star Destroyers and the small twin-ion-engine (TIE) fighters are equipped with CO₂ gas-dynamic lasers, as was Han Solo's *Millennium Falcon*. Lasers are not used in space just because they are more exotic or more colorful. [Indeed, science-fiction films notwithstanding, one **cannot** see flashes of laser-light in space, as there is no reflective atmosphere for the beams to impact.] Lasers are used for two reasons: (1) Slower weapons are virtually useless against 101,000xlite starships, and (2) weapons with any recoil whatever are highly impractical in a zero-gravity environment.

The targeting of lasers at or from starships moving at translite velocities is extremely difficult; hence they are used effectively only in battles where all opponents are moving at sublite velocity.

Grasers

CL-13s, Death Stars, and major planetary defense bases are equipped with larger, more expensive, and more cumbersome gamma-ray lasers ("grasers"). Grasers work on the same principle as lasers but synchronize gamma rays from atomic nuclei rather than X-rays from the outside electrons. A graser-beam is, in essence, a synchronized nuclear explosion. The range and destructive power of a graser is far greater than that of a laser, but the massive containing and mirroring apparatus precludes the use of grasers by individuals or indeed all but the largest of starships. Grasers are also useless for wounding or incapacitating combat; a graser hit is invariably totally destructive.

Photon Engines

These are the most powerful engines known to our physicists. As of this writing only two starships have been equipped with them - Lord Darth Vader's starship and Lord Han Solo's *Millennium Eagle*. Both ships carry two PEX-4C photon engines, although the *Eagle* also carries five K-80 ion engines as well.

The photon is a particle of zero mass caused by the combination of atoms of matter and antimatter and accompanied by an explosive power hundreds of times more powerful than that of hydrogen bomb fusion. Thus the engine is a propulsion application of the AMP-principle. Whereas our IE-powered ships have an effective cruising velocity of 101,000xlite, the two PEX-4C powered ships have a theoretical velocity of 2,000,000xlite. Such speeds are only possible via the use of bow-AMPs on both ships; otherwise even the extremely rarified interstellar plasma would be deadly.

Tactical Considerations

Across the vast distances of space involved in the Second Star War [to say nothing of the Third], there was no question of constructing “nets” or “barriers” of any sort. A force on either side would easily be able to avoid conflict; in fact both sides had to make a concentrated effort to **locate** one another. The expertise of a military commander, therefore, lies in first finding and then accurately assessing the size and striking power of an enemy force. Students of military history may compare Luke Skywalker’s plan for defeating the second Death Star with that of Robert E. Lee on the final day of the Battle of Gettysburg [see in particular Michael Shaara’s *The Killer Angels*, as well as the Warsaw Pact’s “breakthrough” doctrine for the piercing of defensive lines via a phased-echelon attack.]

Release of further technical information at this time would inhibit your normal process of scientific development.

RAJ DAKKAR
RAJ DAKKAR
General, STF
Chief of Staff

RD:g:m

CHRONOLOGY

[Extract from the Chronicles of the Galactic Empire of Andromeda]

Chronology Through Year 5083

[Dates shown do not refer to years on the standard Andromedan calendar, but are computed sequentially from the first event included in the history.]

- Year 1: The Fire of Sith is inspired in the Andromedan humans of the planet Felgane by Thanos Kon, Lord of Sith from the Crab Nebula.
- Year 25: Thanos Kon writes the *Yellow Text* and entrusts it to the Sages of Felgane. He then departs the pastoral culture on Felgane for the Planet of Sith.
- Year 30: Thanos Kon completes the building of the stone temple and pit on the Planet of Sith. Sensing the coming of his own transmigration, he appeals to Sith for a monument to his presence in Andromeda. Sith creates the circular chamber and the statue endowed with his Fire, and sets Wingrace the Valkyrie to guard it and Sith Lords of the future. Transmigration of Thanos Kon and conduct of the passage of his body by Wingrace.
- Year 3000: Discovery of atomic energy by Felgans. First planetary space exploration.
- Year 3200: Construction of ion-engine spaceships with potential for translite velocity. First colonization of human life-supporting planets in neighboring solar systems.
- Year 4000: The Felgan colonial system becomes the Galactic Republic, extending 5,000 light-years along the Spiral Arm. Major translite channels in operation, but system of clearance still difficult. Commerce is slow. Order of Jedi founded by Regos Garlen of the Sages.
- Year 4500: The Galactic Republic extends 15,000 light-years along the spiral arm. Translite channels are now fully operational. High-Energy Laser (HEL) technology has been developed. The seat of government is moved to the Hub.
- Year 5000: The Galactic Republic now extends some 30,000 light-years along spiral arm. Antimatter technology has been developed to AMP, but not yet to propulsion (photonic) level. Graser technology has been developed.
- Year 5015: Obi-wan Kenobi is born on Ioroe.
- Year 5020: Tharrud Terclis is born on Diur. Bail Organa is born on Alderaan. Moff Tarkin is born on Serqu-Ni.
- Year 5027: Aureon Palpatine is born on Kemset. Jan Dodonna is born on Alderaan.

- Year 5029: Raj Dakkar is born on Elor. Kenobi enters the Jedi Order on Hub-3.
- Year 5034: Eldan and Owen Skywalker are born on Tatooine.
- Year 5038: Darth Vader is born on Kemset.
- Year 5046: Kenobi becomes Ordeal Master of the Jedi at the Citadel.
- Year 5049: Han Solo is born on Corel.
- Year 5050: Terclis commissioned in the Republican Star Force (RSF). Tarkin becomes a Senator and instructor at the Academy of State on Hub-3. Palpatine saves Darth Vader's life on Kemset. Vader enters the Jedi on Hub-3.
- Year 5052: Krel Atlan is born on Diur.
- Year 5053: Lorin Xanpol is born on Tatooine.
- Year 5055: Leia Organa is born on Alderaan. Lucas Palpatine is born on Hub-3. Palpatine enters the Academy of State on Hub-3 and studies under Tarkin. Raj Dakkar is commissioned in the RSF.
- Year 5059: Jan Dodonna is commissioned in the RSF. Darth Vader completes Jedi Ordeal and, on Palpatine's urging, enters the RSF War College.
- Year 5064: Palpatine completes the Academy of State. Eldan Skywalker commissioned in the RSF. Beyond the periphery of the Republic the Clone Genos Cell begins to form.
- Year 5067: Palpatine becomes Senator from Kemset.
- Year 5070: Darth Vader completes RSFWC and is commissioned as a colonel in the RSF. Kenobi becomes Sophrex of the Jedi. Krel Atlan enters the Citadel and begins the Ordeal.
- Year 5073: As Sophrex, Kenobi learns of the existence of the *Yellow Text* in the forbidden archives of the Jedi, breaks the Seal of Thanos Kon, and secretly studies it.

Terclis becomes a brigadier general in the RSF and founds the MindWar Center on Hub-4. He selects Colonel Dakkar as his Chief of Staff.

The MindWar Center exercises virtually autonomous authority over research and application of psychological and political thought-control techniques, as well as being the controlling agency for the RSF's clandestine operations. Critics comment that, military expediency aside, the MindWar Center is going beyond the acceptable bounds of civilization. Its targets are the elemental bases of the intellect and personality, it is said, and some critics themselves fear they are not free of its manipulation.

The MindWar Center's operatives move in a realm which most beings cannot not even comprehend, much less control, and so they gradually become almost universal objects of fear and mistrust throughout the Republic.

General Dodonna asks Colonel Vader for advice on how to deal with Alderaan's increasingly serious civil war. Vader suggests Senatorial mediation and refers him to Palpatine. The Senate agrees, and Palpatine nominates Vader as Legate to settle the crisis.

Vader and Dodonna travel to Alderaan. Vader realizes that because of Alderaan's harsh, feudal culture, a monarchy under the Organa Clan holds the best hopes for that planet's continued development of civilization. After exhaustive negotiations, he succeeds in convincing the warring clans to agree to this form of government.

What Vader did not anticipate was that in the course of his diplomacy he would meet, and fall in love with Leia, daughter of the Organa Clan Chieftain Bail. When Bail discovers this, he decrees that because of Vader's non-Alderaan lineage, he must not see anything further of Leia.

Dodonna has ominous news for Vader as well: There are no clan princes capable of Bail's strong leadership. The two Legates realize that the clans' agreement to a hereditary monarchy was only an expediency to deceive the Galactic Senate. Upon the death of Bail, Leia will almost certainly be killed by one of the clanlords, after which the ferocious civil warfare of Alderaan will resume.

Vader, however, has learned that Alderaanean medicine has made startling breakthroughs in the field of electrical stimulation of the brain (ESB). ESB treatment of Leia's brain could transform her from a gentle, peaceful personality into a mental mutant: a dynamic, forceful genius with every promise of maintaining the Organa Clan's monarchy past her father's demise.

Bail Organa is shocked at Vader's proposal and immediately refuses. Only under Vader's threat of invasion of the planet by the RSF and an imposed Republican occupation does he relent and agree. However, believing Vader's proposal as much due to personal as to political reasons, Bail also banishes Vader forever from Alderaan under pain of death.

As Darth Vader departs he accidentally encounters Leia, who, knowing nothing of her future fate, believes that Vader is callously deserting her. Unable to tell her the truth, Vader allows her to believe this. He then leaves Alderaan and returns to Hub-3, where he reports the successful completion of his mission to the Senate. He is promoted to brigadier general, declines an invitation from Terclis to come to the MWC, and is given command of an RSF Strike Wing.

Year 5076: Palpatine talks extensively with Kenobi and Tarkin about the future of the Republic. Tarkin urges Palpatine to stage a coup and declare an Empire. Seemingly surprisingly, Kenobi does not disagree - but on the basis of the necessity for a Philosopher-King system of government. Palpatine determines to make the effort, but he asks Kenobi to take 21-year-old Lucas out of danger - but also to test him as a future Emperor. Kenobi agrees.

The Clone Genos reveals itself. The Clone War (the First Star War) begins.

Year 5077: Following initial conditioning by the disguised ESB treatments, Leia Organa is sent to the Hub as Alderaan's Senator. Dodonna becomes a major general and is given an RSF Strike Division. Han Solo acquires the *Millennium Falcon* and begins smuggling runs between Corell, Kessel, and Tatooine.

Year 5078: The Procreators of the Clones establish one of their secret gene fusion laboratories on the Planet of Sith. A year later, when they detect the effects of the poisonous radiation of the planet, the laboratory is abandoned.

Year 5080: After four years of increasingly serious defeats by the Clone Cells, the Republic is in a state of crisis. Bitterly divisive factions form in the Senate. The Centrist faction, controlled by Tarkin and Palpatine, wants more stringent control by the Hub. The Autonomic faction, headed by Leia Organa, wants the RSF to be broken down into system-based forces and returned to localized control.

The Senate becomes embroiled in furious debate concerning a proposal by Tharrud Terclis. He offers to create a special type of soldier capable of dealing with political/military problems that might arise among the varied civilizations of the Galactic Republic, as well as with external threats such as the Clones: the Stormtrooper. He asks the Senate to authorize a Stormtrooper Force independent of the Republican Starforce.

Normally Terclis' proposal would almost certainly be rejected by the Senate. Distrust and outright fear of the MindWar Center always run high, and the RSF General Staff vehemently opposes what it considers a dangerous departure from responsible and ethical military organization. But conditions are not normal. Terclis is authorized to commence a limited "test" of his concept, while the RSF is appeased by substantial increases in its strength levels.

Upon volunteering and being selected for the STF, a Starforce soldier leaves behind all prior symbols of rank and accomplishment and even outward individuality. Henceforth he is indistinguishable from all other STs within a gleaming white armored spacesuit. Terclis' intent, however, is not to enable STs to hide behind anonymity or to turn them into mindless automatons. Rather it is to inspire each ST to assume the identity of all STs, adopting responsibility for the STF as a whole. Each virtue displayed would be to the credit of every ST, and every injustice or error committed would reflect adversely upon the entire STF.

Each Stormtrooper's ideal self, therefore, is far more carefully conceptualized than that of the average individual. ST training combines the space-combat skills as taught in the RSF with the unconventional tactics and MindWar principles developed by the MindWar Center.

Terclis adds still another dimension to the STF, however, that admittedly confounds its critics: Each ST undergoes extensive education in macropolitical ethics and systemic analysis, and then in the course of actual duty is expected to evaluate each order received on the basis of its intrinsic justice and its probable effect upon the overall strategic scenario. Orders adjudged as being strategically ineffective or ethically deficient on a multi-civilization matrix are to be disregarded.

To make the requirement even more exacting, each ST is expected to make such evaluations almost instantaneously. This provision is scoffed at as being "impossible" when Terclis first reveals it, but he insists that it is in fact a central key to the Stormtroopers' astounding success in action. It forces STF commanders to adhere to standards of competence far beyond those of the RSF, argues Terclis, and it makes every single member of an STF Strike Force as competent in the execution of a strike as the senior officer. A STF Strike Team is thus virtually impossible to disable in action.

In return for the Centrist-backed authorization of Terclis' STF, the Autonomists win the return of the Kanlor Strike Command to that system, which faces a major Clone offensive.

The Clone Cells, recognizing the vulnerability of Kanlor, strike heavily at it. The Kanlor SC appeals to the RSF for reinforcement, but the Senate is divided on whether this is justified - the Autonomists to prove their point and the Centrists to prove them wrong. Reinforcements are finally sent, but the delay is fatal. When the RSF arrives, it finds Kanlor destroyed.

The Kanlor disaster is what Palpatine needs as the incident to justify his coup. He declares himself Emperor, and both the Centrists and the RSF back him. There is considerable speculation over Terclis' reaction. Will the STF challenge the coup and attempt to restore the Republic, or will it become a tool of the new order? Characteristically Terclis does neither, nor does he comment on the development save to say that neither truth nor civilization are necessarily functions of democracy.

Palpatine subsequently issues the series of decrees that reconstitute the old Republican Star Force into the Imperial Star Force (ISF).

When news of the coup reaches Darth Vader, he fears that the Empire will not be able to coexist with the Jedis' independent interpretations of justice. He voices his concern to his Deputy Commander, Colonel Eldan Skywalker, who decides that Vader's sentiments are dangerous enough to warrant his arrest. The two clash, and Vader kills Skywalker and several other ISF officers who try to stop him, boards a long-range probe ship, and escapes.

Year 5081: News of the events following Darth Vader's final destruction of the Clone fleet are greeted at the Citadel of the Jedi with shock and disbelief. The majority of the Jedi are openly antagonistic towards the Empire. Kenobi is severely criticized for not taking action against the coup. Kenobi relinquishes his office, retiring in self-imposed exile to the desert planet of Tatooine.

As Darth Vader brings the probe ship back to dimensional space, he sees floating before him a planet surrounded by pulsating sheets of lightning. Vader pilots his small craft directly towards the surface but loses control of it as soon as it enters the lightning-belt. When it seems that the ship is about to disintegrate, it suddenly breaks through to a clear atmosphere below the lightning. Its engines seared beyond use, the craft plunges toward the rocky surface of the strange world, skims along a low range of mountains, and finally plows to a halt atop a desolate, wind-swept plateau.

From the cockpit of the ship Darth Vader had seen what seemed to be some sort of structure amidst the sand as he approached the plateau, and, after climbing free from the wreckage, he makes his way in the direction he had fixed for it. Dazed by the fierce winds that sweep across the plateau and half-blinded by the lightning above him, he finally comes to the object of his search, now seen to be a squat, windowless building surrounded by a circle of crude monoliths.

He finds a low, arched doorway, passes through a series of corridors whose walls are covered with faded murals or inscriptions, and finally emerges into a great domed chamber. In the dim, yellowish light he can see a gaping circular pit surrounded by what seem to be six crudely-carven stone altars.¹ At the end of his strength, he sinks down beside one of the altars, lets a handful of dust trickle through his fingers, and lapses into sleep.

When Darth Vader awakes, it is to the bright, piercing light of a modern laboratory. Leaning over him are two strange-looking droids; in a prehensile arm one of them holds some sort of respiration apparatus that presumably had just been used upon him. Slowly and shakily he sits up. He is, he perceives, lying on some sort of operating table; he sees the burned, dust-covered remains of his protective suit lying on the floor beside the table. He swings off the table on to his feet and begins to explore.

Of the Clones who had built the complex there is no sign, but he comes across a thick-walled storage room containing four additional droids. Probing further, he finds a living area designed for something at least approximately humanoid, and, in an alcove at the far end of the complex, he locates some rough-hewn stairs leading upward. Returning to the laboratory in which he had regained consciousness, he looks more closely at the equipment. While some of the devices and their controls are completely unfamiliar to him, they are all marked in the Colonial Cipher.

¹ The plateau and its structure are inspired by the Plateau of Leng and its Monastery of the Elder Pharos from H.P. Lovecraft's *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* and other writings.

Hooking one of the droids up to the Central Processor, He adapts its output file to the language of the Republic and learns that he is underground, some five miles beneath the surface. The ascending stair, as he had guessed, leads to the strange building atop the plateau.

When after several months Darth Vader begins to feel weak and unstable, he learns that he is slowly dying as the result of the planet's radiation. He sets the droids to analyzing the nature of the poison and then to devising an antidote for it. The latter they are unable to do, but they ascertain that its progression can be halted within a specially shielded and maintained atmospheric environment.

Using the molecular recombination tubes of the Clones, Darth Vader produces the necessary shielding - a metallic fiber of a dull black sheen. From this fiber he fashions for himself protective armor, but by this time his sensory features are beginning to fail. He gives careful instructions to the surgical droids, then lies back on the operating table from which he had first seen this strange underground world.

When Darth Vader awakens this time, he stares into a reflected image that is destined to become infamous throughout the galaxy. The droids have fixed permanently onto his head a black metal helmet connected directly to his organic sensory systems. Two glowing red photocells replace his eyes, a hissing breath screen his respiration, and a mechanical audio frequency generator his voice. The droids have completed their task efficiently but without regard for the visual impact of the device. It appears as nothing so much as a great black skull, and whether by accident or by some ironic twist of fate, it seems to radiate malevolence.

Nevertheless the mask and the environmental suit are successful in arresting the decay of Darth Vader's body, and soon he is accustomed, if not resigned to them. He determines to experiment further to see if there might not be some method of regenerating his organic features through the Clone machinery.

Ever since he had arrived in the underground complex, he had intended to make a further exploration of the strange stone building on the planet's surface; now he does so. The planet has had other effects upon him, he notes; his normal metabolism has been replaced by photosynthetic processes, and he no longer requires sleep. So, armed with provisions no more elaborate than a powerful Xenon-fission lamp, he begins the ascent to the surface.

Finally he arrives at an arched doorway through which there glows the dull, yellowish light he remembers. He advances through it, finding himself again in the large, domed room. He peers into the central circular pit but can see nothing in its blackened depths save signs of severe scorching on the sides.

In a smaller chamber behind the great one, Darth Vader finds a library the like of which he has never previously encountered. It contains works of Black Magic and sorcery whose very existence has been unknown to all but the Masters of the Jedi, and whose study has been forbidden by them. Now Darth Vader spends weeks in their perusal, and in the great domed chamber celebrates Workings of a wonderful and terrible nature. And the six stone altars are stained afresh with blood, but not the blood of anything which can be said to have a natural right to live.

And so Darth Vader finally comes to learn of the existence of a second great domed chamber only a short distance beneath the Clone laboratory complex. In it, he is told, is the essence of the Power of Darkness itself. Applying the Keys which are communicated to him, Darth Vader locates a subterranean passageway concealed earlier by panels of hewn rock. Deeper and deeper it descends into the depths of the planet, and finally he comes to a titanic stone slab emblazoned with murals and hieroglyphs.

Before it he utters the Great Key of the Opening of the Way, and silently the slab tilts upwards before him. He enters into the chamber beyond, and when he emerges he has become the Dark Lord of Sith.

Obi-wan Kenobi arrives on Tatooine. He places a hypnotic blank on Lucas Palpatine's memory of his past life and entrusts him to the care of Owen and Beru Skywalker as Luke, the orphaned son of Eldan. He represents himself simply as "Ben" Kenobi and retires to a hut in the desert from which he can watch Luke at a distance.

The Republic has lost almost a third of its inhabited territory to the Clones, and only the efforts of the Jedi have prevented the disaster from being even more widespread. Now Terclis is recalled to the Senate with the greatest urgency and directed to activate and expand his proposed STF at the maximum possible speed. He does so, and within months the first STF fleets are en route to the sectors threatened or controlled by the Clones.

What takes place then astonishes even Terclis' most ardent supporters and catapults him into a galactic legend. Within the year the Clone Cells are almost completely annihilated. The STF never loses a single major engagement, and in the cases where STF units suffer defeat, it is only because of accidental conditions of great numerical superiority in favor of the Clones. Soon the remaining Cells are thoroughly terror-stricken. The Stormtroopers take no prisoners and accept no surrender once committed. Ultimately the Clone War ends not by treaty or armistice; rather it simply ceases because of wholesale panic and defection within the Clone Cells. Terclis personally commands the assault on and destruction of the Clone Genos. Upon returning in triumph to the Hub, he is promoted to Imperial General, sole officer in the Empire to hold this five-star rank.

Year 5082: At first reluctant to take action against the dissenting Jedi, Palpatine is finally told by Tarkin that he will be slain and replaced if he does not do so. Four months after Kenobi's departure the entire Order assembles before the Citadel to choose and acclaim a new Sophrex.

On the Planet of Sith Darth Vader has completed repairs on his probe ship and provided it with an outer hull of the black-metal compound. He flies to Hub-3, arriving the afternoon of the Jedi Conclave.

Though he longs to step forward and claim his place among the Jedi, he remains concealed in the nearby forest. He has learned the reason for the Conclave, and accordingly he doubts that he would be a welcome figure there. So he watches helplessly as the massacre occurs.

As the imposing strains of the Processional ring through the halls, troops from the Imperial Guard suddenly burst in upon the scene, their weapons raining fire and death upon the incredulous assemblage. The massacre is as thorough as it is unexpected; within minutes the ancient Order of the Jedi is gone.

Only one Jedi lives through that terrible day - Krel Atlan. Unconscious and presumed mortally wounded, she is left for dead by the Guardsmen. But that night a tall black shape enters the Citadel, eluding the sentries who have been posted there, and finds her still alive among the butchered bodies. His sensitivity to the Force has enabled him to sense her life-field, and by diverting the attention of the guards he is able to carry her out of the Citadel and into the probe ship. He takes her to the Planet of Sith, where her life is saved by Wingrace at the price of Krel's initiation to the Dark Side of the Force.

A close bond slowly develops between Darth Vader and Krel Atlan - a love marred by a deeply-scarred remoteness in Vader. Wingrace advises Krel that what remains of him is sincere, but that the darker realms of his soul contain horrors and daemonic passions best left alone. Krel accepts the Valkyrie's warning, and she and Vader become companions on paths of magic and mystery in ways never known to other beings. Yet they cannot taste the innocence of simple love - the price of initiation to the Dark Side.

Word of the Jedi Massacre reaches Kenobi on Tatooine. At first he is consumed with rage and bitterness; then he comes to the realization that the Jedi courted it by their refusal to understand and adapt to their new environment.

Darth Vader returns to Hub-3 and is arrested and brought before Palpatine. He convinces the Emperor that he can not constitute a political threat to him because of the disgrace in which his name is held, and suggests that his knowledge as a Jedi, military strategist and political scientist can further Palpatine's ambitions.

Palpatine doubts Vader's motives, recalling his earlier distaste for the Empire and Palpatine's own responsibility for the massacre of the Jedi. But he has need of Vader's unique capabilities and so decides to take the chance. He presents Vader to the Senate as his personal deputy.

There is an immediate uproar because of lingering dislike for the Jedi and condemnation for Vader's past treason. Senator Leia Organa attacks him particularly vehemently. But Palpatine and Tarkin have enough power to dictate the decision, and so Vader's position is confirmed by a bare majority.

On Tatooine Luke Skywalker makes the acquaintance of Lorin Xanpol. Darth Vader orders the construction of the Sith Ship on Hub-5, and Krel Atlan arrives to supervise its special features.

Year 5083: Word reaches the Hub of a small but growing rebellion against the Empire, but the power behind it cannot be identified. Palpatine sends Tarkin and Vader to deal with it, giving Tarkin command of the first of the newly-designed Death Stars. Thus Begins the Second Star War.

As the Death Star is enroute to the area of the rebellion, Vader discovers rebel spies on board, transmitting the plans of the battle station to a certain coordinate near Tatooine. He forces the spies to transmit that further details will follow. They do not know who is receiving their message. Vader takes one of the Class-13 Star Destroyers escorting the Death Star and proceeds to the transmission point, where he surprises an Alderaan courier ship ...

STAR WARS

1981

1. THE REBELLION REVEALED

The scan watch on the Alderaan courier ship stared at the screen before him in shocked disbelief; then he lunged for the microphone on the right side of the instrument panel. "Bridge!" he said. "Star Destroyer coming sublite right on top of us, V-34, 12, 40, heading direct zero!"

Colonel Sulvan, commander of the Alderaan ship, slammed his fist angrily down on the console before him and spun round to face Leia Organa. "That tears it!" he said. "It's got to be from the Death Star's escort fleet. We've got to assume that they caught Henos and Yural, and that means we've only few moments to get out of here." Sulvan did not waste time issuing instructions; he sprang from his seat, bolted across the bridge to the command override controls, and jammed the six ion-engine throttles as far forward as they would go. "Straight run!" he shouted at the navigators. "No plot until we're away from this 13!"

The courier ship shuddered as its six engines roared to life and it shot forward towards translite and safety. But Colonel Olenir had anticipated just such a response, and he had not brought the CL13 down to sublite without first manning its laser batteries. Split-seconds after the Alderaan ship's engines roared to life, a cluster of precisely-aimed laser beams ripped into their nozzles. "Careful, careful," said Olenir on the fire control channel. "Nothing forward of the burn chambers - We want to stop it, not blow it up."

Alarms shrieked through the Alderaan ship as three of the engines registered their damage and shut themselves down. Sulvan knew instantly that his efforts had failed and that escape was now impossible. "But it seems they want us alive," he said to Leia. "I can try to get us as far as Tatooine before they target our attitude jets and immobilize us for boarding. If you can get those plans to Kenobi ..."

"I'm way ahead of you," answered Leia, "but they'll shoot at anyone trying to leave this ship. If they see a pod head towards the atmosphere too fast for anyone inside to survive the heat level, however, they just might ignore it. Have we got a droid with 5X-level memory on board? Something that can move too - It's going to have to leave the pod and find Kenobi."

"Best we can do is an R2 unit," said the Colonel. He beckoned to one of the junior bridge officers: "Go get an R2 up to the bridge bay and **move** it - the Princess hasn't much time left." The officer nodded and ran from the cabin. Moments after he left a fourth engine shut down.

Leia pursed her lips in a frown and glanced at the nearest mike. "Can I talk to everyone on this?" she asked, and Sulvan reached to throw two switches, then nodded at her. She keyed the instrument and turned to confront the worried faces of the bridge staff, but she spoke to the entire crew:

"This is Leia Organa," she said. "This is probably the last chance I'll have to talk to you. We're under attack and will soon be stopped by an Imperial Star Destroyer. I don't know why it has attacked us, but under Imperial law a Senatorial ship cannot be detained by the ISF. When I identify myself to the commander, he will be required to free us. If this ship is too badly damaged to continue, I will insist that the ISF commander return us to Alderaan.

"I want no armed resistance to boarding; I repeat - **no** armed resistance. We cannot hope to hold off the sort of assault troops a Class-13 is likely to have. Do your best to resist answering any questions. Refer anyone who asks you anything to Colonel Sulvan or myself. Thank you all. Be careful, and we'll all get through this."

The Princess replaced the mike in its holder with what she hoped was a show of unconcern. "I'll need a disc of the Death Star plans," she said to Sulvan, "and also -"

"Here, already done," he interrupted, thrusting the small black device into her hand. "But you'd better do a personal photomessage if you want Kenobi to believe anything. The R2 can take it in the bay." She nodded and headed quickly towards the bay door, clutching at the siderail as the vessel's malfunctioning engines sent another shudder through the hull.

* * *

Aboard the Star Destroyer Colonel Olenir consulted briefly with his own navigator before turning to face Darth Vader. "We've done as much damage as we can without risking a seal-break," he said. "They're ignoring our signals to halt and are making for that planet up ahead - Tatooine. Alignment is now plotted, however. We'll have them in the bay in about ten minutes."

Darth Vader nodded. "That is an Alderaan ship, of course, and it is our first proof of the locus of the rebellion. But I mistrust this seemingly senseless evasive action. You are alert for other ships?"

"Nothing else anywhere in sublite," answered the Colonel, "and that ship hasn't sent out so much as a single distress signal since we arrived. Very odd. But we'll get some answers in a few minutes."

The gigantic Star Destroyer came smoothly to a halt over the courier ship and then, with a momentary burst of its attitude jets, descended on the disabled vessel and finally enveloped it in the docking bay. Even now the fugitive ship made no effort at further evasion, allowing itself to be captured docily.

"Rigged to explode?" wondered Olenir aloud. "That I doubt," answered the Sith Lord, "since no effort has been made to transmit the Death Star plans. But you might want to use the STF team for boarding as a precaution against surprises."

The Colonel glanced sharply at Darth Vader. He knew what such instructions meant. The Stormtroopers' method for boarding ships was based upon the principle of maximum speed and shock effect. Anything less than instantaneous surrender by all crewmembers encountered would result in automatic shoot-to-kill retaliation. And this was, after all, a ship from one of the Empire's member systems. But Olenir was not in a position to challenge the suggestion. He hesitated for a short but noticeable moment, then placed a viewplate call to Captain Cheston, the STF Detachment Commander.

* * *

Captain Cheston didn't bother with the main entrance port of the captured ship, assuming that it would be difficult to break through and would probably be defended as well. Dialing up a schematic of the Alderaan vessel from the CL-13's library, he instructed his demolition team to blow a hole into the main connecting passage through the weakest part of the hull as soon as the bay was pressurized. Quickly, expertly the Stormtroopers set the charges.

As the doors of the docking bay began to close beneath the imprisoned ship, a small emergency pod blasted loose from the underside of its hull and hurdled through the narrowing gap towards the distant planet. The pod was promptly tracked by the Star Destroyer's Fire Control Center and two laser batteries were focused on it. Colonel Olenir, however, overrode the firing order. "If you hit it," he said to the FDC officer, "you'll just destroy whatever's inside it that they think is so important. Just track it to its landing point, call Recon Section, and have them send a team down after it."

* * *

“All right,” said Captain Cheston, “Detonate!” - and the plastic charges tore a ragged hole in the side of the Alderaan ship, the explosion booming throughout the pressurized bay. A split-second later the primary STF assault team plunged through the opening, their weapons blazing. The Alderaanians who were unfortunate enough to be caught in the passageway tried to return fire, but they were hopelessly outmatched. Within two minutes the team had reached the bridge and taken Colonel Sulvan into custody. “We have the Captain,” signalled Cheston to Colonel Olenir. “Do you want him brought on board?”

“No,” said the ISF officer. “Lord Vader will be joining you momentarily and will want to talk with him. Keep him on the bridge.”

Colonel Sulvan paled when he saw the infamous black figure appear in the doorway of the bridge. Whatever chance the rebellion might have, he knew, could now depend upon his ability to conceal the purpose of his assignment. Darth Vader, sensing Sulvan’s resolution, brushed it coldly aside. “I want the Death Star plans, Colonel,” he said bluntly, “right now.”

“What plans?” said Sulvan, trying to sound surprised and indignant and not succeeding very well. “We don’t have any plans. We’re traveling under diplomatic privilege, Lord Vader, and you know that -”

But Sulvan’s retort was suddenly, brutally choked off as the Sith Lord gripped him by the throat, raising him clear off his feet. “Diplomatic privilege?” said Darth Vader. “You’re wasting my time, Colonel.” Sulvan stared at him in horror - then was flung violently against the nearby bulkhead, where he lay crumpled and gasping for breath.

Darth Vader took no further notice of him. Turning to Captain Cheston, he said, “He’s protecting someone, playing for time. Find out whom and do it quickly.” Cheston nodded and turned to give an order to his men - then paused as Leia Organa stepped through a side entrance and, ignoring them, walked over to help the shaken Colonel Sulvan to his feet. Then she looked at the scene around her, at Cheston, and finally, deliberately, at Darth Vader.

“So it’s **you**,” she said, her voice glacial with anger. “You **dare** to attack a Senatorial ship and murder its crew? When the Hub learns of this ...”

The Sith Lord didn’t wait for her to finish. “Your Highness will do me the honor to recall that I am a Jedi and that insincerity - from you or your Colonel here - is therefore useless. So the rebellion is controlled by Alderaan.” His tone, in contrast to Leia’s, was neutral, almost [thought Cheston with some surprise] regretful. Then Darth Vader glanced at the STF Captain and said, “Tell Colonel Olenir to remain in orbit until that pod’s contents have been recovered. Also ask him to have one of the Class Nines readied for launch; I will be returning to the Death Star immediately with the Senator.”

* * *

A barren, wind-swept desert on the surface of Tatooine ... whose sand dunes were broken now by a tiny rocket pod - and by two even more incongruous shapes that had just emerged from it. One was substantially humanoid: a sleek, golden android with a somewhat startled expression etched into its features, but the other was simply a squat, domed cylinder with two side support armatures and a base propulsion unit. The golden droid looked hopelessly at the wrecked pod, then turned on its companion.

“Why did you bring us down **here**? We must be days from **anywhere**! Not only don’t we know which way to go, but we’ll probably run out of power or be contaminated by sand before we make **any** contacts.”

The barrel-like droid responded with a medley of beeps and whistles, then began to move up the dune to their right. “**That’s** not going to do you any good,” said the golden droid irately. “That **can’t** be the right direction. I’m certain I saw some artificial structures

beyond the mountain range. Wait - Isn't that something moving over there?"

He gestured towards the base of the mountains. The barrel-droid paused; the camera lens on its dome spun to focus on the setting transmitted by the golden droid's optical sensors. Something was indeed moving - towards them. As it lumbered closer, the droids' optical sensors were able to resolve it into a large, tracked vehicle. It was grotesque and ungainly and had almost no windows, and there was something about it that both droids found ominously repulsive.

* * *

The structures that the golden droid had detected beyond the mountain range were the moisture condensers of a Tatooine farmer by the name of Owen Lars. His farm was protected from the harsh desert climate by being spread throughout a system of irrigated caves fed by the condensers. Now, from a weatherworn but sturdy building in the middle of the condensers, the voice of Owen's wife echoed faintly through the complex as she called, "Luke ... **Luke!**"

The summons reached the ear of a young man in his late twenties who was adjusting the timer of one of the condensers. "Coming!" he shouted back, then hopped down from the machine, wiped his hands on his tunic, and strode briskly towards the residence. He wore the loose, bleached garments of a Tatooine desert-dweller, and his blond hair was long and shaggy around his weatherbeaten face. Another five years, his aunt often thought, and what remained of his youth would be gone forever, burnt out of him by this harsh planet just as had happened to Owen and herself.

Beru Lars smiled at Luke as he arrived in the doorway. "Owen wants you to meet him at the boundary," she said, pointing towards the mountains. "He's thinking of buying a couple of droids from the Jawas and needs your help to get them back."

"On my way," grinned Luke. He turned from the door and ran lightly up the foothills towards the farm's perimeter. Ahead of him he could now see the huge, ugly shape of the Jawas' sandcrawler and, as he drew nearer, the figure of his uncle arguing with a number of the small, cloaked creatures in front of a motley assortment of androids. By the time he arrived, a compromise of sorts seemed to have been reached.

"Oh, hi, Luke," said Owen. "I'm going to get this C and this R2." He indicated the two droids from the Alderaan starship. "They're in fairly good condition, and the C unit tells me he has full interface with the condensers. Only thing that bothers me is that the price is a little **too** good, if you know what I mean. And the Jawas won't tell me where they got them either."

"Why don't you ask the C unit?" said Luke. "I thought of that," said his uncle, "but it's next to impossible to get a straight answer out of him. You'll see what I mean. But he sounds anxious to get away from the Jawas. Can't say that I blame him. Anyhow I'm giving them half now and half the next time they make this run, just in case. Take the droids to the shop, will you, and give them a quick check before dinner?"

"Sure thing," said Luke, and then to the droids: "Hey! C and R2 - yes, **you** two - over here! Come with me -" When he saw them respond, he grinned at Owen and headed towards the ramp leading to the farm's underground maintenance rooms.

"My full designation is C-3PO," said the golden droid as Luke helped him on to the oil bath platform, "and this is R2-D2. We were taken by those creatures in the desert 14.5 hours ago. That magnetic restraining bolt is too strong for an R2 unit's circuits; would you take it off?"

"Yes, I suppose so," said Luke. "No place out here for you to go anyway." He beckoned to the R2, which waddled over to him, and he took a wrench to the bolt. It was a heavy-field bolt, all right, and he had to use both hands on the wrench to break it loose.

Finally it came off with such suddenness that the wrench flew across the room and the R2 unit was propelled backward, its dome striking against a support pillar. The droid caught its balance, but its holographic projector accidentally flashed on - and the surprised Luke saw the tiny figure of a girl clad in long, flowing robes. Her expression was worried and her voice low and rushed, as though she feared interruption or discovery. "Help us, Obi-wan," said the hologram. "You're our only hope." Then it disappeared.

Luke scrambled to his feet and went over to the R2. "What was **that**?" he said. "Play it **again**. Let me see the **entire** message." The unit whistled at C-3PO, who said, "He says he can't - that it's a confidential communication for Obi-wan Kenobi, whom we were sent here to find when we were captured by those little humanoids."

About to protest, Luke suddenly heard the voice of his aunt calling him to supper. He hesitated, torn between the summons and his interest in the new discovery, then shrugged and walked to the door. "You two stay here," he said. "I'll be back in about an hour, and then you can tell me what this is all about." He left the shop and headed towards the main building, his thoughts already tantalized with speculation.

At the table he told Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru what had happened. To Luke's surprise, Owen seemed oddly disturbed by the news but wouldn't say why. "I wonder if this has something to do with old Ben Kenobi," mused Luke. "You know - that fellow who lives out there by the Dune Sea? Maybe I should take a run over there and ask him if the Jawas stole the droids from him."

Owen stared at Luke for a moment; when he responded, his tone was oddly nervous: "I think it might be better if you didn't. Kenobi, um, has a sort of past he might prefer to forget. That's why he came here in the first place. I have a feeling you'd just be stirring up trouble, and it might be, well, **bad** trouble. I think it might be better if I cancel the deal and return those droids to the Jawas next week."

Luke stared at his uncle in surprise. "What's there to be afraid of? I'd just be returning some stolen property. And old Ben's always been friendly to us."

Owen glanced worriedly at Beru and then turned back to Luke.

"That old man you know as Ben Kenobi -" he said. "His name is really Obi-wan Kenobi. You don't know anything about him, but he used to be a high official in the Republic and then in the Empire. Then something went wrong - I don't know exactly what - and he wound up here. I don't know whether his exile is voluntary or forced, but I gather he's not in favor at the Hub. Which means that anyone sending him messages for help is probably not in favor either, and that means -"

"- The rebellion," broke in Beru. "That's it, isn't it?"

Owen nodded. "Yes, I'm afraid so. And I must say I'm not particularly anxious to have to explain to the ISF or a patrol of Stormtroopers why we were passing messages for it either."

Luke frowned. "I see what you mean. All right, I'll just forget about it, but ..."

"But?" said Beru.

"Nothing," said Luke, looking down. "Guess I'll go out and finish cleaning up the droids."

He pushed back his chair, got to his feet, and walked a little too quickly out the door. Owen Lars raised his eyebrows at his wife. She said, "He's been following the news about the rebellion, and I think it's gotten to him. Not the politics, of course, but all the action and the excitement."

"Which shows how little he knows about real warfare," observed Owen drily. "It kills and maims heroes as efficiently as villains. Eldan went off to the RSF all starry-eyed, remember, and look what happened to **him**. I had hoped that we wouldn't have to go

through all of that again with Luke.”

“He doesn’t want to be a farmer,” she said delicately, trying not to make the term sound derogatory. Owen stared at her for a moment, then laughed. “Don’t be so diplomatic,” he said. “I’m not that thin-skinned, and I enjoy my work - much more than mass murder, which is what any war boils down to. No, I’m just afraid that Luke may get caught up in something that he won’t be able to stop, and which won’t look quite so glamorous to him later on.”

* * *

Owen Lars was wrong. Luke wasn’t particularly enchanted with the rebellion, though he was impatient and frustrated with the dreary, exhausting work of farming. On his way back to the maintenance shop he paused and looked up at the night sky, that great ocean of stars which always seemed to beckon him with promises of escape and adventure and ...

Luke dropped his gaze to the ground, the wistful look in his eyes giving way to irritation and self-disgust. There was nothing up there for him; he would be locked to this work for life. Got to cut this out, he thought, before I go crazy, and the best way to start is to finish up those droids. He walked the rest of the way to the shop and found them gone.

Instantly he knew what had happened: They had gone off in response to the programming to deliver the message. He cursed himself for not inputting a cancel before leaving for dinner, then ran outside with an atmospheric light telescope. He made a circular sweep of the landscape, but there was nothing to be seen in the greenish glow of the eyepiece. Then Luke thought of Ben Kenobi. He ran over to the Lars’ landspeeder, a somewhat battered air-suspension vehicle, and ignited the three small turbines. Then he spun the craft around and shot off through the desert in the direction of the Dune Sea.

Luke didn’t find the two droids until morning. All through the night he criss-crossed what he supposed would have been their general direction, but the route from the Lars farm to the Dune Sea wound through many canyons and ravines, and he probably missed his quarry by a short distance more than once. Finally, however, he saw the glint of the C unit in the morning sunrise and brought the landspeeder to a halt beside them.

Although he was tired and exasperated, he knew there was no point in getting angry at the droids. They had merely responded to their programming, and that was that. Once more he used oral command to override the fixed programs and told C-3PO to help him get R2-D2 into the landspeeder.

Then Luke heard a slight sound behind him. In the desert all sounds were suspect; he whirled and saw - the figure of Ben Kenobi, clad in a coarse, brown robe and standing a short distance away smiling at him. “It’s Luke Skywalker, isn’t it? What brings you out this way, young man?”

Luke was still disconcerted. How had Kenobi appeared so suddenly? How had he known that Luke and the droids were here? He said, “Uh - these droids. The R2 unit has some sort of message for someone named Obi-wan ... Obi-wan Kenobi. Is that **you**?”

The old man raised his eyebrows slightly at the name, then turned to stare off into the distance. “Obi-wan Kenobi,” he mused, then glanced back at Luke with an enigmatic expression on his face. “Yes, that **is** my name. If you will be so kind as to take me to my home, we shall see what it is that the R2 seems so determined to tell me.”

An hour later the landspeeder glided to a halt before the small, white hut that served as Ben’s home. On one side of it stretched the desert, on the other the desolate, lifeless expanse of the Dune Sea. There were no other signs of habitation in sight, and Luke wondered again how the old man could survive in such an inhospitable place. The interior of the hut - a tiny, two-room hovel - gave him no clues. It was so sparsely furnished that Luke couldn’t see how anyone could live there for a few days, much less months or years.

Ben motioned for him to take a seat on one of the two rough stools in the main room. He took the other himself, then turned to R2-D2. "Well, then," he said, "tell me what you have for me."

Once more the projector flashed to life, and the hologram of the girl materialized on the table between the two men. The image happened to be positioned so that, while the girl was addressing Ben, she happened to be looking directly at Luke.

"General Kenobi, this is Leia Organa of Alderaan. We are the power behind the Alliance, and my ship is now under attack by a Star Destroyer. I am placing information vital to our survival in the memory of this R2 unit and entreat you to see it safely to my father in Emer. **Help us**, Obi-wan - You're our **only** hope." The projector clicked off.

Luke felt frozen to his seat. "You're a General of the rebellion?" he said. Ben grinned and shook his head. "No, not exactly. I'm a General of the Galactic Empire."

The blood rushed to Luke's head. He stared at his host, trying to collect his thoughts, wondering what to say. Ben took stock of his discomfiture for a moment, then chuckled. "Don't worry - You haven't gotten your aunt and uncle into any trouble." [How did he know I was thinking about that, wondered Luke.] "I **used** to be a General, not to mention Sophrex of the Jedi Order, but no longer. And I haven't been involved with the rebellion either - at least not until now. It seems this aggressive young lady wishes to recruit me."

"Are you going to do it?" asked Luke. Ben got slowly to his feet and strolled across to the crudely-cut window. "I'm rather too old for such activity," he said, "but ... I **might** do it - that is," - he looked round at Luke and his pale blue eyes glinted - "if **you're** willing to help me."

"**Me?**" said Luke. "Oh, no - I mean, Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru need me at the farm. I can't just ..." A strange feeling of embarrassment came over him. "Not that I don't **want** to, I mean."

Kenobi turned away from him and strolled over to an old, beat-up chest resting in one corner of the room. He opened it and rummaged around in it for a moment, then grunted with satisfaction and brought out something wrapped in an old rag. He brought it over to the table and set it down before Luke. The youth unwrapped the rag and found the object to be a metallic handgrip surmounted by electronic components and a central core of some clear, jewel-like substance. "What is it?" he asked.

"A lightsaber," said Kenobi, watching him intently. "The weapon of a Jedi. A relic from" - he searched for a word - "a more **civilized** age."

He took up the device with evident familiarity, flicked a switch with his thumb, and a clear white tongue of fire shot forward from the hilt with a crackling hum. He brought this "blade" back and forth through the air, causing the hum to change pitch slightly, then switched it off and replaced it on the table in front of the farm-boy. "Your father wanted you to have this," he said, "when you were old enough."

Luke jumped to his feet. "My **father**? You **knew** my father? What does **he** have to do with **this**?"

"Yes," said Ben Kenobi, "I knew your father." He paused, a little too long. Then he said: "Eldan Skywalker was a Colonel in the Imperial Starforce - You know that, of course. He was slain by his commander, a General named Darth Vader." He looked meaningfully at Luke. "Vader was in command of the starship that captured the lady you just saw - who is the crown princess of the Alderaan planetary states. I think he might very well kill her if **we**" - Luke caught the emphasis on the word - "don't prevent him."

Luke Skywalker looked at the lightsaber and thought about his father and then about his uncle and aunt. "I want to go with you," he said. "But I just can't go off and leave my family. Let's go to them first and talk this over. Then we'll see."

When the landspeeder eased to a halt at the Lars farm, Luke saw no sign of Owen or Beru. He walked into the house - then cried out in horror at the sight of two burned and blackened corpses on the floor before him. He rushed back outside to where he had left Kenobi and the droids. The old man seemed oddly unsurprised at Luke's discovery. "I'm afraid that the Empire tracked those two droids, Luke," he said. "- here."

Luke stared at the old man, pain and hatred in his eyes. He gripped the lightsaber and said through his teeth, "They were good, decent people. They never harmed anyone in their lives. If the Empire did this to them, then I will help the rebellion. And I will also find Darth Vader." Choking back his tears, he turned towards the landspeeder; moments later they had left the farm far behind.

* * *

The door to Leia Organa's cell deep within the Death Star slid upwards and Darth Vader entered, followed by a spherical, black droid with needle-tipped armatures. An ISF Lieutenant looked questioningly at the Sith Lord through the door, but he was dismissed with a curt nod of the black helmet. The door hissed back down, sealing them in.

Leia's anger at the sight of Darth Vader was displaced by a sudden, unreasoning fear of the patiently hovering droid. "What's that?" she said. "What are you going to do to me?"

"I wish to know the location of the main strike base of the rebellion," said the Sith Lord. "One way or another."

The terror in Leia's eyes gave way to a sort of tired resignation. "So now you're going to torture me. From Alderaan it has come to this. Do you know something? I don't know why you're wearing that faceplate, but I'm glad you are. I never want to see your face again. May the Force grant me the strength to die with dignity rather than tell you how to destroy my people." And she turned away from him.

"A pretty speech," said Darth Vader, "but pointless. You will be anesthetized before the droid probes your mind, so neither your body nor your consciousness will experience any immediate pain. When you awake, you will experience some confusion and possibly some temporary lack of coordination. As for my face," he added drily, "it no longer exists." He turned to the droid. "Proceed." The metal sphere glided obligingly toward the princess, one of the needle-tipped arms rising into position, and she screamed once.

* * *

It was even hotter than usual in Mos Eisley, and Lieutenant Daron Brumus' temperature-controlled STF armor did not suffice to cool him down.² As a detachment commander with the Tatooine STF garrison, Brumus had drawn the unenviable assignment of patrolling the planet's "free" spaceport. As was the case with all freeports, Mos Eisley was a seething hive of crime, violence, and flagrant contempt for the Imperial ideal of civilization.

Indeed "freeports" were the eternal bane of Imperial cultural reformers, who doggedly mounted campaigns to rehabilitate them. But the few raids which had been attempted had resulted only in severe trade disruptions and even more vicious epidemics of ship-to-ship piracy. Even so autocratic a force as the Empire had finally given up the fight as hopeless, contenting itself with assigning a garrison of STF to each freeport.

As may well be assumed, Stormtroopers themselves were in no hurry to volunteer for such duty, which was regarded as combining the worst hazards of their profession with virtually no chance for exercise of the higher arts of MindWar. In terms of undesirability Mos Eisley was, as Brumus once observed to a fellow officer, "15 on a scale of 1 to 10."

² This is the first appearance in *The Dark Side* of the long-suffering Brumus, who will eventually be immortalized in the song "Hijack" in the Jefferson Starship's *Blows Against the Empire* album, in the Milky Way Galaxy.

Today there had already been three shootings and one minor riot, and one of Brumus' team members had had to be sent back to the garrison infirmary with charring burns from laser fire on one leg. Now there were orders from some orbiting Class-13 to conduct a search for one, possibly two droids "with presumed evasive programming" - but no hint as to why. So Brumus' small team had been kept on past its normal relief to aid the other two teams in an inspection of all incoming traffic - atmospheric and ground - and the lines were long and the temperature and temperaments equally fiery.

The decrepit landspeeder now approaching Brumus' checkpoint contained an old man, a young farmer, and two droids perched behind near the turbines. The Stormtrooper waved it to the side and strode over to it. The young man shot him a terrified glance, but to Stormtroopers that was nothing unusual.

"I'm looking for two droids who may be evading Imperial control," said Brumus to Luke. He looked at C-3PO and R2-D2. "Are these yours? Have you owned them long?"

"I happen to be their present owner," said Ben Kenobi, "and they've never been out of my sight since I first acquired them - certainly not for criminal purposes. I live quite alone - out on the far shore of the Dune Sea."

The two droids remained silent and didn't show any sign of "evasive programming". On impulse Brumus said to R2-D2, "Are you programmed to avoid Imperial officials?" C-3PO promptly began to interpret his counterpart's answering whistles, but the Stormtrooper waved him to silence. "I can understand droidcode," he said. And then to Luke: "All right, go on."

"What did he say?" gulped Luke to the golden droid as he maneuvered the vehicle carefully back into the flow of traffic. "That there is no present programming of that sort in memory," answered C-3PO, who then commented as an afterthought: "That was cancelled when we found General Kenobi."

"From now on I'm not 'General' - just 'Ben'," said the old man. Then to Luke he remarked, "Pull in at that cantina over there. We'll get out of this heat for a few minutes and see if we can find suitable transport to Alderaan."

The cantina was not the sort Luke would have chosen had he been alone. It was dark, malodorous, and evidently the haunt of the least desirable cross-section of Mos Eisley's undesirables. But Kenobi seemed determined, so Luke followed him reluctantly into the stifling darkness, blinking after the glare from the suns outside.

Almost immediately the youth stumbled into a large, unkempt biped ambling unsteadily towards the door. The biped swore viciously at him and, before he could think of an apology, pointed the laser pistol it carried drunkenly at him.

The color drained from Luke's face, but - before he could move - there was a brilliant flash of golden iridescence, a familiar electrical hum - and a scream from the biped as Ben Kenobi severed its arm from its shoulder with his own lightsaber. Howling in agony, the creature staggered madly out the door while the old man calmly deactivated his weapon and motioned for Luke to take a seat while he himself went further into the recesses of the bar. Shaken and confused, Luke did so. The biped's arm lay horribly on the floor, cauterized and bloodless, until another customer kicked it casually out of the way.

A few minutes later Ben Kenobi beckoned to him to join him across the room at another table, where Luke found him conferring with a large orange-brown Wookiee and a human slightly older than Luke himself. "I'm Han Solo," said the human, not offering his hand. "Your friend wants a fast ride to Alderaan and no questions asked, and I've agreed to both. Dock 94 in 15 minutes." He pushed back his seat, rose, motioned for the Wookiee to follow him, and walked quickly out of the cantina.

Luke ran a hand through his hair. "Whew," he said. "Is **everyone** here this friendly?"

“Not all of them will kill you for missing your footing,” answered Kenobi lightly. “Now Captain Solo, for instance, is experienced enough to want to know as little as possible about what - or whom - he is smuggling. He does not want to be able to talk, if you follow me. He should be trustworthy enough for our purposes - particularly since he won’t be paid the other half of his fee until we arrive safely on Alderaan.”

At Docking Bay #94 Luke Skywalker stared with horror at the ship being readied for departure. “What a piece of **junk!**” he said to Kenobi, not quietly enough.³ Han Solo looked up at him from where he stood at a fuel line, then ambled over to them. “**Junk?**” he said threateningly, then, suddenly, grinned at Luke’s expression. “She may not look like much, kid,” he said, “but that’s ’cause all the beauty’s in the engine banks. Tops at 10-6-Lite and hits TL 10 minutes from zero. I call her the *Millennium Falcon* because -”

But Luke never found out how the ship had received its name, because at that moment two Stormtroopers appeared in the dock portal.

Han Solo did not wait to find out why they had come. He assumed that they meant trouble, and as it happened he was right: Word of the fight at the cantina had given Lieutenant Brumus second thoughts about the old man in the landspeeder. But the incautious entrance of the two ST’s was their undoing. Breaking off in mid-sentence, Han Solo whirled, drew his laser pistol, and hit the ground all in the same movement - and a moment later the two soldiers were writhing against the doorway, their armor smoking from two point-blank hits.

Solo did not pause to congratulate himself. “**Chewie!**” he shouted, “Get the hoses off and start the burn!” Then to the passengers: “Thirty seconds to board before you get cooked - oh, and your fare just doubled.” Then he dashed up the ramp and into the cockpit.

As Lieutenant Brumus arrived to find the injured bodies of his two troopers, he looked up to see the *Falcon* rising from its pad with a thunderous roar. Keying his helmet transmitter to the STF garrison frequency, he said, “Authentication 85. Put me through to the OpCen on that 13.” Moments later he was talking to the Operations Officer of the orbiting Star Destroyer.

“Quick thinking, Captain,” said Luke to Solo as the *Falcon* rose through the stratosphere and approached the blackness of orbital space. “Han,” said the Corellian, “as long as we’re all together on the Empire’s latest wanted list. That’s what I get for talking to strange people. And we’re not out of this yet. That picks up ISF signals,” he continued, indicating a crudely assembled group of circuitboards on the left bulkhead, “and that code you just heard was the boss of those two ST’s, and that probably means the 13 he was calling will be climbing all over us any moment now ... Yes, there she is on the scope.”

Kenobi’s voice cut through the air like cold steel. “That Star Destroyer wants us **alive**. There’ll be no shooting, but it will try to delay you long enough to grapple you. Got my meaning?”

“Got it,” answered Solo. “All right, Chewbacca, we’re going to skip evasion and go straight for the TLC. No checks; we’ll start the TL burn right now and just take our chances about hitting anything in the channel.” He brought the ship into a smooth, straight course as the Wookiee adjusted the thrust computer for a proper angle of entry into the translite channel. When he looked up and growled at Solo, the Corellian jammed the ion-engine throttles to full acceleration, and the entire ship shuddered as its massive powerplants flared to maximum thrust.

Evidently unprepared for their maneuver, the Star Destroyer did not follow suit. Peering into the aft camera, Luke could see it falling farther and farther behind the *Falcon*

³ A line too memorable from the original *Star Wars* film not to repeat here!

until it was finally lost from view. Then the stellar display on the screen blurred and finally disappeared into a dull haze as the *Falcon* reached translite. The four live passengers looked at one another with relief, then rose to leave the cramped cockpit for the main cabin beyond.

* * *

Moff Tarkin glanced round the conference table in the Death Star's command center at the battle station's division commanders. "Gentlemen," he said, "the nature of this expedition has now changed. We have not been able to recover the design prints of this station, and we must assume that they are now in the possession of the rebellion. I hardly need emphasize that this creates a condition of risk. We can no longer rely upon our invulnerability and so must prepare to strike first. Lord Vader?"

The Sith Lord, who had been standing in the shadows of the darkened room behind Tarkin, came forward beside him. The assembled generals stiffened noticeably, and Tarkin wondered whether it were more from hatred of a mutinous comrade or from fear of what he had since become. But if Darth Vader himself felt the antagonism, his voice betrayed no concern for it:

"The design prints were sent by TLD to a ship from Alderaan. Commanding that ship was Princess - and Imperial Senator - Leia Organa. She is now under arrest aboard this battle station."

He paused to let the murmurs of surprise subside, then continued:

"The inescapable conclusion is that the rebellion is controlled by the Alderaan government, and we now have two pressing options. The first is to identify and destroy the main rebel military base, providing that its location can be extracted from Senator Organa. Only that base would possess sufficient resources to mount an effective attack on this station."

"The second option?" said Tarkin, not looking at him.

"If we cannot locate the base immediately," answered the Sith Lord, "then we must destroy Alderaan itself."

There was a collective outburst of shock and surprise from the division commanders. General Dihar of Division 6 got to his feet and slapped both of his hands on the table. He fixed Tarkin with an angry glare. "I think we've heard **quite** enough. I've seen the report. A Senatorial ship has been attacked and half its crew killed by the STF. An Imperial Senator has been imprisoned without warrant, and **now** we are actually asked to massacre an **entire planet** - a **federal seat**, in fact - on the most feeble of evidence? This is **inexcusable**; it is **criminal**. We cannot **possibly** agree to such a barbaric proposal. Senator Organa must be released **at once** and returned to her home, and apologies rendered to her government. Not that any of that will help much when the Hub learns of this."

Most of the other generals nodded their heads.

The implication of Dihar's remarks had not been lost on Darth Vader. Acceptance of the general's advice by Tarkin would mean his own imprisonment and probable execution for treason. He said, "The evidence is more than circumstantial, General. We may not have actually seen the Alderaan ship recover the TLD, but you and I both know the odds against their two vectors crossing so precisely by sheer accident. As we boarded, an escape pod was jettisoned towards Tatooine, and two droids - one with extensive memory - were found to be missing from the ship's inventory. The pod was later located opened on the surface of the planet. This is not normal procedure for a Senatorial ship on a routine flight."

General Dihar scowled. “Of **course** the Alderaan ship could be expected to run from your 13 - What captain **wouldn't** panic if he thought he were under attack by one? The jolt of the grappling could have triggered the pod's release mechanism, and inventories have been wrong before. Granted that the odds against the ship's crossing the path of the TLD are high; but not impossibly so and **certainly** not enough to justify your subsequent actions, much less the destruction of Alderaan! And neither the Senator nor any of her crew has indicated any knowledge of the TLD or its contents.”

“Nor would I expect a hand-picked crew on a mission of this importance to break their cover readily,” said Darth Vader, “but I am able to sense their deception by means of the Force.”

“The Force!” growled Dihar derisively. “I might have guessed. Jedi nonsense. If we are asked to make life-or-death judgments based on nothing more than superstitious hunches -”

He stopped in mid-sentence as the Sith Lord turned full in his direction. The room suddenly distorted before the general's eyes; it elongated and shrank to a choking, constricting tunnel between Darth Vader and himself. An icy terror reached out towards him, seeking, finding, seizing ...

The other generals stared at Dihar in astonishment as he fell silent and stood there trembling, sweat beading on his brow. They could not understand, but Moff Tarkin did, and after a moment he reached up and caught Darth Vader's forearm. “You have made your point,” he said quietly.

The Sith Lord's concentration was broken. He peered down at Tarkin, then took a step back from the table. General Dihar started as though hit with an electric shock, looked wildly around at his comrades, and then with evident effort managed to control himself. But the arrogance had left him, and he stared at Darth Vader in stark, naked terror. This too was not unnoticed by the others.

“I accept Lord Vader's skill with the Force,” said Tarkin calmly. “But even if I did not, I see no cause to quibble about minor factors. The resistance to the Imperial system by Alderaan has long been ill-disguised, stopping just short of outright insurrection. I have known before now that Alderaan was the political force behind the rebellion,” - another murmur of surprise from around the table - “and the only thing changed by this incident is that Alderaan now believes its cover completely destroyed and so on its own initiative will seek to press its advantage.”

“Here, then, is my decision - for which I assume full responsibility as the Emperor's representative: I will offer the Senator the chance to identify the location of the main rebel base - so that we may destroy it. If she does not do so within what I consider to be a safe margin of time, then this battle station will destroy Alderaan.”

“Why the entire planet?” asked General Renos of Division 2. “Why not a surgical strike against the capital or a demonstration shot with the AMP against one of its moons or neighboring planets without populations?”

“Because,” said Tarkin, “the audience we play to is considerably larger than that of Alderaan. This is the first time that the Empire has been faced with an overt military insurrection, and many other would-be revolutionaries will be watching to see how we respond to it. I regret to say that if we do so with mercy and without making the adventure far more costly for the rebels than for the Empire, then we may expect to have to do it again, and again, and again - until far more than the population of a single planet have died. The precedent **must** be set now. Violent insurrection must become unthinkable; only then will malcontents resign themselves to the more difficult, diplomatic means of addressing problems.”

The room was silent.

“Now, gentlemen,” said the governor with a coldness in his voice, “if you fail to take my point, or if you have a preferred suggestion, speak and speak now. Otherwise I shall expect you not only to execute this policy but to defend it.”

Renos nodded once; after a moment, one by one, the other generals did likewise. “Very well, then,” said Tarkin, pushing back his chair and rising to his feet, “you may return to your divisions. Navigation will set TLC course for Alderaan.”

He paused on his way out of the conference room and turned to look at Darth Vader, who had remained standing motionless by the circular table. “When we reach Alderaan,” he said, “bring Senator Organa to me - in the observation room of Div-12 above the AMP.”

Darth Vader inclined his head, but Tarkin continued to look at him thoughtfully. “I may not be a Jedi,” he said, “but your thoughts are not hard to read. You are quite right; I am also doing this because of you. Do you not know how important you are to the future of the Empire?”

“There is nothing you need prove to me,” said Darth Vader.

“No, that is quite true. But there is something I need prove **about** you,” said Tarkin. He turned to go, then added, without looking back, “either way.”

* * *

“Ben, would you tell me more about the Jedi?” said Luke Skywalker, fingering the lightsaber grip at his side. “Who are they? What do they do? And how can I become one?”

The old man, who had been dozing in his seat across from Luke, blinked and sat up. “The - Jedi,” he said. “They are gone now. Massacred by the Republic in its decadence and paranoia ... No, that’s not entirely fair; they also brought it on themselves by their refusal to see the reality of their situation. Only I remain, I fear. And, of course, Darth Vader.”

“Who is this Darth Vader you keep talking about?” asked Luke.

“You’ll know soon enough,” said Kenobi drily, “but one thing at a time. You’re curious about the Jedi. Well. There are three types of knowledge, Luke. First there is knowledge acquired through experience, as in the case of the craftsman. Secondly there is knowledge acquired through study, as in the case of the scholar. Finally there is knowledge acquired through initiation, and this is the special province of the Jedi Order.

“Initiation does not teach you to know or do anything in particular. It is rather a process of awakening certain latent sensitivities within rare individuals. These sensitivities enable the Jedi to see situations and events around him with a clarity and objectivity unknown to non-Jedis. Thus he is able to impress his Will upon situations in a manner that is as effective as it is subtle. This Jedi characteristic, mysterious as it is to others, has resulted in our being suspect to those in positions of social power - and has also made us objects of fear to those of lesser intelligence. You are a little afraid of me yourself, are you not?”

Luke grinned and nodded.

“Good,” said Kenobi. “I would hate to think I am losing my touch. Now the knowledge of the Jedi requires two factors. The initiation process is one factor; it is the deliberate sensitizing of the individual to the abilities that lie within his - or her - consciousness. This initiation may be encouraged and to some extent guided by others, but it is essentially a personal, private experience. Hence at the Citadel of the Jedi we never spoke of ‘training’ Jedi - but rather of Recognizing their respective levels of initiation.”

“What’s the other factor?” said Luke.

“The other factor,” answered Kenobi, “is the raw material. We have found that not everyone can respond to initiation, or respond to it at comparable levels. Nor is the capacity for initiation tied to the ability to acquire knowledge of the other two kinds, though of course a Jedi with such knowledge is all the more effective. In certain individuals - beings of all races and species throughout the galaxy - there is ... the ‘Force’, as we generally call it. It is the raw material that, when refined through initiation, enables the Jedi to effect change in accordance with his will.”

“What sort of change?” said Luke. “And why should a Jedi want to change anything?”

“The Jedi’s commitment is to change as something desirable in itself,” answered Kenobi, “but of course there are value judgments involved. There is nothing to be gained by influencing a peaceful, progressive society to disintegrate into war, for example. But a peaceful society which fails to progress may benefit in the long run from a destabilizing shock. The art of the Jedi lies in the ability to estimate when and if a change in the existing situation will stimulate positive evolution.

“As for how: The answer is that the most wide-reaching changes may be set in motion through a single, isolated decision or action. At its height the Jedi Order numbered in the thousands, but such a number was miniscule against the entire population of the Republic. The strength of the Jedi lay in their ability to set processes in motion, not necessarily to force those same processes to conclusion.”

Luke frowned. He felt that Kenobi was answering his questions truthfully, but he didn’t see anything very useful in the answers. Being a Jedi seemed a very vague business at best - frustrating, dangerous, and not particularly rewarding to boot. On the other hand there was the lightsaber. He looked at it again and recalled Ben’s skill with his own in the cantina.

“If we are so subtle,” said Kenobi, “then why the lightsaber - That is what you are wondering. A paradox of sorts: A more primitive weapon than a laser pistol, and yet I called it ‘more civilized’. I will tell you why. Pistols, laser cannon, missiles: All these enable one to kill with detachment, from a psychological as well as a physical distance. Death becomes an abstraction, something that can be dispensed for whimsical reasons. The Jedi’s use of the lightsaber necessitates intense personal involvement with the prospect of death. The Jedi must risk life to take life, and the process of taking life is graphic, ugly, and physical. The lightsaber is not an advantage or convenience to the Jedi; it is a hindrance. But it is civilized in that it forces the Jedi to respect life, to feel it, and to take it only when necessary. It also possesses certain other characteristics, which you will appreciate when you are capable of doing so.”

“Nice speech,” said Han Solo suddenly from across the cabin, “but a stupid idea. If it’s so hard to become a Jedi in the first place, then why risk being gunned down by someone from a distance while you’re waving that thing around?”

“Gun me down,” said Kenobi. “Go ahead - I’m serious.”

Han Solo looked at him doubtfully, then, with the same, sudden motion Luke had seen in the docking bay, whipped out his pistol and levelled it at the old man. Kenobi did not move, nor did he touch the lightsaber that hung at his belt.

Solo, however, did not fire. He looked suspiciously at Kenobi, then slowly holstered the pistol with an expression of bewilderment on his face. “What was **that**?” he said. “What did you **do** to me?”

“‘That’ is the Force,” answered Kenobi. “More precisely, complex elements of my expression and attitude suggested to you that you should not fire at me. I did not control your mind as such; I simply stimulated certain qualities of your own personality which

influenced your behavior in the desired direction. With another subject my approach would have been correspondingly different.”

“So you stun someone, then walk over to him and lop his head off,” said Solo. “How does that fit in with personal risk?”

“The answer to that lies in the expertise of a Jedi,” said Kenobi. “If you are an opponent of no consequence, then you might very well have your head lopped off while ‘stunned’, as you put it. If your challenge is a serious and a worthy one, on the other hand, the Code of the Jedi requires that your death be at appropriate hazard to the Jedi. You would have the opportunity to prove yourself deserving of life, or, to put it another way, of proving yourself deserving of passing sentence of life or death on the Jedi.”

Han Solo looked at the old man with a new respect. “Guess I’m beginning to see why that Star Destroyer wanted your hide so bad,” he said. “For the first time since we left Tatooine I’m beginning to think that I just might live to collect my fee ... providing, of course, that you consider me, um, worthy of remaining alive until we get to Alderaan.”

Ben Kenobi laughed. “Oh, you’re good for another few hours at least,” he said. Then, almost as an afterthought, he added: “Possibly longer.”

And once more Luke Skywalker had the sensation of missing the point of some private joke - a joke whose point he wasn’t certain he wanted to know.

* * *

Leia Organa stumbled along one of the Death Star’s transit passages, guided by two Starforce officers who kept her from falling altogether. Although she was fully conscious, her thoughts were only semi-coherent and her muscular control erratic - after-effects from the mind-probe. Her earlier anger had given way to near-panic at the condition of her mind and body, and she clung to the hope that, as Darth Vader had said, it would be temporary. Her escorts evidently felt both pity and sympathy for her, but she ignored their attempts at cheering conversation. Instead she concentrated as best she could on regaining full use of her mind and body. Wherever she was being taken, she guessed, she would need both.

The three of them finally halted before a set of double doors, and the Lieutenant spoke a few words into the microphone beside them. The doors slid open, and the bewildered girl saw a vast observation platform beyond them - occupied, it seemed, only by Darth Vader and a thin, sharp-featured man wearing the insignia of an Imperial Governor. She recognized him instantly, and, as she was guided into the room, an even more bitter sense of defeat gripped her.

“Senator Organa,” said Tarkin, “you do not look well. The probe was used on you, I understand. The side effects will pass; please do not feel that you need conceal them on our account.”

Leia made no answer. One of the Starforce officers brought her a chair, but she refused to sit and instead braced herself against it, both of her hands trembling.

Darth Vader took a step towards her, then stopped and turned away.

“I will come straight to the point,” said Tarkin after a moment. “I know about the rebellion, and I know about the danger to this battle station because of your theft of its plans. You leave me no alternative but to destroy your main base before it can attack us. If you refuse to tell me its location, then I will have to strike at its source of support - Alderaan.”

Leia tried to speak, choked and nearly fell, then managed to respond: “I don’t know anything about a rebellion or about a base. And you cannot attack Alderaan; it is a governmental seat.”

“I am not in the habit of giving empty warnings,” said Tarkin. “If you wish to save your planet, then you must identify the base - **now**.”

Leia’s head throbbed. A wave of nausea engulfed her, and she clenched her teeth, refusing to be ill. The pain overcame the probe symptoms, and she was dimly aware that the two Starforce officers had quietly taken her arms again so that she wouldn’t collapse. Her mind raced, forcing reason over hysteria. He doesn’t know about the big fleet preparing to leave Alderaan for the base, she thought. If we have any chance, it’s to send him there and not to Yavin-4. Aloud she said, “The base. It’s ... it’s in E-7, on - Dantooine - the second orbit.”

“Lord Vader?” said Tarkin. The Sith Lord shook his head.

“Your answer is not acceptable, Senator. Lord Vader thinks you are lying.”

“I’m **not** - lying. It is the **truth**. Would I sacrifice my own civilization - an entire **planet** - for a military base?”

Tarkin looked at her thoughtfully. “No ... no, I don’t believe you would. And that being the case, I suspect that you have reason to think that Alderaan would stand a better chance against this station than would the base. I think you should -”

The sound of a monitor at his belt cut him short. He keyed it, said “Tarkin.”

“Governor, this is Major Sorren, OpCen 4. We’ve got a large fleet of ships from Alderaan on the screen, heading this way. And the LR scopes are registering continuing launch patterns on the surface. Looks like the whole planet is coming to greet us.”

“That I doubt,” said Tarkin. “Major, switch me to AMP-control, will you?”

He looked up at Leia. “So that’s it. Well, Princess, I am satisfied that the plans you took never reached Alderaan - or, that if they did, their significance was not realized. That is very unfortunate for you. These ships are no doubt expecting to confront ships of our own, or graser-fire from the station’s batteries. They are mistaken.”

The monitor crackled. “AMP, Colonel Predule. Energized, primary ignition primed.”

Moff Tarkin looked at Leia, spoke to the monitor: “Commence fire.”

A sudden, overwhelming fear gripped Leia. She looked at Darth Vader. “What is it?” she cried out. “What’s an AMP? What’s he **doing**?”

“Go to the observation window and see for yourself,” said Tarkin.

Wrenching her arms loose from the two officers, Leia staggered to the port, pressed her hands against it, tried to focus her eyes into the expanse beyond. At first she saw nothing unusual, then a pulsing, seemingly-opaque ray of some sort, streaming forth from a point below the glass towards her planet. She looked wildly back at her captors. “What is it?”

“That is a synchronized stream of anti-matter,” answered Tarkin matter-of-factly. “The first atoms should be reaching the Alderaan fleet any time now.”

Leia spun round again. As she watched, she saw first one, then a few - then scores, hundreds of flashes in the space between the Death Star and the planet. Ship after ship of the Alderaan fleet burst into fire, then, horribly, seemed to implode into darkness.

But before Leia could say anything more, her attention was caught by an even more frightening sight. Beyond the dying fleet Alderaan’s atmosphere began to boil into a firestorm; within minutes the entire planet was bathed in raging flame.

Yet this was only the preliminary to what happened when the antimatter stream reached the surface and began exploding its way down towards the planetary core. As the stricken Princess watched, Alderaan spewed forth jet after jet of molten magma through the now-expiring atmosphere, then seemed to begin to break apart - then, blew itself completely apart like some incredibly gigantic nuclear bomb - then, hideously, imploded into nothingness.

Leia stood frozen, refusing to believe what she had seen, refusing to admit that such a thing could even be possible. Then she shrieked aloud - a cry from the depths of her being for her family, her people, her home. She screamed and screamed again; she pounded her fists against the glass helplessly, hopelessly.

Then she turned; she faced Tarkin and Darth Vader; her grief was cut through by a feral snarl. She raged at them, unable to speak; then she overcame the numbness and the pain of her limbs and rushed forward, meaning to kill them mindless of any further risk to herself. So maniacal was her fury that the two Starforce officers quailed back before her.

But Leia's ravaged body had still not recovered from the effects of the mind-probe, and the shock of what she had just seen sapped the remaining reserves of her strength. A few steps away from Darth Vader and Moff Tarkin, the room whirled before her and she crumpled unconscious to the deck.

Tarkin shrugged, glanced ironically at the Sith Lord, and walked from the room.

2. THE BATTLE OF YAVIN-4

“We’re coming up on the Alderaan System exit,” called Han Solo from the command cabin, “but it’s going to be another few hours before we reach the planet. Orbit’s on a tangent to the translite channel, and Alderaan’s a quarter away from us right now.”

There was an increasing hum from the *Millennium Falcon*’s engines as the ship braked to TLC exit velocity, and Obi-wan Kenobi and Luke Skywalker came through the doorway behind Solo just in time to see the haze of translite give way to the clear panorama of light-wave space. Chewbacca, his eyes glowing greenly as he peered into the celestial display tube, grumbled, fiddled with two dials, then looked over his shoulder and barked at Solo.

“What?” said the Corellian. “That’s **crazy!** Here, let **me** have a look -” He got up from his seat, leaned over the Wookiee’s controls, and frowned at the screen. Then he checked the setting of the same two dials. Then he stood up and looked around at his passengers, a mystified expression on his face. “It’s **gone,**” he said.

“What do you mean?” said Luke. “**What’s** gone?”

“Alderaan,” answered Solo. “It’s not on the light-wave display, and the display checks out. Everything else is where it should be - but Alderaan’s gone. What could have happened to it?”

“Collision?” said Luke. “Maybe it was knocked out of orbit by something or other?”

“No,” said Solo after a moment. “That can’t be it - They’d have plotted any planetoids or meteors that large and blown them out of the sky long before impact. No, it just doesn’t make sense. I don’t like this.”

“Hold your course anyway,” said Kenobi. “Once we get within visual range of Alderaan’s plotted locus, we may be able to tell more. Could be some sort of freak radiation blanking Alderaan’s normal light reflections.”

And again Luke Skywalker had the odd feeling that Ben Kenobi didn’t believe his own speculation - that he was merely going through the motions of concern. But that wouldn’t make sense, he thought to himself - Ben was in a hurry to get here to help Alderaan. He glanced up and saw the old Jedi looking bemusedly at him.

* * *

The Death Star’s Communications Center was the scene of pandemonium. As soon as the shift personnel had realized what had happened to Alderaan, there had been near-mutiny. Colonel Werren, the shift OIC, had finally managed to restore order after security guards had taken away four of the most hysterical operators, but he himself was shaken - and the situation was not aided by the frantic calls coming in from commercial ships who had been headed toward or away from Alderaan when the AMP was activated. From their transmissions it was clear that the commercial ships believed the Death Star to be run by homicidal maniacs, and most of them were altering course away from it in random directions. The monitor operators, thought Werren, could hardly be expected to stand much more of that traffic without losing what was left of their self-control.

He stalked to the viewplate and again punched the code for the Death Star’s Commandant. As he half-expected, the link was still jammed with similar calls coming from all over the Battle Station. Jarza must be climbing the walls about now, reflected Werren. Then one of the operators came up to him with the excuse he needed to override the other links - which he did - and moments later the face of General Jarza appeared on his VP. The Commandant did not look happy.

“Werren here, General,” said the ComCen OIC. “Override per Section 34. We just got the lightwaves from a new TLC-exit; they fit a Corellian freighter EL-2 - same type that Colonel Olenir said got away from him at Tatooine. You might want to pass it along to Governor Tarkin.”

“Yes,” answered General Jarza thickly. “I’ll do that. Thanks. Good work.”

“By the way, General, could you tell me what’s going on? I’ve got a crew here that’s in a state of near panic, to say nothing of radio traffic from all over the system that says we’ve gone completely crazy. What am I supposed to -”

The General’s composure snapped. “Tell them whatever you feel like!” he raged. “We destroyed Alderaan on orders, for reasons that doubtless were justified. **You’ll** know what they were when **I** find out what they were! Now just do your job, Colonel, and I’ll do mine!” - and the VP blanked out.

* * *

“Ben, there’s something I’d like to ask you,” said Luke; and when the old man nodded, he continued: “I can’t help thinking that this whole thing has happened to me too, well, **precisely**. The situation with the Alderaan starship. You. This lightsaber. The death of my aunt and uncle. It’s as though events have conspired to make my choices inevitable. Is there anything to this, or am I imagining things?”

For the first time it seemed to Luke that he had caught Kenobi off-balance. The old Jedi peered at him strangely for a moment, then looked away, cleared his throat, and tapped his fingers nervously atop the table where his hand had been resting. Only then did he answer:

“You’re asking me the greatest of all questions, my young friend: whether there is in fact freedom of the individual will, or whether there is a transcendental will that assigns us roles to play.”

Luke started to answer, then paused and looked directly into Kenobi’s blue eyes. “Or,” he said, “whether there is a **less** than transcendental will assigning such roles.”

There was another long moment of silence. Finally Kenobi sighed and answered: “You are wondering whether I am some mysterious being who can orchestrate wills in that fashion. Whether I have created this entire state of affairs to put you and others through some private ordeal I have conceived. How comfortable for you were I to say yes, for then your sense of responsibility for your decisions could be abrogated. On my shoulders would be all blame for anything less than an ideal outcome.

“Luke, even the most advanced of Jedis - even the source from which Jedi initiation springs - cannot predetermine choices. In fact the act of initiation strengthens the awareness of the individual will that **it** can make choices. If there were no real freedom of choice, then initiation would be no more than an elaborate sham - and a cruel joke. All of our efforts to exercise will would be merely a higher function of natural instinct. And, for all the effort we put forth to perceive ourselves as being entities of independent will, we might as well be insects building hives while deluding ourselves that we had ‘decided’ to do so.

“So I say to you no, that is **not** the case; and however you may suspect my Jedi motives, believe that I speak the truth in this. I do not know what you will do a moment from now - or what Captain Solo or the Alderaan government or the Galactic Emperor will do. It is of the utmost importance that I **don’t**, because in **that** fact rests the essential proof of the truth of initiation.

“I may know and be able to influence the weaker, natural dispositions of the mind to make animalistic decisions; that is also a fact of initiation. But the two considerations are alien to one another.

“To the charge that I am controlling this situation, I answer yes - to the extent that the factors governing it are functions of natural, instinctive behavior. But I also answer no to the extent that conscious, non-natural will is being exercised by those able to do so.

“I add that the Jedi understands truly-conscious exercise of will to be a far rarer phenomenon than the non-initiate might believe it to be. You believe in your freedom of will. Can you offer me a single choice you have made since our meeting that was not made for reasons which were motivated by a desire for pleasure or a fear of pain?”

Luke stared at him in astonishment. He thought carefully back through the decisions that he had made - and found, as he examined them - that all of them had implicit motives as Kenobi had suggested. Then something occurred to him. He said, “My decision to become a Jedi. I didn’t know what that might portend - only that it implied change to a higher state of existence.”

Then, for the very first time, Luke saw Ben Kenobi really smile at him - a smile so full of pleasure and affection that the young man couldn’t help grinning back. “You’re right, of course,” said Ben. “In that case,” said Luke, “what about -”

- But his question was cut through by the sudden sound of the *Falcon*’s emergency alarm system. Luke and Ben stared at each other for a moment, then turned and rushed through the connecting passage to the cockpit. Han Solo burst half-dressed from his sleeping quarters and arrived moments after them. He shouldered Luke aside and plunged into his seat. Chewbacca started barking at him, but Solo could see for himself what had triggered the alarm.

The screen before him showed a pattern of six numerical codes arranged in a staggered hexagon around the central indicator that represented the *Millennium Falcon*. Solo answered the unasked question: “That code means the computer’s identified the profiles. They’re all Model 23 TIE fighters. Newest thing around. And they’ve got me so tightly bracketed that there’s no way I can get away from them without getting shot to bits.”

“How could they sneak up on you like that?” asked Luke. “Easy,” said Solo bitterly. “They didn’t **have** to. They pre-positioned themselves at the calculated point of my deceleration to sublite and then just matched my SL velocity. Whoever sent them must be in front of us and must have seen my accelerated light-image coming through the translite channel. Must have had some way of breaking down the blur and making it coherent. Must have a new toy to do something like that with. I don’t suppose there’s any hope that those TIEs belong to Alderaan?”

“No, I’m afraid not,” said Kenobi. “The Empire doesn’t make Model 23s available to subordinate governments - for obvious reasons. No, this is an **Imperial** escort.”

Just then the viewplate crackled to life, displaying only the videographic insignia of the Imperial StarForce on the screen. A voice said: “This is Captain Karb, ISF. Your vessel is under arrest and will change course in accordance with our vector patterns henceforth. Maintain transmission silence except on channel 83-45, which is jammed except to my receiver. Contact me only in the event of a maneuvering emergency. Deviations from these instructions authorize me to destroy you under Edict 93, Imperial Code.”

Han Solo threw up his hands in exasperation. “They’ve got us locked up tight,” he said. “Nothing I can do short of a terminal gesture of defiance. So -” he turned to Kenobi “- that means you’d better tell me just what you’ve done to make the Empire so interested in you. Are they just going to slap your hand and fine me for misusing the TLC, or are we looking at something worse.”

“Worse,” said Kenobi drily.

“Great,” said the Corellian, equally drily. “So do we shoot up this party or wait and go out in style by throwing our all at whoever sent them?”

“Hopefully neither,” said Kenobi. “I suggest that -”

“**Ben!**” cried Luke. “**Look!** Look at **that!**”

“I don’t **believe** it,” said Han Solo. “It’s ... some kind of artificial moon! Some kind of station. But - **incredible!** How could anyone build it so - so **big?**”

“That,” said Ben Kenobi, “is what is known as a Death Star. They were initially conceived as a weapons system for use against the Clone Cells in the war, but the war ended before any could be constructed. Evidently the construction of at least this one went ahead anyway. You might as well forget any combative notions you entertained, Captain; your lasers are unlikely to do any significant damage to it.”

“So what do we do now?” said Luke.

“We dock,” said Kenobi. “And then you pay **very** close attention to what I say and do, because I’m not going to be able to focus my attention on you. Remember the checkpoint at Mos Eisley, Luke? All right, then.”

And the *Millennium Falcon*, now dwarfed by the gigantic expanse of the Death Star, fired its hovering jets as it sank down towards the docking bay beneath it.

* * *

“Identify yourself!” said the ISF Lieutenant brusquely into the control room VP. “Prepare to break seal.” Peering in the direction of the Falcon’s cockpit he could discern only a Wookiee at the controls. Then an authoritative voice came through the VP, though no picture was broadcast:

“Dock officer, this is a code R-284-7W. I repeat: This is a code R-284-7W. Clear all personnel from the bay immediately.”

“What the -? What’s an ‘R-284-whatsit?’” asked the hydraulics operator to the Lieutenant’s left, but the officer didn’t reply to him. Instead he blanched, spun, and bolted over to another panel, where he threw a red switch. The emergency evacuation horn began to blast throughout the bay, and within moments it was completely cleared. The Lieutenant, after ordering the control room cleared, redialed the VP and said: “Bay E5-A evacuated; code R-284-7W.” Then he turned and ran for the door.

Within the *Falcon* Luke Skywalker and Han Solo watched this strange scene with amazement. Then they both looked at Ben Kenobi, who had just switched off the VP. “Before you ask,” he said, “that’s ISF code for ‘Ionic overload imminent’. Means your engines are about to chain-react and blow themselves - and anything nearby - to atoms. The ‘7W’ means that an officer of Colonel or higher rank has initiated the alarm, so the automatic reaction of the dock officer was to credit the transmission and clear the bay. We’ll have a few moments to get out of the ship before he realizes he’s been tricked.”

Moments later they had run down the ramp of the freighter, followed Kenobi through one of the exit ports, and were hurrying through one of a number of ever-branching corridors on the dock-level. Fortunately there were many service and support personnel in the same corridors, and most of them were not uniformed. Finally the party stopped to rest, and Han Solo was the first to speak.

“I guess this is an improvement,” he said, “but **now** what? Sooner or later they’re going to catch up with us - and I can’t just leave the *Falcon* either. That ship is my life, not to mention my meal ticket.”

Kenobi ignored him. “R2-D2,” he said, “access the computer directory through that terminal there, will you?” The small droid did so; moments later C-3PO gave them a detailed description of their position relative to the *Falcon*’s bay and to the command centers of the giant battle station. R2-D2 suddenly paused in mid-relay, then continued with a different sequence of droidcode signals. “Senator Organa,” said C-3PO to no one in particular.

“What **about** Senator Organa?” said Luke irritably.

“She is on board this battle station,” replied C-3PO. “She is under arrest and is being held in the execution cell block on level 8, radius 384 by 26.”

“Ben!” said Luke. “**That’s** the girl in the hologram, right?” “Right,” he answered, and then he sighed. “Which means it’s going to take us a little longer to get out of here than I had anticipated.”

“What do you mean?” asked Han Solo. “You don’t mean you’re going to ... **Oh**, no - that’s **crazy!** This place is filled with people who’re going to have just one thing in mind in a few minutes - us - and we’re supposed to rescue this girl from a high-security area?”

Luke had an idea. “Han,” he said, “she’s **rich**. You know what kind of reward you’d get for helping to save her life?”

“**Was** rich, you mean,” he retorted. “Aren’t you forgetting that her entire planet just went up in smoke? I’d say that her life is worth about half of what ours are worth at the moment, and **that** isn’t saying much!”

“Quite right,” put in Kenobi, “but you’re forgetting one thing: She can tell us how to find her main military base once we get away from here.”

“What? Why would we want to go **there?**”

“Oh, talk sense, Han!” said Luke angrily. “Where **else** can we go now? They’ll have a print on us all over the Empire now that they think we’re agents for that Rebellion. We’ve just joined it whether we like it or not.”

“That is deductively sound,” put in C-3PO helpfully.

“Don’t hit the droid,” said Kenobi calmly, deflecting Solo’s fist. “We’ll need him. My young friend’s right, of course. And we’re wasting valuable time arguing about it. Now I’m going to make my way back to the vicinity of the bay, so that I can clear a path for our eventual departure. You two will have to get the young lady back to the ship on your own.”

“You know,” mused Luke, “if we could convince the guards at the execution cell block that there’s a reason they should leave - like Ben did for the docking bay people ...”

Chewbacca tapped Han Solo on the shoulder, then growled at him. “Hmm,” said the Corellian, “might just be crazy enough to work. Yeah.”

“Yeah what?” prodded Luke.

“You know what **claros** is?” said Solo. “It’s a disease carried by Wookies, and it’s deadly where humans are concerned. No preventative vaccination, no cure, and it’s a very horrible way to go. What do you think would happen if we tell the cell guards that we’re bringing a **claros**-carrier down there for quarantine?”

“They’d all find somewhere else to go,” said Luke happily. “Han, you’ve got the kind of mind I like.”

“Now that that’s decided,” said Ben Kenobi, “I’d better see about arranging things so that our departure won’t be interfered with. I’d say that jammed dock doors, cut wires in the TIE-fighter alert system, and a detonator in the HSD battery tracking monitor channel ought to be a good start. See you at the ship ...” - and he strolled off down the corridor, motioning C-3PO and R2D2 to follow him. Han Solo looked after him and scratched his head ruefully. “Some weird friends you’ve got, kid,” he said.

“Tell me about it,” said Luke, winking at Chewbacca.

* * *

“Excellent,” said Moff Tarkin sarcastically. “I no sooner finish emphasizing the importance of arresting the crew of that Corellian freighter than your whole docking bay crew is dispersed by a childish trick. The security guards too. I suppose it never occurred to anyone to cordon off the area around the anticipated explosion?”

The ISF Major looked at him helplessly, knowing that there was no answer he could make that would make things any better. “Oh, get **out** of here, Major,” said Tarkin impatiently. “The more time I devote to you, the more I delay finding that crew.” The hapless officer, his face burning, saluted and headed for the door. When it had closed behind him, Tarkin turned to Darth Vader, who had been watching the exchange from across the room. “Well?” he said. “What’s the matter with **you**?”

“There was a Jedi on that ship,” said the Sith Lord quietly. “He is here now; I can sense his presence. If he is seeking to do damage, he will be able to do a considerable amount of it before you apprehend him. And if he is seeking to escape, he most probably will do so despite the best efforts of hapless humans such as that ISF officer.”

“One Jedi - not the entire crew?”

“I think not, though just for a moment I thought there might be two. But there is not enough distortion in the Force to account for more than one Familiarity. Your security people should be able to track down the others, all right. As for the Jedi, I will see to him myself.”

“You know where he is?”

“I will know when I am near him, and of course he will sense my presence as well. But I fear no other Jedi, for they are Familiar only with the Light Side of the Force.”

“One thing more: Senator Organa.”

“She is in maximum security pending execution.”

“Yes. But, presuming that this crew consists of agents of her Rebellion, why not enable them to free her and lead us to the Rebel base? - Minus the Jedi, to be sure.”

Darth Vader pondered for a moment. “It would work, but you overlook the symbolic value of her presence at the base. Without her the Rebellion may now break apart; the factions agreed to unite only under the leadership of the Organa clan - of which she is now the only survivor. If she is allowed to return, the military will be inspired to continue the fight.”

“They will not live to have that opportunity,” replied Tarkin. “You should understand me better, Lord Vader. I am not interested in surrender, but in the example that will be set by the complete destruction of this Rebellion. Now go and seek out your fellow Jedi. I will deal with Senator Organa.”

* * *

“Why Stormtrooper uniforms?” whispered Han Solo as he and Luke struggled with the two sets of white armor they had pilfered from a reconditioning plant en route to Level 8. “Just hurry!” hissed Luke. Then he answered: “Because everybody’s scared of ST’s, that’s why. Nobody’s going to ask any questions of us if he can help it. And ST’s are just what the cell guards would be expecting to see with something as dangerous as a Wookie with claros.”

“See what you mean,” grunted Solo, tugging the helmet into place. “How do they see through these things, anyway?”

“I asked one once,” said Luke. “He said that the vision constraints are designed to teach ST’s to look around them by moving their entire bodies - which makes them just that much more prepared to react. Haven’t you noticed the way they’re almost constantly changing position? That’s why. Weird idea, isn’t it?”

“Gives me the creeps, like everything else about them,” said Solo. “What kind of maniac thought them up in the first place? Isn’t the ISF bad enough?”

“I don’t know how they got started,” said Luke, “but we can worry about that some other time. You ready?”

“Ready,” said Solo, rising awkwardly to his feet. “Let’s go, Chewie.” The Wookiee, now resplendent with repulsive bandages, gave an answering growl and led the way back to the elevator shafts.

Level 8 was unlike the other stops that the car made in that the door didn’t immediately open. Instead a voice crackled through the speaker above their heads: “Level 8. Identify and state your business.”

“STF,” said Solo with what he hoped was the proper arrogance in his voice. “QE-389 and RY-443 from Quarantine Crisis Control. We have a Wookiee with claros, I repeat a Wookiee with claros. Normal quarantine section is **not** secure for this degree of contamination danger, so we have orders to bring him here.”

There was a shocked exclamation from the speaker. “What do you mean, bring him **here**? This is just a **cell** facility - we don’t have anything like isolated life systems! I’ll have to call the Level control -”

“Do that,” broke in Solo, “and you’ll wind up sharing a cell with him. Don’t you know better than to start yelling about a claros case over the com system? This is secure at the **highest** class. Why do you think you didn’t get any advance call?”

The voice was unnerved. “Hold on - just **wait** a minute, will you - we don’t know what to do about this ...”

“We **can’t** wait,” insisted Luke. “The case is advancing right now, and this elevator is not sealed. Either you open the door and give us immediate access to the cells or we blow it open - and then the contamination danger gets worse.”

“All right,” said the voice. “Look, We’re opening the doors to the death block and taking off the hold on the elevator too. But just wait until we get out of here - I’m clearing the guards out of the way until you’ve left him and gone. Then I’m going to hit the entire complex with aericid before we step back, O.K.? So you let me know when you’ve gone. Call from the elevator.”

“You’re supposed to be at your stations,” said Solo, “but - O.K., we’ll give you a break. No one’s going to get past us. And anyone who’s stupid enough to get near this Wookiee is dead anyway.”

Luke kept his finger down on the door control. “No sense giving them any more time than necessary to think about this,” he remarked as Chewbacca’s face contorted in a smirk. In about 45 seconds the door slid open, and the three comrades found themselves facing a deserted block control room and - stretching beyond it - the dark, silent expanse of the deathblock itself. Slowly they moved into the control room, overcome by the chill of the sight before them.

“Snap **out** of it, kid!” said Han Solo under his breath [and trying to keep his own voice from shaking]. “Find out where she is, and let’s get her **out** of here.”

Luke rummaged for a directory, found it, and thumbed impatiently through it. “Got it!” he said. “Back in a minute ...” - and he bounded off down the block, pausing only to check the numbers on the metal doors as he passed them.

* * *

Time had ceased to have meaning for Leia Organa. After regaining consciousness in an emergency care center, she had been so violent that it took four physicians and two droids to hold her down long enough to sedate her. Even after the drugs took hold and her body became numb, the nurse who was assigned to dress her wounds and clean the blood (from one of the physicians) from her hands lost her nerve and had to be replaced. There was something nightmarish in the Princess’ eyes, she said, and she couldn’t stand to look at them. But the other duty nurse saw only tears.

Now they had allowed the drugs to wear off, seeing that her fury had run its course - only to be followed by dark, aching despair. She could not cry, she could not speak, because tears and words were all so futile and so inadequate in the face off the tragedy of her planet. She didn't bother to resist as they took her down to the death block; why should she? What could life mean to her **now**? Senator? Princess? The titles mocked her, mocked the very honor and responsibility that they had symbolized only a short time ago. Death held no more meaning for her than life; why should she care what the Empire did with her body?

And so she lay on the bed in the cell, staring numbly at the door and hoping that death would come soon for her. And it seemed that death had indeed come, because the door now hissed open and the white form of a Stormtrooper came into the cell. Leia sat up and looked at him, and suddenly she decided that she would go to her execution with all the dignity her people would have expected of her.

She looked coldly at the Stormtrooper. "If you've come to kill me," she said, "then do so now." But the Stormtrooper continued to stare at her, and suddenly she became annoyed. Death she was prepared for, but display was something else entirely. "I don't know who you are -" she began, biting out the words, but then the Stormtrooper wrenched off his helmet and she paused in surprise.

"I'm **not** an ST," said her visitor. "I'm Luke Skywalker. I'm here to rescue you. I've got your droid, and I'm here with Ben Kenobi."

For a moment there was a spark of hope in Leia's eyes, then she sighed and sat back down on the bed, clasping her hands in her lap in a gesture of hopelessness. "What does it matter now?" she said. "It's too late. Alderaan's been destroyed. Go and save yourselves if you can, and let me die."

Luke's face burned - from anger or pity, he wasn't sure which. He brought a toughness into his voice. "It's **not** too late; there are others who still depend on you. And I and my friends are risking our lives to get you out of here. Now either you understand that and help me, or I swear I'll **drag** you out of here by your hair! Either way you're not dying just yet."

To his surprise the Princess stared at him, then laughed shortly. "After what I've been through you're going to drag me out of her by my hair?" She shook her head. "I just don't **believe** this!"

Luke started to reply but was cut short by the frantic sound of Han Solo's voice over the suit-radio. "Luke, what's holding you **up**? **Get** the girl and let's get **out** of here!"

Leia heard it too, and suddenly her manner changed. "All right," she said, "you're quite right - I'm sorry for what I said. Of course I'll go with you."

"Just a minute," said Luke as they stepped from the cell into the corridor. He threw the switch that closed the door, then slapped a magnetic sign on to it. The sign said QUARANTINE - CLAROS. Leia looked at him questioningly. "Tell you about it later," he said. "Now we've got to beat it before we really **do** run out of luck!"

* * *

After leaving Luke Skywalker and Han Solo, Ben Kenobi turned to C-3PO and said, "Return to the *Millennium Falcon* and say that you are there to clean the data files on the Death Star Commandant's orders. Make it appear that you are doing so, but instead program the ship for immediate departure and immediate translite acceleration."

"Directly away from the Death Star - not into the TL channel?" asked the droid.

"Correct," said Kenobi. "You will understand me when I say that our survival depends upon outdistancing the firepower of this battle station, and that requires instant and sustained acceleration." He had an afterthought: "Add a return to sublite after an elapse-5.

The ship should be beyond detection by then, and further blind TL travel would merely increase the danger of a collision. Once bearings have been taken, the *Falcon* can enter the nearest TLC.”

Then he turned and walked down the corridor away from the droids. R2D2 emitted a puzzled toot. “Who knows?” said C-3PO. “It’s difficult enough trying to detect patterns in **normal** human thought.”

* * *

Darth Vader walked slowly down the ramp that connected the command module to the main level 1 system just beneath it. Passers-by glanced nervously at him, but he seemed unaware of their presence. He was, in fact, concentrating on the faint sensation that had first alerted him to the presence of another Jedi. He felt the disturbance more strongly now, and he quickened his pace. So intent was he on the Force that he lost track of his changes of direction - and when he ran into the locked door of an old storage bay, it occurred to him that he did not know his exact location. But the Force-disruption now burned in his brain like fire, and he felt a sudden, irrational conviction that the cause lay just beyond that locked door. Drawing his lightsaber, he ignited the blade, and the cold, blue fire hissed to life. He touched the end of the blade to the lock, melting it, and then pushed the door slowly open.

Before him was a large, unlit storage bay cluttered with old machine parts. It was eerily silent, and the harsh clang of a piece of metal that the Sith Lord kicked out of his way echoed throughout the darkness. The only source of light was the blue glare from the lightsaber, and the shadows in the bay danced fitfully as Darth Vader swung the weapon back and forth. Cautiously he advanced, every step an eternity, his body taut with the sense of present danger. And then -

Before him in the darkness: An old man, standing, facing him. He raised the blade of the lightsaber so that its glow illuminated the figure. “Obi-wan,” he said. “I knew you were the one.”

The old Jedi stared fixedly at him. “Yes,” he said. “Of course you did. I didn’t teach you to make mistakes, young Vader.”

The Sith Lord stiffened. “I am no longer your student. Do you forget that you abandoned the Jedi to extermination?”

“You are not the one to speak of that to me,” said Kenobi. “But that cannot concern either of us now. I am here to tell you that you are once more Elect.”

Darth Vader started visibly for a moment. Then he laughed, bitterly and harshly. “Then you are a fool, Obi-wan, or you mock me cruelly. I am now but the shell of the Jedi you once knew. I have sought knowledge forbidden by the Order; I have the blood of nameless things on my hands. Even my body is an outrage to the Universe: It belongs to Death, yet even this covenant I have denied; I have wrenched it back from the threshold because of the Change brought about in me by the Dark Side. I am accursed by the order of existence.”

“Whatever you may think of me,” answered Kenobi, “believe me in this: that I do not mock you. But I do not pity you your trials either, for each of them - no matter how loathsome it may have seemed to you - has ennobled your Being. Not the shell in which it is imprisoned, but your Being itself.”

Then, with great dignity, he raised his arms above the black helmet in the ancient Jedi greeting of *Xa*.⁴ He said:

⁴ To later be revived in the Milky Way Galaxy as the greeting between Initiates of the ancient Atlantean and Egyptian priesthoods.

*Esseai aqanatoz qeoz, ambrotoz, ouk eti qnhtoz.*⁵

The words were meaningless to Darth Vader, and he felt no physical change in what remained of his body. The exercise seemed absurd, blasphemous. He shook his head angrily. "I am **not** Elect," he said.

Kenobi lowered his arms. "You have no choice. Look at your *t'a*."

Darth Vader glanced down at his lightsaber, then brought the weapon up sharply before his photocell eyes as though he doubted what they were conveying to his brain. The glowing blade was slowly altering in color. The blue deepened, reddened, and then brightened again - to a shimmering purple. "You see," said Kenobi.

Darth Vader had no time to answer, however, for suddenly the bay was ablaze with light; he heard the sound of voices and the harsh sound of running boots. He spun round to see a detachment of ISF soldiers taking up positions behind the machinery. "It seems that you were followed," said Obi-wan Kenobi. "But they are too late. Come, Lord of Sith, we shall fight for them - and perhaps I shall grant you what you have denied yourself."

The old Jedi drew his own lightsaber, and its golden blade shot forward. Automatically Darth Vader swung his up to parry it, and then the two weapons began a deadly, blindingly swift ballet of death. Round and round the two combatants circled, their bodies enmeshed in an aura of purple and golden flame. Then, suddenly, they separated.

"You are not fighting," said Darth Vader. "This is not the teacher I knew."

"Now you mock yourself," replied the other, "for you have since learned from another teacher. It is the Dark Side of the Force that energizes your *t'a*."

Before Darth Vader could answer, the golden blade lashed toward him again. He parried it, then countered with a slash of his own - and his blade cut through the body of Obi-wan Kenobi in a terrible, final arc. The golden lightsaber exploded in a blaze of fire and a shower of sparks; and when Darth Vader looked again, there was nothing before him but Kenobi's old brown robe, lying in a crumpled heap on the deck. He took a step toward it, then jerked his head up at the sound of an agonized scream -

"Ben! **No!**"

In the doorway at the far end of the bay Darth Vader saw two Stormtroopers - and the figure of Leia Organa. He tried to gather his wits, to react to their presence, but his body seemed to be at an infinitely great distance from his mind. The Dark Lord of Sith stood as one frozen, his lightsaber rigid at his side; and behind him the ISF guards hesitated as well, confused by his behavior and surprised by the apparent presence of the Stormtroopers.

Luke Skywalker was wild with grief and anger. He shook himself loose from Leia's restraining grip and was about to cast himself forward into the bay to avenge his friend. But then to his consternation - Ben's voice!: "Luke, this is **not** the time. Run for the ship - save yourselves - **now**."

Luke paused, bewildered, and then Han Solo gripped him by one arm and struck him sharply across the face. "Luke! **Listen** to me, kid! You can't do **anything** for the old man now! We've got to get back to the ship and get out of here - **understand?**"

Luke stared at the Corellian blankly, then nodded and stumbled back through the port. Close on his heels, Han Solo paused only to knock the port control switch to the "closed" position. As the panel slid shut, moments before the ISF pursuers could reach it, he fired a shot at the mechanism to freeze it in place.

⁵ Prior to translation into Andromedan: "You shall be an immortal god, divine, no longer mortal." - to be echoed in the Milky Way Galaxy by the philosopher Pythagoras.

Then he grabbed Luke with one hand and the equally-shocked Leia with the other, and half-led, half-dragged them both through the last few passages to the docking-bay holding the *Millennium Falcon*. “Now **get** up that ramp before I **kick** you up!” he shouted at them. Leia bristled, but Luke said, “No, no, he’s right; come on -” and led the way into the ship.

Solo shot the mooring grips to bits with his blaster, fired another shot at the control booth window for good measure, and catapulted himself up the ramp as a hail of blaster-fire filled the bay. “Chewie!” he shouted, “**Hit** it! **Now!**”

But Chewbacca hadn’t waited to be told; the moment that Solo cleared the ramp, he fired the main engines - and the *Falcon*, its vectors pre-set per Ben’s instructions, thundered out of the bay, its boarding ramp still closing as the ship broke through the pressure field into the blackness of space.

* * *

“Sir, did you say to just let them go?” said a startled HSD battery commander. “That’s right,” crackled the VP. “Don’t ask me why, ’cause I don’t know either. Maybe they want to try to catch it - Yes, that’s got to be it; there go a couple of TIEs after it ...”

* * *

“Did you say put the ships on auto and eject?” said the TIE-fighter team commander to TacControl. “That’s right,” came the answer. “Don’t ask me why, ’cause I don’t know either. But set the autos to home in on that freighter before you go.”

“If you’re expecting to do it in by ramming,” said the team commander, “it won’t work. That freighter’s got a set of LC’s top and bottom. It’ll blow these TIEs to bits.”

“Just quit arguing and **do** it. As soon as the freighter’s away from you, we’ll send out a tug to bring you both in.”

The team commander shrugged, shook his head, adjusted the automatic pilot, and ejected into space.

* * *

“There are two TIE-fighters coming after us!” cried Leia as she spun around towards Han Solo, who had just picked himself off the deck following the *Falcon*’s surge of acceleration.

“I knew it!” he growled. “All right, sister, you get in this seat in case Chewie gets shot up ... Luke! Quit feeling sorry for yourself and get on the top gun - I’ll take the other one!”

As Luke swung himself into the laser-cannon control harness, he could see one of the TIEs approaching, its own LCs firing intermittently. He clenched his teeth, flicked on the sight, waited for the flicker of the focus lock, and hit the triggers. Whatever else was wrong with the *Falcon*, Han Solo had evidently thought it prudent to keep its armament in top condition; the focus was perfect. The approaching TIE exploded in a puff of light, and Luke heard Solo’s delighted crow as the other pursuer met a like fate. The two of them climbed back out of the LC capsules and went back up the passage to the cockpit. “You can relax, sweetheart,” said Han to Princess Leia. “Our friends are gone, and they can’t catch us with anything else now. Not a bad rescue, if I do say so.”

Leia raised her eyebrows. “Don’t misunderstand me, Captain Solo; I’m well aware of the risk you both took. But I’m still not sure why you did it. You’re not Alderaanian, either of you, nor are you part of the Rebellion forces. And you’ll forgive me for saying this, but you’re, well, um, too inexperienced for Imperial agents. So?”

Han Solo colored and stared at her. “Inexperienced?” he said. “Well, as long as we’re being honest with each other, **Princess**, you’re here so Luke and I can have somewhere to **go** - assuming that we could get away from that battle station in the first place. And we

wouldn't **be** in this jam if **this** idiot" - he waved at Luke - "hadn't gone crazy over your pretty face in that hologram and wanted to help you. As for me, it's just my luck to meet the wrong kind of people in bars." He spun and stalked back down the passage to the lounge, muttering to himself.

Leia looked after him for a moment, then turned and gazed questioningly at Luke. He was blushing furiously, and Leia couldn't help giggling despite everything. "That doesn't go very well with Stormtrooper armor," she said.

"Leia - I mean, Princess -" said Luke.

"Leia'," she broke in. "And Luke - I didn't mean to be unkind. You can't know what genuine affection can mean to me right now; I had almost forgotten that it could exist." And she leaned over and kissed him.

Luke stared at her, not knowing what to say. C-3PO said helpfully, "That is an oscillatory expression, Master Luke. It means -"

"He knows what it means," said Leia.

* * *

"So now you have killed General Kenobi," said Moff Tarkin, "in the act of aiding the Rebellion. Most curious. Why should he have done so?"

"It would be easy to conclude that he was avenging himself on the Empire for the massacre of the Jedi," said Darth Vader, "but Obi-wan's motives rarely yield themselves to quick interpretation. As familiar as he is with the power of the Empire, he could not have thought the Rebellion would have any real hope of ultimate success."

"Well then?" said Tarkin.

"The key," replied the Sith Lord, "must lie with the individuals he was aiding - and I don't mean only Leia Organa. One or both of those two humans - or even the Wookiee - must have been important to a plan of his. We must attempt to capture rather than kill them if at all possible. I must emphasize that Obi-wan's schemes are self-sustaining once set in motion. His death will not change that."

"Indeed," said Tarkin, stroking his chin thoughtfully. He looked up at Darth Vader, and his eyes were hard and piercing. "I must speak frankly, Lord Vader; I abhor verbal sparring. I know that your Jedi loyalties are greater than those to the Empire. I know that you were alone with Kenobi for some time before the ISF found you. I have been told that you reacted to his death like one stunned, and that the escape of those intruders was facilitated by your inaction.

"I do not presume for a moment that you deliberately aided them. If I thought **that**, you would now be dead. But I fear, my friend, that your curiosity may get the better of you and that you may seek to encourage Kenobi's design, whatever it was.

"The Empire is not the plaything of the Jedi - It is a rational state. You alone of the Jedi still live because the Emperor believes that you **serve** that rationality. Remember that. I offer this as advice, not as a threat. It would be a shame for an intelligence such as yours to suffer for its curiosity."

Tarkin's tone grew more measured: "So when you find General Kenobi's latest pets, kill them. Whatever they may intend will then perish with them."

Darth Vader shook his head. "It is never that easy," he remarked. "For all we know, their death at our hands might be part of Obi-wan's design. No, they must live at least until their actions reveal what parts they were intended to play.

"As for my own existence, you should understand that it is no longer for my own curiosity that I live. I have seen enough; and I have discovered more, perhaps, than I take pleasure in recalling. You needn't worry that I would subvert the Empire. In my own way I am as committed to its survival as you are."

Tarkin frowned and gazed down at the floor. "You have endured much," he said. "Perhaps whatever compels you to continue will ultimately grant you peace."

The Sith Lord was so surprised by this uncharacteristic comment that he made no answer. Was this the cold-blooded cynic he had known for so many years?

But before he could respond, Tarkin - now irritated, it seemed, by his sudden lapse - turned abruptly and stalked over to the VP, hitting the code for Communications. "Now," he said, "we had better see if that drone has returned to us yet."

* * *

"What was **that**?" said Han Solo to Chewbacca as the *Millennium Falcon* eased out of the Translite Channel into the Yavin planetary system. The Wookiee examined the electronic log, then told him. "You're **kidding**!" moaned Solo. "A **drone**! And we were idiots enough not to check the hull!"

"That means the Death Star is going to know right where we are, doesn't it?" said Luke. "And," said Leia, "where the Alderaan military base is. It seems that I have led **all** of my people to their death."

"Not necessarily," said Luke. "Didn't you say that this R2 unit contains something important to the Rebellion?"

"Yes, yes - that's right," she replied. "The plans of that battle station! Han, we've **got** to get to the base as soon as we can - It's on the fourth moon of Yavin itself; that's the second planet from the sun."

Han Solo keyed the data into the flight computer. "O.K.," he said. "Yavin-4, here we come."

* * *

Yavin-4, much to Luke Skywalker's surprise, turned out to be anything but an ideal staging site for military operations. There was no open terrain that he could see, nor were there any ships in orbit. It seemed that the entire surface of the moon was covered by swamps and rain-forests.

When the homing signal finally answered Leia Organa's coded transmissions, the *Falcon* descended towards what appeared to be the ruins of an old stone temple complex rising out of the marsh. Han Solo brought the ship down on its hovering jets and then carefully guided it through a craggy opening into a vast inner hall that had been converted into a maintenance hanger. A variety of space ships could be seen in various stages of repair, most of the ones near the *Falcon* either Sekonasta Grade 4s or Threhel-Dhannos, commonly called "Y-wings" and "X-wings" respectively.

As the small party alighted from the *Falcon*, they were surrounded by what Luke presumed were Alderaanean military officials. [He later learned that they came from both Alderaan itself and a number of allied worlds.] A gruff-looking senior officer elbowed his way through the crowd and came up to Leia.

"Your Highness," he said, "We thought you were dead. Did anyone else -?"

"No, Jan," she replied. "I will tell all of you about it later. But now there is no time. We've just learned that we've been tracked here - by the same battle station that destroyed Alderaan. It's nothing we can fight in a conventional way; it's too big - and it has some kind of antimatter weapon of far greater power and range than anything here. But we've got the station's plans - here in this R2 unit - Our only hope is to search them for a vulnerability."

"Right," said the officer, then barked: "Captain Junno! Image the banks of this R2 into the IMM. Run the battle station plans. Have the IMM look for" - he paused to think - "for anything, either unshielded or shielded, which could give us access to a main magazine or power source. Got it?"

As the engineer hurried away with R2D2, Leia indicated her three live companions. "General Dodonna, may I introduce Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, and Chewbacca. A short time ago I was imprisoned on that battle station - it's called the Death Star - for execution. They are responsible for saving my life. My friends, this is General Jan Dodonna, Supreme Commander of the Alliance - or the 'Rebellion', as I believe the Empire calls us."

"Gentlemen," said Dodonna, who had looked sharply at Luke upon hearing his name, "we are deeply grateful for what you have done and will thank you later as you deserve. At the moment you must excuse me ..." - and he saluted them, turned on his heel, and ran after the engineer. The three heard him shouting instructions to his staff as he left the hanger, and moments later a series of alarms began to sound. Fuel lines appeared, and ground crews swarmed over the ships, evidently preparing as many of them as possible for imminent flight.

A half-hour later General Dodonna summoned all base personnel to the VPs for a remote conference. He wasted no time coming to the point:

"I estimate about an hour before this moon is located and destroyed by an Imperial battle station called the Death Star. In that time we can only evacuate personnel, not equipment; and in that case our cause is lost and we will be lucky to survive long enough to reach the nearest Allied planet.

"The IMM has located a radiation overload port on the Death Star that, if struck by a proton torpedo, can unbalance the central core of the station and cause it to explode. The IMM is now programming the target computers of all X- and Y-wings for that port, and the four alert squadrons will lift off in 15 minutes. All other personnel will now begin boarding the remaining ships, which will commence lift-off immediately thereafter.

"The evacuation ships may not be able to escape the ISF fleet ships based on the Death Star - or the station's antimatter weapon - but their chances will be better than if we remained here. The evacuation ships will scatter immediately upon departure to present a less-cohesive target for the Death Star. Now let us all move as quickly as we can to get the maximum number of ships operational. May the Force be with you!"

"Great, **just** great," remarked Han Solo to Luke. "Guess you'd better help me round up everyone we can stuff into the *Falcon*."

"You'll have to use Chewie and Threepio," was the reply. "I've volunteered to fly one of the X-wings. Artoo's getting the nav program right now."

"You **what**?" said Solo. "You're **kidding**! **You** can't fly an X-wing; those things are little more than drones with LCs. You'll just get in the way."

"Wrong again," said Luke defensively. "I learned to fly in an old X-wing at Anchorhead on Tatooine. I bet I can handle one better than two-thirds of these people. And I used to hit womp-rats all the time with the LCs."

Solo looked at him doubtfully. "If you say so. But I don't give much for your chances. Do you know how many TIEs that thing's liable to turn loose the moment it sees this bunch on the screens?"

"A lot," said Luke. "Listen, don't cheer me up any more, Han. I'm **trying** to pretend I'm not scared, all right? Just promise me you'll get Leia away from here safely, and that you won't let the Empire take her back."

The Corellian was moved in spite of himself. He grasped Luke's hand. "You have my word, Luke. Know something? You're quite a guy."

Luke forced a grin. "Tell me that again in an hour after I've turned that Death Star inside out."

As the Death Star moved out of the translite channel into the Yavin system, its monitors detected the fighters streaking toward it from Yavin-4. "Shall we send out TIEs to meet them?" inquired OpCen. "No," answered the Commandant. "Shouldn't be necessary to risk any of our pilots that way. Just let them come here and then the HSD batteries can pick them off at their leisure."

"Why haven't we sent out TIEs?" snarled Moff Tarkin into the VP fifteen minutes later. Then: "Colonel, your HSD specifications reflect the tracking mechanisms that will be added in the next phase of construction. The interim trackers aren't quick enough for fighters that small. Now **get those TIEs launched!**"

"Here comes our welcoming committee," said Captain Hoff, commander of squadron Red. "Blue and Yellow, see if you can keep them occupied, will you? Green, go for your run. Red in reserve. If it looks like Green's getting through, Red will join the party up here. If not, we'll follow Green."

Squadrons Blue and Yellow promptly peeled away from the formation and headed towards the oncoming TIE fighters. As the opposing forces converged, Luke Skywalker could see the deceptively silent flashes of light as craft on both sides began to take fire. Down below him squadron Green had disappeared against the massive hulk of the Death Star; the only signs of its presence were occasional flashes of graser fire from HSD laser cannon striking either the squadron's ships or protruding structures of the Death Star itself.

The silent battle was quick and savage; within two minutes Luke heard Hoff's voice again, this time even more glacial: "Green's gone, guys, and that means we've got a bigger score to even. And you know this thing isn't going to let our big ships get away. So let's do it right. Skywalker - you said you were good at womp-rats. O.K., you go on in for the hit. Rest of you I want in formation seven, over and behind him so those TIEs can't climb up his tailpipe. I want your LCs crawling all over those HSDs on the approach run so that they can't concentrate on Skywalker. **Go!**"

* * *

As squadron Green was making its final and fatal run toward the port, Darth Vader was lowering himself through the hatch of one of the new Model 30 TIE fighters, which were scheduled to replace the existing Model 23 ships as soon as they had been fully tested. He nodded at the dock control booth, fired the thrusters, and moved smoothly out of the bay. After he had cleared the entrance, he rotated the ship and shot off in the direction of the attack.

"Who told you **he** could go out there?" fumed Moff Tarkin as soon as he learned of the Sith Lord's departure. "**He** did," answered the dock officer plaintively over the VP. "He said something about a Force ..."

Tarkin's expression changed. "All right, Lieutenant," he said. Then he punched the code for the AMP. "Are you prepared to fire?" he enquired. "Yes, sir," came the reply. "Prepared to commence the final ignition on your orders."

"As soon as you clear Yavin," said Tarkin, "fire. Then retarget the AMP on that fleet of ships and destroy it too."

"Acknowledged," said the AMP-commander.

* * *

The *Millennium Falcon* had been one of the last ships to leave Yavin-4. Since it had been designed as a freighter, Han Solo had taken on supplies rather than people, and only Chewbacca and C-3PO were aboard as crew.

Solo, who had been grim and silent for some time, suddenly turned to the Wookiee and said, "Chewie, we're going to the Death Star. That fool kid's going to get killed if we

don't. No, **don't** ask me why - I'm out of my mind, all right?"

Chewbacca looked at him doubtfully and nodded firmly. But then he hit the alternate course vector switch - and Han Solo saw that it had already been programmed for an evasive approach to the Death Star. Solo laughed shortly. "You're out of **your** mind too," he said, and again the Wookiee nodded.

* * *

As he closed in on the section of the Death Star under attack by squadron Red, Darth Vader felt once more the Force-disruption that had alerted him to the presence of Ben Kenobi. One of the attacking ships, he thought - but which one? And what Jedi could be left alive? He considered Krel Atlan, then dismissed the idea; the disruption was too weak. He saw Luke's X-wing as it was beginning its run; then he looked at the protective screen of fighters and waited for his opportunity. It came moments later, as one of the HSD batteries scored a fatal hit on one of covering ships, opening a gap in the formation.

Captain Hoff immediately called for the formation to close up, but the squadron couldn't realign quickly enough to prevent the Model 30 from slipping through them into a position directly behind Luke's craft. Hoff was about to order fire against the TIE, then caught himself as he realized the danger to Luke. Got to catch him and ram him, he thought, but could he do it before the TIE got within firing range?

Up ahead Luke could see the structural wall containing the overload port; he was coming up on it fast, and he switched on the X-wing's targeting sights. Simultaneously he began to feel a strange sensation in his brain, as though there were danger behind him. He looked back, and in that instant a laser bolt from the TIE lanced forward, striking and destroying the left range-finder of the X-wing. Luke fought the controls, keeping the craft on course as he combed his mind desperately for a way to aim the proton torpedo.

* * *

"Yavin-4 in range," said the AMP-commander into his VP. "Energized, primary ignition primed."

"Commence fire," replied Grand Moff Tarkin; then he switched the VP to portray the schematic of the departing transport fleet.

* * *

Now Luke's ship was directly in Darth Vader's sights, and the thumb of his black gauntlet began to press down on the trigger. But then, obsessed by the Force-disruption that he now knew came from the X-wing in front of him, the Sith Lord hesitated - and then felt his own ship jolt with the impact of an LC hit from directly above. He glanced up to see the dark shape of the *Millennium Falcon* overhead, and then one of the ion engines shut down. The continued thrust from the other one, combined with the damage done to the mass-distribution of the ship by the laser hits, threw him completely out of control. The Model 30 veered towards one of the channel walls, cartwheeled over it, and shot out into space.

"There," said Han Solo from the control seat of the lower laser cannon, "**That's** done for that one!"

As Darth Vader's presence vanished from his mind, Luke's thoughts cleared - and suddenly he felt that he could see the port ahead in all of its detail. The X-wing was no longer a machine in which he was riding; it became an extension of his will. Almost without being aware of what he was doing, he squeezed the torpedo release mechanism and felt the jolt as the projectile roared away from him.

"Luke!" came a familiar voice in his headphones. "Get **out** of there, kid! It's going to go any second!"

Luke shook his head, grasped the maneuvering controls, and pulled the X-wing up in a sharp climb, directly away from the Death Star. Behind him came the rest of squadron Red - and the *Millennium Falcon*. Then ...

A glare that Luke could feel as well as see reflected on the craft around him - as the Death Star first shuddered as jets of fire tore through gaping rents in its metal body, then exploded outwards in a silent, brilliant nuclear flower. The explosion lingered, expanding, changing color - now distorting as additional sections ignited - and then there was nothing behind the fleeing attackers but a ragged constellation of bits of glowing metal.

The Death Star was gone.

As a somewhat shaken Luke climbed down from the cockpit of his X-wing back in the Yavin-4 temple, he felt warm lips against his own, then heard a cheer from the crowd as Leia Organa hugged him delightedly, her eyes sparkling as he had never seen them before. Then a more breathless hug, as he was hoisted clear off his feet by Chewbacca. "Don't kiss him, Chewie," said Han Solo from somewhere down below, and then "Yup, **quite** a guy, Luke Skywalker."

"Now?" said General Dodonna to Leia. "Now," she answered - then made her way through the crowd to the far end of the hall, where she stopped and faced them atop an elevated platform. She motioned for silence, and then her voice rang through the chamber:

"Beings of Our blood: We convoke you now in the name of the royal clan Organa, whose title now rests with Our person.

"This is a time of grief for those here present - and a time of vengeance, but the hardest trial lies yet in the future. We will never forget Alderaan; but we will remember her not through tears, but through the better worlds that will be built to preserve the hopes and dreams she died for. To this beginning I dedicate my life and pledge my honor."

For a long moment silence; and then she was answered by a cheer that rang throughout the cavern. After a moment she raised her hands again, and once more there was silence.

"The Medallion of Alderaan," she said, and General Dodonna came forward to hand her three jewelled pendants. "Beings of Our blood," she continued, "We confer this, our highest of honors, upon those who have endured great peril and performed with great valor to save our person, avenge our mother planet, and preserve our people here. Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, Chewbacca: Attend us now in this Court of Honor."

Chewbacca, embarrassed, began to back toward the Falcon - only to be stopped by the iron grip of Han Solo. "Chewie," he said under his breath, "if **I** gotta go through this, then **you** gotta go through it! Besides," he added sweetly, "they'll probably kill you if you turn it down ..."

The Wookiee glared at him, then turned and shambled towards the platform with the two humans. As they crossed the open hall towards Leia, she spoke again:

"And in memory of one who was our friend in our moment of greatest peril - Obi-wan Kenobi - let us remember this day to the sound of the Processional of the Jedi, outlawed throughout the Empire since the Massacre."

Over the great speakhorns of the bay came a thrilling fanfare and then the solemn, noble strains of the Processional.

And as Luke Skywalker walked the few remaining steps to where the Princess awaited him and his friends, he knew that the Processional not only honored Ben - but foreboded a new Jedi as well.

THE SECRET OF SITH

1977

1. MISSION TO THE SENATE

Away from the massive Death Star Battle Station careened Darth Vader's tiny TIE-30 fighter, both of its ion-sails shredded and one of its thrust units sending forth only intermittent, uncontrolled bursts. Flash-burns from the explosion of the left engine, hit by fire from Han Solo's *Millennium Falcon*, had seared its hull and partially fused its exposed wiring.

Within the cramped cockpit, now ablaze with electrical sparks and the flashing of emergency warning lights, Darth Vader fought urgently to regain control. Through the circular viewport before him, the pinpoint of light from distant suns had become streaks and spirals that shot wildly across his line of vision as the small vessel spun towards deep space. Unable to read the instrument panel, he threw the switch that lowered the metal meteorite shield over the port - a decision which quite possibly saved his life as the Death Star, its central reactor system destabilized by Luke Skywalker's proton torpedo, blew apart behind him with such force that it virtually disintegrated into a boiling globe of fire.

Although his complete weightlessness prevented him from feeling any shock as exploding fragments struck his ship, Darth Vader sensed the Force-negation immediately. His first thought was that the Death Star had succeeded in its attack on Yavin-4, but the sudden blank-out of the instruments linking the TIE fighter with the navigational computer of the Death Star told him otherwise.

In an uncharacteristic moment of emotion - and for reasons other than the loss of the Death Star itself - he slammed a gloved fist against the bulkhead beside him, leaving an oblong dent in its surface. Then he turned once more to the task of halting the runaway vessel. Overriding the inertial guidance system, now hopelessly disoriented, he shut down the single functioning ion engine and spun the dial of the gyro stabilizer to maximum. He could hear the whine of the stabilizer and feel the shuddering of the fighter as it slowed to a halt. Finally the displacement printer before him indicated that zero velocity relative to the nearest planetary body had been attained, and the Sith Lord reopened the metal shield.

He was surrounded by debris from the Death Star. Mostly it consisted of shapeless lumps of fused metal, but here and there were grisly reminders of its organic population. Darth Vader had neither the time nor the inclination to dwell upon the scene, however. A cursory check of the scanner verified that the only landing-point within range of his damaged ship was Yavin-4 itself.

The rebels, he guessed, would be too preoccupied with their victory to attempt to intercept him or even track him. But, since he could not be certain, he would have to approach at crash-landing speed. Carefully he began to maneuver through the scrap. For a brief moment he wondered why it had not continued to explode; then it occurred to him that the gravitational mass of the Death Star was so immense that it would have acted to brake the outward velocity of its components. He turned his full attention to the navigational task before him. The single engine coughed to life and began to turn the fighter towards the nearby moon, while the gyro shrieked its protest at the unbalanced pressure.

* * *

At the old temple on Yavin-4, the presentation of the Medallion of Alderaan to Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, and Chewbacca was followed - as Darth Vader had guessed - by a delirious victory celebration. Stores of food and drink were broken out, a bewildering array of musical instruments from an assortment of planets were soon competing horribly with one another, and the surviving attack fighters were quickly drenched in streams of

brew at least as explosive as the fuel in their tanks.

As an exhilarated Luke was recounting his attack on the Death Star to an assemblage of rebel commandos, C-3PO strode purposefully up to him and, oblivious to a bucketload of mead that suddenly struck both him and the laughing pilot, enquired brusquely if he would mind joining Princess Leia and General Dodonna at once in the observation center. Luke made his way good-naturedly through the crowd, followed by the droid, and paused to look around for Han Solo.

A commotion across the cavern told him where to go, and he finally found the exuberant Corellian, surrounded by an even larger and more vocal [and more obscene] crowd, painting a giant set of targan jaws around the cockpit of the *Millennium Falcon*. Pulling the spraygun carefully from his friend's non-too-secure grip and passing it to a particularly enthusiastic bystander, Luke tugged the protesting Solo to one side and told him of the summons. The two of them set off briskly for the observation center, leaving C-3PO to follow at a slower, if somewhat more balanced pace.

The center was located high atop the ruins of the old temple, in a tumbledown chamber that evidently had once served as an observatory. Now the spaces between the inscribed stones were occupied by various units of scanning and tracking machinery, and the slit apertures in the ceiling were jammed with antennae and optical sensor cameras. The only way up to this site was via a ramp that curved upwards along the exterior of the main temple; and when Luke and Han arrived in the doorway, blinking after their climb in the tropical sunlight, they saw General Dodonna and Princess Leia across the room peering over the screen of one of the stratospheric scanners. As they approached, Dodonna drew their attention to a point of greenish light indicating a small craft of some sort.

"We don't know yet whether it's ours or theirs," he said, "but it's just about to hit the atmosphere. No response to our signals, and its entry vector is too steep. Unless that pilot - if he's alive - corrects that declination in a hurry, he'll crash. If the ship doesn't burn up first. But at that angle he'll hit pretty close to the base, so we'll send out a team to see if there's anything to pick up."

"Visual in about a minute now, General," said the scanner operator. "Should be passing overhead at ... about vec-145." Dodonna led the way towards the exterior ramp, and the four of them craned their necks upward, shielding their eyes against the sudden glare. "There -" said Luke, pointing at a tiny, glowing speck which came plunging through the sky at dizzying speed. The company watched in silence as it fell towards the jungle canopy, blazing like a meteor, and finally it vanished into the tangle of trees and vines a short distance away from the temple. There was a subdued flash of light as the ship impacted, but any sound it might have made was muffled by the tropical undergrowth.

"I doubt if anyone could have survived that," said Dodonna, "but we'll check just to be sure." He signaled to an aide, gestured towards the crash site, and gave his instructions. Moments later two of the short-range vertilifts could be seen gliding over the jungle towards the crash site.

The four rebel leaders walked back inside the observation center, and Leia nodded in the direction of a map room adjacent to the main chamber. Its walls were covered with a bewildering array of stellar charts, and the old table in the center of the room contained computer print-outs of the structure of the Death Star. It was here, only a few hours earlier, that Dodonna's IMM analysts had found the reactor exhaust port through which the giant battle station could be destroyed. The key print-out lay atop the pile, the port marked with a red X, now a forgotten curiosity.

Leia glanced briefly at the stack of paper but then turned to face Luke and Han. "We didn't call you away from the party because of the ship," she said. "Jan and I were talking

over the implications of this ‘victory’ of ours, and I think you should hear what he has to say.” She looked expectantly at Dodonna.

The General sat down in one of the chairs, gestured for the others to do the same, and looked at each of them thoughtfully.

“You already know the essential point. Whether by skill or by luck, we’ve managed to defeat the largest and most powerful battle station in the entire Empire. Now that’s **not** going to pass unnoticed at the Hub, and we can expect that the position of the Death Star was constantly fixed by Hub monitors. So it’s just a question of time before something else heads this way - probably worse, if there **is** anything worse.

“That means we’ve got to get out of here fast and find somewhere else to hide. And that also means we drop communications with our allies for awhile until we know what we’re dealing with. The staff recommends that the main base be relocated to Teloos - here, in the Cylurian system.” He got up, walked to one of the wall-charts, and thumped his hand against it. Han Solo went over for a closer look.

“Jan’s going to get the base dismantled and moved as soon as everyone has sobered up,” said Leia, “but that’s still not why you two are here. Now that Darth Vader and Tarkin are both dead, I’m going to take a chance that I can negotiate an agreement with the Senate. There’s a faction there which originally supported us, but Tarkin and his people made it dangerous for them. If there’s any chance for getting what we want out of the Empire, it’s **now** - after we’ve achieved a major victory. So what I want you to do is to take me to the Hub - right now.”

“The **Hub**?” said Solo incredulously, running his fingers through his hair. “It wasn’t exciting enough that we had to chase you through that hunk of iron out there ... Now we’re supposed to go right down the **throat** of the entire Empire just when Luke’s blown its favorite toy to bits. I mean, just because I was stupid enough to come back and get that TIE off the kid’s back, don’t get the idea that I **love** doing this kind of thing. My hands are still shaking - see?” He held out a hand and waggled it emphatically.

“That’s not from being scared,” said Leia. “That’s just from too much celebrating. Of **course** it’s risky, but would you rather we just sit around and wait for the Hub to come to **us**? It **will**, you know.”

“I know, I know,” said the Corellian morosely. “All right. Come on, Luke - Let’s go find Chewie and get the *Falcon* ready.”

“Han,” said Leia, “Chewbacca can’t come. Wookies are banned from the Hub. Too many incidents because of them. He’s going to have to go with the main body.”

“Now wait just a minute -” said Solo, but Luke broke in: “It’s O.K. We understand that this is an **important** trip,” he said, looking at his friend pointedly. Solo seemed about to reply, then raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. “Sure,” he said, “I -”

He was interrupted by a young officer who poked his head in the door. “The team just called in, General,” he said. “It was a TIE, and it was in about a thousand pieces. No sign of the pilot.”

“I suppose he got picked up by a friend near the Death Star,” replied Dodonna. “Either way I don’t suppose we need worry about him any more.” He turned back to face Luke. “I’d like those two droids of yours here too to help us with the move. Or at least the R2.”

“They work better as a pair,” said Luke. “Unless Leia wants Threepio along for diplomatic purposes.”

“Whoever programmed that droid for diplomacy ought to be shot,” said the Princess sweetly. “Well, I guess that answers **that**,” observed Han Solo.

Two hours later the *Millennium Falcon* backed unsteadily out of the hanger cavern. As it cleared the opening, there was a crunching noise as the side of the fuselage scraped against the rock. The ship began to rotate slowly on its hovering jets, and Jan Dodonna and Chewbacca heard Han Solo's voice crackle over the open comline: "Next time stick to X-wings, kid, so the lady can pay the bill when you mess up the paint job!"

Dodonna raised his eyebrows at Chewbacca, and the Wookiee, looking oddly self-satisfied, responded with an amused bark. Then there was a roar from the *Falcon's* IE bank, and the starship climbed slowly through the atmosphere, gaining speed until it was finally lost from sight.

After the *Falcon* reached temporary orbit around Yavin-4, Han Solo turned the controls over to Luke and went back to the main cabin with Leia to consult the celestial navigation computer. "There's what we want," he said. "TLC straight to the Hub, about four hours away from here." Leia nodded, and the two of them went back through the connecting tunnel to the cockpit. Han punched the instructions into the time/distance monitors, then leaned over Luke's shoulder to glance at the instrument panel. "Much better," he said. "A little more time and you'll have the feel for it. It's hard getting used to the offset when you're used to the balance of a center-control ship."

"Piece of cake, actually," said Luke, winking at Leia. "Only problem is that the controls aren't in the greatest of shape. Chewbacca told me how he has to go over them and repair most of the damage whenever you make more of those, um, 'special modifications' I believe you called them. Look here -" Luke yanked on a lever marked IE FIRE EXTINGUISHER, and it came completely out of the panel. Grinning, he handed it to the nonplussed Solo. Leia collapsed with laughter. "Some way to run a rebellion!" she gasped. "Should have told Jan that the negotiations might work **if** I can get to the Hub without the ship burning up first!"

Han Solo brandished the red handle at her indignantly. "Sister, if the engines catch fire, I'll go back and pour water on 'em. As for **you**," - he turned to Luke - "treat her right and you won't **have** to worry about the IE cooking up!" He spun round and stalked back down the passageway, while Luke and Leia stared after him gleefully.

Solo strode through the main cabin to the engine compartment, intending to reassure himself that the extinguisher controls next to the ion engine were still hooked up. He found that they were, but as he turned to leave the compartment, the smile froze on his face.

* * *

"There," smiled Luke a short time later. "See that? I'll bet that's the smoothest run up to translite the *Falcon* has ever made." He checked the TDM for the Hub's exit pattern, then looked over at Leia. "So where's Han? Don't tell me he's really upset about that stupid fire extinguisher ..."

"Wait here," said Leia. "I'll go see." She rose from her seat and disappeared down the passageway. When in another half-hour she hadn't reappeared, Luke sighed, hoisted himself out of the pilot's seat, and walked after her to find out what the problem was. As he came round the bend to the main cabin, he stopped and stared at the sight of his two companions sitting motionless in the lounge-seats along the far wall. Across from them stood the figure of Darth Vader. "Come in and sit down," he said.

Luke Skywalker knew that he should not obey Darth Vader's command - that he should do something to save his friends, save the rebellion. But it was an intellectual realization which was not answered by his will. Slowly he walked over to Han Solo and Leia Organa and took a seat beside them, his mind a whirl of confused emotions: surprise at the presence of this strange being, anger at the murders of Ben and his father, fear of what would happen now. Overshadowing all of these, however, was a sinking sense of

defeat that Luke supposed to be the result of the Sith Lord's control over the Force.

For his part, Darth Vader stood rigidly upright, motionless as a statue. He could have been mistaken for some nightmarish droid, thought Luke, were it not for the measured hiss of the breath screen. Perhaps beneath the black armor was a body too damaged to move easily, he mused, but then he remembered the pace of the lightsaber fight on the Death Star.

But abruptly his thoughts were cut short by the terrifying sensation of having his mind pierced by the Sith Lord's. Perspiration beaded on his face, and he stared helplessly at the black shape before him, his heart pounding. When he thought that he might go mad with shock, the sensation vanished as quickly as it had come. Then Darth Vader spoke again:

"So it was **you** who destroyed the Death Star." The statement was flat, unemotional. "Obi-wan taught you something about the Force, then. And you learn quickly. Unfortunately the ability to change the course of events is rarely accompanied by the knowledge to do so wisely. And Princess Leia -" The helmeted head inclined slightly in her direction. "So now you have succeeded in your ambitions. There is no turning back for the rebellion."

"**Murderer**," said Leia slowly and clearly. "You may kill us, but the rebellion will live to avenge Alderaan."

"Murderer?" replied the Sith Lord. "I have just seen the carcasses of thousands of Imperial soldiers and technicians, now destined to drift through space forever. Will you excuse that as self-defense? Then can the Empire not claim the same rationale for seeking to preserve the peace against armed rebels? Who are you to pursue selfish policies of regional autonomy in callous disregard for the damage they may cause throughout the rest of the galaxy?"

Leia's icy composure gave way to open fury. "The **Death Star**?" she raged. "How **dare** you compare that - that -" - words failed her - "to **Alderaan!** Alderaan was a planet of **peace!** Couldn't you **see** that when you tore me apart with that torture droid? Why did you let Tarkin **do** it? Why didn't you **stop** him? **Murderer!**"

Darth Vader seemed to stiffen slightly, and when he replied there was a coldness to his voice. "What you may not know, Princess, is that the Death Star was originally sent here as a show of force only - an indication to the rebels that an armed contest with the Empire is preposterous. By stealing the plans of the battle station, you created a condition of risk, necessitating a first strike unless the plans could be recovered. What were the lives of your crew - to say nothing of your personal comfort - against the civilizations of entire planets and the population of the Death Star itself?"

"Yes, the Death Star. It was not built simply as an engine of tyranny; it was conceived as a vital means of defense against unknown invasions that the Empire might confront from beyond its borders. It was not operated by fiends, but rather by men and women like yourselves - who in doing so thought that they were defending the cause of civilization against its enemies. They are now dead in order that your ambitions may live.

"And your 'defenseless' world of Alderaan was the main logistical resource for your outlaw force, contributing to its destructive power just as certainly as though it had been manufacturing warships. I knew that the moment I saw you on board that blockade runner, Senator. Why **else** would the Crown Princess of Alderaan take such a risk? Do you really think me such a fool, or am I to suppose that this is merely a show to impress these two gentlemen?" The glowing red eyes scanned Luke and Han briefly; then Darth Vader turned and selected a seat for himself.

"It is time for all of you to understand something of the actual situation you have created. If I am to do anything about it, I may need your cooperation. I will release the

disruption of your life-fields that you may listen to what I say without distraction. Please remember that I am quite as skilled as Obi-wan Kenobi at sensing intentions, and that I am able to completely neutralize your life-fields should it become necessary. This is not a time for heroics.”

The three sat up and stretched their limbs carefully, but the numbness had completely disappeared. Darth Vader seemed satisfied with their silence. When he began to speak again, the artificial voice had lost its earlier sharpness and, indeed, displayed something of the calm patience Luke had come to know in Ben Kenobi. [He wondered if Darth Vader had acquired the mannerism during his past exposure to Ben, or whether it might be simply a psychological trick to make his audience all the more receptive.]

“You gentlemen,” said Darth Vader, “have seen only a minute segment of the entire Galactic Empire. In fact the very concept of any sort of galactic government is beyond you, since your minds have not been trained to work with statistics, economics, demographics, and politics on that scale. As a Senator you have a better idea of what I am talking about,” he continued, glancing at Leia, “but you were torn between loyalties to your own civilization and to the Empire as a whole. I do not fault you alone; the entire Imperial Senate was regularly paralyzed by such conflicts of interest. That is why it finally became necessary to terminate that body.”

“You don’t deny, then, that you planned to destroy the Senate?” said Leia. “No,” answered Darth Vader, “and I will tell you precisely why. Decisions on a galactic scale cannot be granted the luxury of opinionated debate. They must be made instantaneously on the basis of a completely dispassionate analysis of all relevant data, and solutions must be implemented with equal promptness. Either a delay or an error in the process can cause markedly disproportionate damage as the effects multiply logarithmically at successively lower echelons of the administrative network. At the Imperial level a one-day postponement of a Senatorial decision could mean the slow starvation of an entire solar system over a year’s period. In fact I could produce many examples of such tragedies, although I recall the Senate was disinclined to dwell upon such unpleasant statistics.”

Luke was interested in spite of himself. Ignoring a chilling glance from Leia, he asked, “Do you want to rule in place of the Senate?” And Han Solo observed, “What a pleasant prospect.”

Darth Vader chose to ignore the sarcasm. “In fact I would be far more efficient than the Senate, but neither my attention-span nor my reasoning processes are optimal for the task. Nor is any other organic mind capable of such performance, particularly over an extended period of time. No, the only solution is to place Imperial sovereignty for purely-deductive considerations under the control of an extended time-span forecasting computer.⁶ At lower administrative levels there will be increasing latitude for differences of opinion, of course, and planetary governments may squabble to their hearts’ content. But no individual - or group of individuals,” he said, looking directly at Leia, “should have the power to make - or not to make - decisions completely beyond their competence.”

“No doubt the Emperor will be delighted to hear that,” said Leia. “Not exactly delighted,” said Darth Vader, “but he **did** listen, and he finally came to agree. Yes, I have heard all the quaint stories about the megalomaniac hiding behind armies of Stormtroopers, but he is far from being so helpless or foolish. Please bear in mind that he had the acumen to rise to the top of a government whose reach is some thirty thousand

⁶ In the original *Secret of Sith*, as published in *Famous Monsters*, “positronic brain” was used here in homage to Isaac Asimov’s vision of a theoretical ultimate artificial mind in his *I, Robot*. However the Andromedan Empire, while it had developed sophisticated forecasting technology, did not proceed into positronic machine intelligence.

light-years along this spiral arm of the galaxy. Hardly the accomplishment of an idiot.”

“You’ve explained everything except what you’ve got in mind for us,” pointed out Han Solo a little indelicately. “I mean, I know we’re just bugs in all this galactic stuff, but even a bug will take a mild interest in his own hide. Or would you just like to be dropped off at the nearest Imperial base?”

“Very witty,” said Darth Vader. “Let me tell you just how amusing it is. If I cannot stop a punitive expedition from being mounted to avenge the attack on the Death Star, countless worlds will be ravaged in the search for your base or bases. Moreover those elements at the Hub who favor the increasing use of military force against the periphery will become stronger. Do you suppose Tarkin to be unique? There are many more like him, and I cannot control all of them at once. Do you think they would willingly relinquish galactic power to a computer incapable of enjoying one method of political power over another, but always using a necessary minimum of pressure? Hardly.

“You will take me to the Hub, whereupon I will do what I can to abort a punitive strike. If I am successful, I will then deal with your rebellion myself. Your plan to appeal to the Senate is useless, I might add, for two reasons: First, the Emperor permanently dissolved that body when it was learned that a Senator had stolen the Death Star plans. Secondly, even if the Senate were still in existence, it would be debating your appeal long after the sweep of the punitive expedition had begun. Do you remember the Kanlor episode?” he said, turning to Leia. “Yes,” she answered in a low voice, but whatever the Kanlor episode was she did not say.

“As for the three of you, there will be nothing you can do at the Hub,” continued Darth Vader. “You had best return as quickly as possible to your friends and do your best to convince them to surrender whether or not I can stop the fleet. Theatrics are quite beside the point; it is neither just your own lives nor even your own time-span of existence that you endanger, but rather an entire level of civilization in your area of the galaxy for centuries to come.

“Now I have said all that I can. What you do after you reach the Hub will be your decision, so I suggest you consider it carefully. Han Solo, I believe that the time is approaching for you to return the ship to sublite. Have you been to the Hub before?”

Solo admitted that he had not. “Then you will find it a fascinating sight. I will give you the necessary approach instructions.”

2. THE GALACTIC HUB

Han Solo and Luke got to their feet and, after a moment's hesitation, walked through the tunnel to the cockpit. As they went through the instrument checks for the return to sublite, Darth Vader and Leia arrived and took the two back seats. Finally Solo threw the activation lever, and the blur of incoherent light in front of the viewport gave way to recognizable astronomical features. The *Falcon* was now on a pre-programmed exit path from the translite channel, and Luke peered round for some sign of their destination. "Over there," said Leia, directing his attention to the far right.

Luke drew in his breath with astonishment. The *Millennium Falcon* was turning towards a solar system unlike any that he had ever seen or even imagined possible. There were five planets in the system - all on a single plane and orbiting the parent sun at a uniformly-relative velocity. Flashing between the planets were what seemed to be almost continuous bolts of light, so that the entire family seemed connected in one long string of radiant energy.

"This solar system was selected for the Galactic Hub in part because of this interesting planetary relationship," commented Darth Vader as though he were conducting a tour. "As you can imagine, the reciprocal orbits of the sun and the planets are highly parabolic. The flashes you see between the planets are devices for almost instantaneous transfer of matter, eliminating the delays caused by conventional space-travel procedures. The Hub complex is spread throughout all five planets, with the nerve center, you might say, on the third planet. That is our destination."

Leia Organa was impressed in spite of herself at the deference enjoyed by Darth Vader at the Hub. Normally the process of obtaining clearance for landing even at one of the outer planets was tedious, exhaustive, and time-consuming. With vessels arriving from all over the galaxy, biological contamination of either the Hub or other visitors was a constant danger, and there were security, economic, and diplomatic tests that had to be undergone as well. It was not unusual for a ship to reach the Hub in a few weeks of translite, then orbit one of the outer planets for two or three months before obtaining authority to land. And travel to the third planet was almost completely impossible save for officials bearing the highest priority. Leia herself had made the trip only for sessions of the Imperial Senate, and then she and the other Senators had been in protective quarantine on Hub Two for four months prior to the scheduled opening of the Senate.

Darth Vader, however, told Han Solo to fly directly to the main port of the third planet, while through the *Falcon's* communication system he simply identified himself by name. Evidently some sort of audio-identification was involved, because clearance to land was immediate. And Leia wondered at the willingness of the Emperor to decide that the time of Darth Vader was worth a biological risk to the Galactic Hub.

The spaceport of Hub Three was also unlike any that Han Solo or Luke Skywalker had ever seen. It was gigantic, stretching as far as the eye could see in every direction. Yet it seemed that only a small section was operational.

In answer to their unspoken question, Darth Vader said, "It was originally built to handle both military and civilian traffic from all over the galaxy. That was before the reports began to come in of biological disasters in the periphery. Counter-measures had been taken against the life-forms that were immediately transferable, of course, but some organisms were found to become detectable only with the passage of time. Hence the exhaustive quarantine procedures with which you are familiar, Princess. They are not necessary for the Hub itself, but rather for the protection of unborn generations on planets

thousands of light-years from here. As for my seeming license to disregard the precautions, it is only because I am able to use the Force to destroy all life-forms in my vicinity save those I intentionally spare. For the moment at least you may consider yourselves the sole biological inhabitants of your bodies.”

As he was about to disembark, Darth Vader suddenly hesitated. He turned back to face the three. “Well?” he inquired. “What have you decided?”

Luke started to say something, but the princess cut him off. “We will return to our base,” she said, “but I will not commit the council to any course of action, no matter how sensible it might seem to you. Perhaps to one of your disposition all these opinions are very bothersome, but there are many creatures other than yourself in the galaxy. Personally I find it difficult to believe that you have their best interests at heart. You are too far removed from them, Darth Vader; to you they are little more than cosmic gaming-pieces which you manipulate - not out of affection for them, but out of curiosity to see what you can do with them. Evidently you are content in such a god-like posture. I would not be.”

Luke said, “You’re also forgetting one thing - Ben’s decision to help us. Is he not wiser than you in the ways of the Force? And, if a fleet should be sent to attack us, will it not have to confront him as well?”

Darth Vader, who had remained impassive while Leia spoke, took a step closer to Luke. “Obi-wan Kenobi **alive!**” he said softly. “**Explain** this.” Pressed by the telepathic power, Luke blurted out an account of the voice that had spoken to him immediately after the duel in the Death Star, together with his own reliance upon the Force to launch the killing torpedo. Darth Vader gave no indication of what he might be thinking; instead he turned toward Han Solo. For once the normally cocky Corellian was ill at ease. He looked at each of them in turn, then turned to the ramp of the ship and stared into the distance. Then he lowered his head slightly and answered:

“You’re not one for giving people easy decisions, are you? What you’re saying is that we should betray our friendships and loyalties out of concern for entire civilizations. What kind of choice is **that**? You cast this alliance of ours as a childish indulgence with nightmarish consequences. That isn’t what I saw on Yavin-4. I saw people free to be **themselves** - no longer concerned with proper behavior as cogs in your Imperial machine. What point is there to civilization, as you call it, if no one can move on impulse without causing these destructive chain reactions you describe?”

“I have stated the reasons for my evaluation of the rebellion,” said Darth Vader, “and you have wit enough to consider them. As for the constriction of free will, I of all individuals am opposed to that. I have spent my lifetime strengthening my own will in an absolute sense - not just as opposed to others. Impulsive decisions were tolerable only when they affected a few worlds at a time - although you’d find it difficult to argue that they were beneficial even then.

“The price we pay for communication and commerce across an entire galaxy is the loss of impulse in favor of analytical probability. Bear in mind that the benefits are reciprocal. The decision you make may mean peace and prosperity for worlds far distant from yours, and their policies may have a corresponding effect upon your region. If you can exist in an environment free from unnecessary misery, you will have the freedom to exercise your will in ways that are truly creative. **That** is what I would prefer.”

“I think,” said Han Solo, “that I would like to see what sort of reaction you get from this Emperor before I make up my mind. And it might help to have one of us along.”

“Satisfactory,” said Darth Vader, and Han Solo had the uneasy feeling that the comment did not refer to the point he had tried to make.

Solo's leave-taking from the others was strained. Leia made no real effort to conceal the fact that she thought him a traitor, his past gallantry notwithstanding. Luke Skywalker didn't share her opinion, but he was disturbed at what he considered Han's odd behavior. It certainly didn't square with the brash, fun-loving, pirate personality he had come to know so well. He was worried that somehow, in some way he could not fathom, Darth Vader was exerting a telepathic influence upon the Corellian's mind. But under the present circumstances there was not much he could say - and he was far from being certain about his suspicions. He gripped Han's shoulder warmly. "Take care of yourself," he said. "Don't forget about us."

And then, for a moment, the old personality was back: "Listen, kid, just you get the princess home in one piece. Don't screw up my ship either; it's hanging together by only five bolts as is. And tell Chewie that if I find out he's been tearing the place apart, I'll shave him from head to foot with a dull razor!" He seized Luke's hand in a powerful grip, then turned abruptly and followed the black shape of Darth Vader down the ramp. At the bottom he paused, kicked the ramp with his boot, and yelled, "And don't forget to shut this thing before you lift off!" Then he was gone.

As the *Millennium Falcon* vanished into the sky, Darth Vader and Han Solo boarded a waiting landspeeder marked with the Imperial insignia. But instead of allowing the pilot to proceed to the Imperial Center, Darth Vader gave him instructions to alter course towards the perimeter of the city.

Soon the vehicle was sailing across a tangled forest of trees and vines, all the more incongruous because of the elaborate metropolis a short distance away. Then, rising through the surrounding vegetation, there was what appeared to be the top of a large, domed structure. Darth Vader directed the pilot to bring the landspeeder to a halt in a rough clearing adjacent to one of the exterior walls.

Disembarking, he strode up to a once-impressive but now badly corroded metal door. He pressed upon both sides of the door, evidently trying to activate some concealed opening mechanism, but the attempt was unsuccessful. As Solo came up, he drew his lightsaber, ignited the blade, and burned an arched opening across the barrier. The smoking panel fell inwards with a dull clang, and Darth Vader motioned for Solo to follow him through the gap.

Han Solo found himself within one of the strangest buildings imaginable. From the inside, the gigantic dome was translucent [or radiant]; a gentle glow illuminated an interior landscape of tragic aspect. Once it must have been a beautiful garden, with groves, ponds, and winding pathways. But now it was completely overgrown and obviously untended; here and there were burned, blackened areas that had not yet been reclaimed by the brush.

As he picked his way along one of the paths after Darth Vader, Solo caught glimpses of sizable buildings, all seemingly abandoned. Most were merely covered with brush and vines, but once he saw a pile of charred and blasted rubble that had evidently suffered a more abrupt fate. He saw that Darth Vader had arrived at one of the larger and more imposing edifices and was standing in front of a door bearing a crossbar-like device surmounted with the Imperial seal. "Where are we - what is this place?" said Solo, rather out-of-breath.

"This is the Citadel of the Jedi," came the toneless response, "and we are looking at the residence of one-time General Obi-wan Kenobi. This door was sealed by the Senate shortly after his disgrace, and no one - not even myself - has broken that seal in all these many years. I am about to do so now, since the Senate no longer has any say in the matter - and since it is vital that I try to discover both Kenobi's method for existing in a dematerialized state and his rationale for encouraging that idiotic rebellion."

With a slash of his lightsaber, Darth Vader cut through the seal and the crossbar. He forced open the door and proceeded down the dimly-lit hallway behind it.

On the threshold Han Solo paused, glanced down at the broken remains of the seal, and then looked back at the ruins and undergrowth throughout the Citadel. What could have brought the ancient and powerful Order of the Jedi to such an end? He considered asking, then decided it might be an unwelcome question. He recalled Luke once telling him that Darth Vader had slain his father, also a Jedi, and he decided not to ask about that either.

He shook his head and walked slowly along the hallway. Off to the right near the far end was a room from which there shone a ray of light. He peered through the opening.

If Han Solo had thought that there couldn't possibly be any further surprises for him after all that he had seen, he was wrong. He stared incredulously at the sight of Ben Kenobi seated before him at an ornate desk, with Darth Vader looking over his shoulder at the documents before him.

Before the nonplussed Corellian could think of anything to say, Kenobi got up from behind the desk, walked over to him - and passed right through him on the way to a cabinet against the wall. Solo's expression brought a rare laugh from Darth Vader. "Don't worry; you're still quite sane. This is not the real Kenobi, but a teleprojection of him. Most of the Jedi had such devices in their homes, intended for automatic recording of their research. I am gambling that the same realization that drove Kenobi to his disgrace made him forget to erase the final reel - until it was too late for him to return here. We shall see."

The figure of Ben Kenobi, which Solo now noticed was younger and more impressively clad than the old man he had met on Tatooine, passed through the doorway and disintegrated. Almost immediately it was reconstituted in one of the other doorways. Presumably some time had elapsed since the last recording, as the figure was now dressed differently and the shadows in the room had lengthened.

Kenobi was carrying an oddly-shaped box of black metal. He made for the desk, passing through Darth Vader on the way, and sat down. He placed the box in front of him and stared at it for a time. Then he seemed to reach a decision and carefully raised the hinged lid. Within the box was a slim volume with a cover of some peculiar substance that glowed and pulsed; it was yellow, and Han Solo felt an inexplicable fear as he looked at it.

He was distracted by a sharp exclamation in some strange language from Darth Vader. He had not seen him lose that machine-like composure before now, but there was no mistaking the astonishment of his tone. Whatever the strange book was, it was evidently something that Darth Vader did not take lightly.

Kenobi opened the book and began to study the symbols within. After a moment's hesitation, Darth Vader again peered over his shoulder. Han Solo glanced at the pages as well, but the strange writing was completely meaningless to him. [Later it occurred to him that Darth Vader would probably have prevented him from looking had he thought the material intelligible to him.]

After about two hours Kenobi closed the book, replaced it in the black metal box, and walked slowly out of the room with an odd expression on his face. Darth Vader switched off the projection mechanism and said, "Now I understand things a little better. Later I will discuss certain matters with you, but first we must deal with an impatient Emperor."

As he walked toward the doorway, Darth Vader seemed to have an afterthought. He drew the lightsaber from his belt, switched it on, and touched the end of the fiery-purple blade to the projection mechanism. It promptly dissolved into a molten mass. Darth Vader then deactivated the weapon, and the two of them returned through the Citadel to the

waiting landspeeder. The pilot was now agitated almost to the point of panic because of his unauthorized delay, but he managed enough composure to steer the vehicle back toward the city and thence to the Imperial Center.

From Han Solo's point of view, the structures they were now approaching looked no more imposing than the other administrative complexes he had seen on Hub Three. The Emperor's dock was completely functional, with none of the ceremonial display Solo had anticipated. At the very least he had expected an Imperial Starforce honor guard or a detachment of Stormtroopers, but only a single ISF officer was there to escort them from the landspeeder. Evidently reading his thoughts, Darth Vader commented, "Do not forget that this entire planet is rather difficult to approach. And yes, there are facilities for formal receptions, but neither the Emperor nor I have time for that now."

Their guide took them to a room which, because it contained only three metal chairs, Han Solo supposed to be some sort of waiting area. Darth Vader selected one of the chairs - which were arranged in an inward-facing triangle - and the Corellian took another.

Suddenly, without warning, the figure of a man appeared in the third chair, a slight shimmering about him indicating that he was only a projection. He was clad in robes of white with no decoration or insignia, and his powerful, sharp-featured face was crowned by a shock of silvery-grey hair. This apparition looked directly at Darth Vader and said, "Welcome, Lord of Sith." Then: "And welcome to you, Han Solo. Your reputation has preceded you; there is many a humiliated customs officer who would cheerfully cut your throat if given the chance. I might have known you would arrive in the company of Darth Vader."

Solo had a momentary impression of cold, steely eyes that belied the casual greeting; then the Emperor shifted his gaze back to Darth Vader.

"I know, of course, about the fate of the Death Star. If this rebellion is strong enough to destroy such a station, then it would seem I should send a strong fleet to deal with it. Do you disagree?" "I do," answered the Sith Lord. "I have learned that the Death Star was destroyed not by the rebel attack, but by Obi-wan Kenobi, who has mastered an unsuspected aspect of the Force. This state of affairs is **his** doing; had he not taken a hand, the original mission of the Death Star would have succeeded. Your fleets will be useless against him, and in all probability they would share the fate of the Death Star. I must return to confront him again. If I am correct, the rebellion will pass out of existence without significant disturbance to the Empire."

The Emperor's expression did not change. "As usual, I am advised that you are untrustworthy - not because you are disloyal in a petty sense, but because you have other, more ethereal allegiances than that to the Empire."

"We both know," said Darth Vader, "that I am a Jedi and hence a Familiar of the Force, although I know precisely what the Force is and you do not. There are two ways of looking at it - one as though it were a source of Will and morality, and the other as though it were a non-conscious tool to be employed by those with the skill and judgment to do so. We also understand that I have no loyalties save to my own intellect - but that this same intellect considers the cohesion of the Empire to be necessary for reasons far more important than mere economic or political convenience."

If the Galactic Emperor found this answer irritating, thought Han Solo, he managed not to show it. "Then tell me," said the projection, "how you intend to solve this particular problem."

"I am convinced," answered Darth Vader, "that what Obi-wan seeks is not the success of an insignificant rebellion, but rather the initiation of a social chain-reaction aimed at destroying the **entire** Galactic Empire. I do not yet know his reasons for desiring this, but

I can estimate the process he has in mind. Whether or not the rebellion is destroyed by force, it will become a symbol of martyrdom; it will become an abstract impulse which will inspire other rebellions in a variety of social contexts throughout the galaxy. This process may not destroy the Empire in my span of existence or yours, but in time it **will** happen. Then the level of civilization - of ordered knowledge - will regress towards that of bestiality. This I would consider extremely undesirable.”

“Hence it is necessary to **neutralize** the rebellion, not simply exterminate it. The individual who will accomplish this is here before you.” And Darth Vader inclined his head slightly in the direction of Han Solo.

The Corellian was startled out of his composure. “**What?** Now just a **minute** -!” But he was silenced by a sharp glance from the Emperor.

“You are seriously asking me, Darth Vader, to place the future of the Empire in the hands of this **pirate?**” “No,” came the deliberate answer, “in **mine.**” The projection fell silent, its eyes shifting from one of them to the other. Finally it said, “Do not fail.” Then, as unexpectedly as it had appeared, it vanished.

As he walked back to the waiting landspeeder with Darth Vader, Han Solo felt an odd sort of pity for the Emperor of the Galaxy.

3. DEATH OF A JEDI

Back at the spaceport Han Solo and Darth Vader were taken to a dock holding a ship somewhat more striking than the battered *Millennium Falcon*. About three times the size of the Corellian freighter, its polished black exterior gleamed as though it were cut from a diamond. Indeed its hull was faceted, not smooth, and odd-looking and seemingly non-functional decorations appeared along its length. At the foremost point of the fuselage was a curved, dishlike mirror containing two glass and wire-wrapped armatures. At the stern, instead of the usual ion exhaust nozzles, was an abnormally large opening lined with rings of translucent tubes and banks of electromagnets. Solo looked at his companion inquisitively. "Ionic propulsion is too slow for my requirements," said Darth Vader. "This is a photon system."

Photon engines! thought Han to himself. He had heard about such devices from other captains and engineers. None were known to exist because of the difficulties involved in their manufacture and the theoretical danger of their operation. And now he was looking at an actual, working unit. For a moment all thoughts of the rebellion and the Empire vanished from his mind. He grabbed Darth Vader by one armor-covered arm and said, "You **mean** it, don't you! **Photon** engines - Do you know what this **means**? If you can do **this** kind of thing, what are you doing playing games with Tarkin and Palpatine? You can cross the whole galaxy in **minutes** with this; you can go to the **next** one; you can practically -"

Darth Vader pried Han Solo's fingers from his arm. He said, with a touch of amusement in his voice, "Perhaps we shall do all those things in due time. But just now I am occupied with - lesser matters. If you will be so kind as to let me deal with them, I promise to let you experiment with my ship at the first opportunity." And he walked off towards the mid-section of the gleaming ship, followed by the still awestruck Corellian.

Suddenly Han Solo felt as though he were standing on his head. The sensation was so acute that he automatically raised his hands to brake his fall, and indeed he was "falling" - straight up towards the hull of the black vessel. But, instead of crashing against it, he continued right through it as though it were not even there. After the somewhat alarming sensation of seeing his body pass right through a variety of molecular solids had ceased, Solo became aware that they had come to rest in a spacious, salon-like cabin, appointed elaborately if not opulently.

And standing before them was another figure, dressed in a form-fitting costume of black and silver. Unlike Darth Vader, however, she wore no mask and was decidedly more pleasant to look at. "Han Solo," intoned the voice beside him, "may I present Krel Atlan of the Order of Jedi." She smiled disarmingly at Han, and after a moment he smiled back. At first glance she seemed like any other pretty girl, with long black hair cascading down into the folds of the cape she wore over her Jedi uniform. But, when she raised her lashes, Solo stared into eyes that were like sparkling diamond crystals.

Sensing his discomfiture, she answered the unspoken question: "Yes, they are artificial. The atmosphere of the Planet of Sith is highly poisonous, and my natural sight failed some time ago. Through these devices, however, I am able to see normally. I hope you do not find them repulsive." Solo had the presence of mind to lower his own gaze and shake his head slightly. And, when he looked up, he decided that he didn't mind the crystalline eyes. In fact he found them oddly attractive, and a sudden arching of Krel's expression told him that he was easier to read than he had supposed.

“Krel is both my pilot and a Jedi Master in her own right,” said Darth Vader. “Do not be deceived by her charms. She is far more dangerous when angered than I am. Nevertheless she serves to remind me that there are more enchantments than those which may be wrought with abstract concepts.” And to Krel: “Set a course for the Cylurian system. Once we are underway we shall talk.”

The ascent of the Sith Ship was so smooth that Han Solo was hardly aware of any movement at all. The acceleration to translite was also undetectable save for the indications on a second bank of instruments at one end of the salon. Han saw with amazement that at standard translite channel velocity the large-scale analog dials had hardly moved at all. [Why would Darth Vader design a ship with so much power?] He looked up to see that Krel Atlan had returned from the command cabin.

“Aside from the influence of Obi-wan Kenobi - with which I will deal - the hinge upon which the rebellion turns is Leia Organa,” observed Darth Vader. “Her own subjects are motivated more by loyalty to her than by an understanding of her policies and ambitions. Much the same holds true for the allies she has managed to gather around her.

“In point of fact she holds others in little regard, as was quite evident by her decision to mount an almost certainly suicidal attack on the Death Star instead of seeking a truce. Moreover she is a romantic idol for Luke Skywalker and other young adventurers to worship; otherwise they would seek similar causes to serve and comparable females to impress. She herself has used her allure to her advantage, and this too is one of the qualities that attract those around her - just as an intoxicating drink will provide seeming respite from the rigorous discipline of intelligent existence. You yourself,” - he nodded at Solo - “have sampled this intoxication, and I suspect you would like to do so again. Krel has kindly agreed to intrude.”

Under his breath Han Solo drew a comparison between Darth Vader and a particularly odious Felgan reptile. If the Sith Lord noticed, he chose to ignore it, but there was a peal of laughter from Krel. “Darth Vader not only knows far too much about everyone,” she said, “he takes perverse delight in demonstrating it at their expense. Hence he is only slightly more popular at the Hub than with your rebel princess. Most of the time I find him infuriating too, but he **is** fascinating company.”

“Eventually I will feed both of you to a krayt dragon,” remarked Darth Vader indifferently, “but it is now time to be serious. Krel, Obi-wan Kenobi has found and read the *Yellow Text* - and so, now, have I.⁷ If you are to be effective in the time to come, you must understand the substance, if not the details of that book.

“The Jedi have long regarded the Force as either an active intelligence or a passive tool for use in manipulating the natural laws of the cosmos. In the *Yellow Text* an entirely different application of the Force is suggested. It involves the creation of matter and energy by recourse to the Force alone, without reference to the pre-existing laws of the Universe. More than that, it approaches the inertial qualities of the natural Universe as an inconvenience and an impediment to the spontaneous application of the Force for such creation.”

“You are saying,” said Krel, “that Kenobi has decided to use this rebellion as a catalyst to gradually rid himself of the galaxy, so that he can create something original in its place? But, even if the social momentum of the rebellion were to initiate such a chain-reaction, it would be ages before it could grow to proportions capable of affecting the entire galaxy. Kenobi would never live to see it.”

⁷ *The Yellow Text* is inspired by Robert W. Chambers' *The King in Yellow*, a psychodramatic work that drove all who read it to illumination or madness, depending upon your point of view. H.P. Lovecraft also acknowledged it as the inspiration for his own *Necronomicon*.

“There is more to the *Yellow Text*,” said Darth Vader. “It contains a formula for divesting the self of its material body and transferring it to the vehicle of the Force itself. In short - immortality and virtual limitlessness in extension of the mind.” The mechanical voice had an odd note to it which Solo had never heard before. Glancing at Krel, he saw that she had gone inexplicably pale. Darth Vader continued:

“I know what you are thinking, Krel, but the answer is no. I have my ambitions, but they do not involve the extermination of art even to attempt a greater art. Moreover there is a conceptual paradox involved to which I think Obi-wan has given inadequate consideration if any: A complete destruction of the natural order of things will leave him no memory or integrity of thought, and he will redesign the Universe as a blind fool. Perhaps that is how this Universe truly came to be - and why it functions so mechanically without any observable intelligence behind it.”

“If I understand you,” said Han Solo, “you are saying that Ben Kenobi is actually planning to do away with the **entire Universe!**” He shook his head in disbelief. “I’m sorry - that’s just, just plain **crazy!** He’s a kind old man who left a hole in the Tatooine desert to help the daughter of one of his old friends. O.K., so he’s a Jedi and knows about the Force - but - the **whole Universe?** Just because you read something in that **book?** Ridiculous.”

Krel started to say something, but Darth Vader interrupted. This time there was the lash of anger in his voice, and Solo was seized with a sudden fear of him. “By now you know enough of me to appreciate my intelligence. I would not draw such a conclusion lightly. And a time may come, Han Solo, when you will understand how painful this discovery is for me, both because I refuse to use it myself and because I will not entrust it to Krel - or yourself.”

The tension was broken by the soft tone of an alarm. “We have returned to sublite,” Krel said to Solo. “Now it is up to you to find your friends’ new base.” Recovering somewhat, Han said, “They’re on Teloos. I’ll have to signal them.” “We’ll need to go to the command cabin for that,” she said. “There is no danger of damage to this ship, but it will make many things easier if they understand they are not under attack.”

As Han left the salon, he looked back at Darth Vader. The helmeted figure was crouched in front of one of the large viewports, staring silently out into the void beyond.

When the observation center on Teloos picked up Han Solo’s signal, there was considerable excitement at the base - and apprehension, which did not decrease when the stratospheric scanner displayed the unmistakable outlines of the Sith Ship. General Dodonna considered ordering a number of the X-wings into the air, then thought about the reports he had read concerning the black starship. “If they have fixed our position, they can destroy this base and any X-wings we send up, with no risk to themselves,” he told Leia and Luke. “I advise just allowing them to dock. Better to contend with them in person.”

When the three passengers finally alighted from the Sith Ship, it was difficult to say which one of them attracted the most attention. The only unqualified greeting was given by Chewbacca, who let out a roar of delight and hoisted Han Solo completely off his feet in a Wookiee-hug. Luke’s welcome to the Corellian was somewhat more subdued, though he grinned and pointed to a freshly-painted and polished *Millennium Falcon* at the adjacent dock. His gaze was drawn to the strange beauty of Krel Atlan, however - a fact which did not escape the notice of Leia Organa. She herself greeted Darth Vader with glacial formality, ignored both Krel and Han Solo, and led the way off the dock to the vertilift that would take them to the conference room of the new base.

When all were seated in the room, Leia asked Darth Vader what news he had for her. "The fleet is not coming," he said. "You have the opportunity to end the rebellion and disperse to your homes. Those from Alderaan will be given their choice of appropriate estates from Imperial properties on similar worlds."

"I presume the alternative is the fleet," she said. Darth Vader was silent.

"I have already discussed the implications of such an offer with my council, and the unanimous recommendation was that it be rejected. The conditions of Imperial exploitation which forced us to take up arms originally have not changed, and we will not submit to them again. I reject the notion that such measures are necessary because of trans-galactic programming. Every world must first fend for itself before considering sacrifices for others."

"Even if such sacrifices might prevent worse ones later on?" asked Krel Atlan. Leia glared at her. "Darth Vader has already given me that particular lecture, and I am not convinced," she replied. "We have tried to test his theories on our own demographic computers without success. Whatever reasoning processes he may use, they are not identifiable here."

"Perhaps they can be explained to your counselors' satisfaction," said Darth Vader, but the princess said, "No, you have sought and received your answer. You may rest here while your ship is being serviced, but then you must go. And I might advise you to avoid straying far from this area. There is little affection for you here, truce or no truce." And she turned on her heel and walked from the room.

"But that ship of yours doesn't require servicing," Han Solo whispered to Krel Atlan. "Of course not," she answered, "but it may give Darth Vader the time he needs to deal with this situation." And to the aide nearby she said, "Please tell the dock supervisor that our ship must stand alone for two days before it can be safely serviced. Then I will give him the necessary specifications."

Alone in her quarters that evening, Krel Atlan suddenly sensed the disturbance in the Force that indicated the presence of another Jedi. Then - across the room - there was a faint warp in the light refraction. As she stared at it, it became more pronounced, until finally the atmospheric molecules had been completely reconstituted into the form of an old man clad in coarse, brown robes. His gentle blue eyes looked directly into her shining silver ones. He sighed, almost as though he were very tired.

"I am Obi-wan Kenobi," he said softly. When she made no reply, he continued: "I am afraid it was a mistake for you and Darth Vader to come here. I let him live before because it was necessary for him to bring the Death Star to Yavin-4 for its destruction. I would let him live still if he had not developed this sudden taste - uncharacteristic, I might add - for reconciliation between the Empire and the alliance of Leia. There are reasons which I am unable to disclose why that should not be allowed to happen."

And, without the slightest change to his expression, he drew his lightsaber from its sheath and energized its golden blade. But then he paused; the Code of the Jedi gave an opponent the opportunity to ignite-saber as well.

Krel got slowly to her feet, but, as she was reaching for her own saber, Luke Skywalker burst through the door. Passing by the room, he had recognized the crackle of a lightsaber and had assumed Krel had drawn hers to confront some threat. He was taken aback by the sight of Kenobi. Understanding the situation, he made as if to protest Ben's obvious intention, but the old man shook his head. "Things are not always what they seem, Luke. You are still a novice in the ways of the Force, and I understand the purpose of this Jedi in a way that you cannot. Leave us, and say nothing of this."

Her saber still unignited, Krel said, "So you would be a Jedi, Luke? Then begin to rely upon your own judgment rather than being content with blind obedience to others, no matter in what esteem you may hold them."

Luke stared wildly at each of them, then drew a breath and said, "I'm sorry, Ben, but I can't let you do it. Not like this. Let me call the others, and -" His sentence was stopped by a glance from Kenobi, who, Krel saw, had applied a mild paralysis to his life-field by means of the Force. He then advanced upon Krel, raising his saber for a lethal blow.

But the fiery golden shaft was arrested in its descent by a glowing purple one, and Kenobi spun sharply about to confront Darth Vader. They began to circle one another as they had in the bay of the Death Star, but this time they both knew that it would not end with Obi-wan's dematerialization; one of them would die.

Then the two lightsabers met, and the fight was joined. It was not long confined to Krel Atlan's room, as a slash from Kenobi's saber cut a jagged opening in the wall, and the two antagonists carried the duel through it and into the hall beyond.

Han Solo and Leia arrived moments later, but were unable to do more than stand well aside while the two Jedis' sabers flashed through the air around them. From such a weapon, all knew, there was no question of a mere wound or glancing blow, nor could the blade be parried by anything save that of another lightsaber.

Finally Kenobi aimed an upward cut at Darth Vader's head, but he missed his mark, and the blade only tore the black metal helmet from the mask beneath it. Then the purple shaft of Darth Vader's saber found its mark, and with a stricken cry the figure of Obi-wan Kenobi literally exploded into a fireball that knocked all of them to the ground and brought walls and roof collapsing around them. Flames leapt up, and the area was filled with smoke and haze from the pulverized debris.

Amidst the wreckage Darth Vader staggered to his feet, then turned to see Leia Organa's blaster leveled at his heart.

For a split-second they stared at one another; then the Sith Lord stiffened in agony as a laser-bolt tore through his chest-plate. The force of the impact ripped the mask from his head, and Leia and Solo saw with a thrill of horror that the humanoid features beneath were hideously decomposed and disfigured. Exposed to air, they began to dissolve, and gradually Darth Vader's entire body boiled away to nothingness.

Leia dropped the pistol and collapsed in shock; somewhere an alarm siren had begun to send its shrill cry throughout the complex. A badly-shaken Han Solo reached up to wipe blood and dust from his face, and then he was dimly aware of Krel Atlan guiding him gently but firmly in the direction of the dock where the Sith Ship was moored. In the confusion they were completely unnoticed. Taking a last look behind him, Solo saw a dazed Luke Skywalker kneeling by Leia Organa.

The docking area was deserted and unlighted, and the vast bulk of the Sith Ship was visible only as a shadow slightly darker than the others around it. In the adjoining dock Solo saw the dim profile of the *Millennium Falcon*. Breaking loose from Krel's grasp, he staggered across to it and up the ramp. He lunged over to the computer console, keyed a code system known only to Chewbacca and himself, and entered just two words: CHEWIE - TATOOINE. Then he plunged back down the ramp and back across the dock to the Sith Ship. The gravitational counterfield drew Krel and himself up into the familiar surroundings of the salon, and then Han Solo lost consciousness.

4. THE SECRET OF SITH

Solo awoke to find Krel Atlan standing across the salon near one of the viewports. "Where are we?" he said, sitting up and feeling the back of his neck. She turned to face him and replied, "Right now we are in orbit around Cylur. I will be returning to the Planet of Sith. You may come with me if you wish, or I will return you to the base on Teloos." She avoided his eyes.

Han Solo thought about many things; then he got to his feet and walked across the cabin to her. He touched her chin, raising her head so that the silver eyes looked up at his. "I will go with you," he said.

She turned away from him and walked to the viewport. "Before you make such a decision, I must tell you what awaits you there. Do you know why it has always been shunned by explorers and colonizing expeditions? It is a planet in the throes of continuous electrical storms of the most violent nature; not even an Imperial Star Destroyer could survive them. Only this ship can get through, and then it is safe to disembark only far underground. The planet has remained completely uninhabited save for Darth Vader and myself."

Solo started to reply, but she interrupted. "No, that's not all. You may have guessed why we were there. There is That on the planet which explains the Force to us in ways that the Jedi never could. But there has been a price.

"The planet is poisonous, beyond any protection we could ever devise. You have seen what it did to Darth Vader. Once he was as strong and healthy as you. Gradually he degenerated into a ghost of a living being, sustained only by an atmospheric suit and an electronic mask that replaced all of his facial functions - and from which he could nevermore escape. Do you wonder that he was so bitter at Obi-wan Kenobi's freedom from his physical body? Do you know how painful it was for him to reject that option for himself? And," she continued in a lower voice, "for me? Already my eyes have failed. Soon I will need the same protection for my body, and finally this face that you see will vanish forever behind a black metal skull."

"Can you not leave the planet and go elsewhere with me?" he asked. "My system has already absorbed too much of the poison," she answered, "but even that is not the main reason why I must stay. The Force - rather I should say Sith - has need of me. And I am determined to fulfill that destiny."

Han Solo suddenly recalled a peculiar feeling he had had when - it seemed ages ago - Darth Vader had looked intently at him and said, half to Solo and half to himself, "Satisfactory."

He smiled at Krel Atlan. "Set a course for this planet of yours."

* * *

From space the Planet of Sith was a beautiful sight, laced with what seemed to be a delicate web of light covering its entire surface. As the starship descended, however, Han Solo saw what Krel had meant about the lightning. Gigantic bolts lashed across the skies in an almost continuous blaze of brilliance, ripping at the ground and surrounding the ship in a pulsing wreath of energy.

No ordinary vessel could have withstood such forces for long; against such massive energy, shielding would be useless. But the Sith Ship was insulated - how Solo could not begin to guess. Krel piloted it easily into the depths of a cavern that loomed before them. It seemed to extend for miles beneath the surface, its height and breadth so great that the Sith Ship had no trouble in maneuvering through it.

Finally the ship eased up to a landing dock lined with the familiar black metal. They entered a polished passage lined with the same material, and therein Han Solo encountered the first of several silent, black-metal droids. "The metal itself is a creation of the Clones, who once maintained a laboratory here," said Krel. "It is the only compound which will not break down under the stresses of the planet."

They walked through a complex of living quarters, but Krel seemed intent upon taking Solo to a still lower level. "Since you have made your choice," she said, "you must learn the secret of the planet."

Now the metal-lined corridors were discontinued, and through rough-hewn tunnels they continued to descend. At last they halted before an oddly-shaped door, cut from the reddish rock itself. It was covered with hieroglyphic designs etched deeply into its surface, and Han Solo recognized them as being similar to those in the yellow-covered book from Ben Kenobi's study. Krel raised her hands before the door and it swung silently upward, falling again into place as they passed through.

Within was a vast, circular chamber, formed entirely from some dull, glass-like substance. Han Solo was suddenly aware that the rumbling of the planet's volcanic interior did not penetrate this room; it was deathly quiet. The only light was a silvery glow which, he saw, came from a statue in the exact center of the chamber. It was a slender, seated figure, about the size and shape of a human being, and on the floor around it was some sort of geometric design. But Han Solo's attention was fixed upon the strange features of the creature's head. The forehead and the slim nose sloped downward to a point below the mouth, and atop the head were two brushlike, upraised appendages. "This," said Krel Atlan, "is Sith."⁸

Han Solo approached the awesome statue and ran his hand gently over the silvery one of the creature, positioned on its knee. He drew back suddenly, conscious of a strange sensation that tingled through him. "That is the Fire of Sith," said Krel. "According to Darth Vader it was sealed into this statue by the creature himself dim æons ago, when this entire galaxy was just beginning its upward struggle from savagery. It is not of the Force, but it explains the Force. And sometimes it seems to speak with a purpose of its own."

"Yes," said Han Solo slowly. "I have just understood something of that purpose. I have learned that the influence of Darth Vader might have enabled the Empire to continue its climb to higher levels of civilization. But he has been slain, and now the Empire faces an unstable and uncertain future. And I know what we both must do."

The two of them turned away from the statue and left the chamber, returning to the complex at the higher levels. Then Han Solo said, "Before long you must leave here - leave this galaxy entirely, taking with you the knowledge you have gained during your exposure to Sith and the Force. You must find another galaxy with creatures of high intelligence, and you must take with you the Fire from the statue and endow them with it. I will remain here and do what I can to arrest our civilization's decline. But there is still some time remaining before we must depart, and so we may learn to remember one another."

"Then one of my wishes is answered," said Krel, "because I did not want you ever to see me in the black metal mask which I must soon don."

The time came for them to go their separate paths, and it was decided that Krel would take Han Solo to Tatooine before turning the Sith Ship towards the void beyond the galaxy. Both of them were now wearing the black protective armor. Their faces had not yet been affected, but they carried the skull-like masks on board with them. When they arrived at Tatooine, however, Han Solo took hers from her and smashed it beyond

⁸ Later, in the Milky Way Galaxy, to be known as [the Egyptian *neter*] Set.

recognition while she looked at him in surprise. Then he produced something wrapped in soft fabric. She drew apart the covering, and the silvery radiance of the statue of Sith leaped out at her. It was a mask of her own face, perfect to the most minute detail, which Han Solo had wrought from the metal of the statue. The ethereal light glowed and rippled about its surface.

“The statue is gone,” said Han Solo. “It was time for it to be destroyed. But this remains - for you.” She took it gently from him, and the silvery eyes that could not cry looked once more into his. A short time later the new Lord of Sith was standing alone on the Tatooine desert, looking upward at the black starship as it vanished into the sky.

PANTECHNIKON

1979

1. CROSSROADS

The Sith Ship was gone, and Han Solo was alone. Suddenly he reached up towards the sky with his armor-encased arms, as though he could somehow bid a final farewell to Krel Atlan. Then he recognized the terrible futility of the gesture, and he knelt silently in the sand.

He pondered his mysterious attraction to the strange, silver-eyed Jedi and the destinies which had so inexorably wound their lives together - and which just as dispassionately had torn them apart. He was close to tears, yet he felt at the same time a fierce exhilaration. Though he and Krel would now be separated by almost unimaginable reaches of space, he knew that she would never cease to remember him and to think of him. And in the twilight of the twin suns of Tatooine, Han Solo vowed that he would love her until his death.

After a time he rose to his feet and looked about him at the desolate, silent landscape. A hot, dry wind stirred the dunes and caused his black cape to snap fitfully about his shoulders.

It would be about a day's walk to Mos Eisley across the nearby foothills, but he welcomed the prospect. It would help him to shake himself loose from his obsessive memories, and he also needed the time to decide how best to explain his presence to the planetary garrison. To all appearances he was now indistinguishable from Darth Vader, but he was far from confident about his ability to carry out a successful impersonation. True, he was now inspired by the Fire of Sith, but he was not one of the Jedi, nor did he have at his command the vast psycho-political knowledge that had enabled Darth Vader to exert such a compelling influence in the affairs of the Empire.

And now, as Han Solo strode across the Tatooine desert, his own body protected against the effects of the Sith Planet by a black-metal suit and helmet [though it had not been necessary to replace any of his facial functions by mechanical devices], he wondered how he would fare as the Sith Lord's successor. Finally in the distance he saw the familiar skyline of Mos Eisley, and to the right of it the Imperial Garrison toward which he was headed, and he quickened his pace.

* * *

At a speed almost beyond comprehension the Sith Ship approached the outermost stellar systems of the galaxy, its translite acceleration set for continuous compounding. The great vessel would have long ceased to be detectable by any sub-light monitor [were any to be trained in its direction], and indeed its own instrumentation no longer registered the very presence of the galaxy it was departing. Peering through the great bevelled viewport, Krel Atlan now saw nothing but a blackness without any appearance of depth whatever. And again she realized how completely alone she was - embarked on a voyage that would eventually bring her to a new galaxy and ultimately to a new world where she would instill the Fire of Sith in yet another species of life.

As Krel turned slowly away from the viewport, her crystalline eyes fell once more on the Sith-metal mask of her face, wrought by Han Solo to protect her from the effects of normal atmosphere.

She had placed it carefully on one of the cushions in the salon; now she took it and ran her fingers gently over its surface, as though by touching it she could convince herself that the worlds she was leaving forever were still there, somewhere in that terrible blackness, and that on one of them there was a man who loved her.

“You needn’t look so terribly melancholy, young lady,” said a pleasant voice behind her, and the stunned Jedi spun around to see ... Obi-wan Kenobi reclining comfortably on one of the couches. As she stared at him in bewilderment, he began to smile even more broadly. “I assure you that I’m quite real, although I confess I had quite a time focusing on this curious vessel of yours.” Noticing Krel’s hand move to the hilt of her lightsaber, he shook his head. “And I’m not in the mood for further swordplay either. As I said to young Luke a short time ago, I really am getting too old for that sort of thing.”

Krel finally managed to speak. “But you were **dead!** I **saw** it happen. I saw Darth Vader ...”

“Both you and Darth Vader saw what I wanted you to see, my dear. It seemed necessary to make my departure a little more graphic than it was at the Death Star, since Darth Vader had uncovered the truth behind that. But it is not quite so easy to ‘kill’ the Force, and one might say that I have in fact **become** the Force - **part** of it, at least. As one Jedi to another I regret having found it necessary to deceive you, but there were certain events I had to set in motion. And it was an opportune moment for me to be of help to Darth Vader as well.”

“Help to **Darth Vader?**” said Krel. “He’s **dead** - killed by Leia Organa when she thought he had killed you. How does **that** help him?”

The old man’s smile became, if anything, more genial. He motioned for Krel Atlan to sit down beside him. Not knowing whether she felt more angry than ridiculous, she finally did so. Then he spoke carefully and earnestly to her for a time, and finally Krel’s expression changed to one of understanding and even delight. But then she became somber once more. “If what you tell me is true, then what of Han Solo? How can you justify what has happened to **him**? And what of the words of Sith?”

“Han Solo will not fare so ill as you might think,” answered Kenobi. “I have not used him callously, though his trials are not yet ended. There is only one thing which I failed to foresee, which was his attachment to you and yours to him.” [In spite of herself, Krel blushed.] “I can’t promise that either of you will get over it soon - in fact you probably won’t get over it at **all** - but it may not be so unfortunate at that. We should all taste great love at least once in our lives, tinged though it may be with pain. And who knows? The distances separating you are perhaps not as final as you might suppose.

“As for Sith, he and I understand each other very well. We are, you might say, old friends. And in the fortunes of human evolution we both have our prerogatives. Sith told Han Solo what it was appropriate for him to hear so that he would do what he is now doing - just as it is necessary that you do what you are now doing.

“But you won’t be quite as lonely as you feared a short time ago, because I will be going with you. Darth Vader was quite right - I **am** intrigued by the prospect of observing a new process of social evolution on a galactic scale. But there is no need to destroy the old galaxy; a new one will serve just as well - better, in fact, since it won’t be all cluttered up with inconvenient archaeological ruins.”

Kenobi’s glance fell on the black helmet. “Oh, and you won’t be needing that either. I’m afraid I can’t do much about your eyes at this point, but I have arrested further degeneration of your molecular structure. Nevertheless you may wish to keep this beautiful item” - he indicated the Sith-metal mask - “for the memories it holds for you. And who knows? You may someday find it useful for preserving your own image.”

The old man got to his feet and walked across the salon to the intergalactic display. “And now,” he said, “we might do well to consider just where it is we are going at this impressive velocity. It just so happens that I have a star system in mind that might suit our purposes. Look here ...”

* * *

As the Rebellion's base on the planet of Teloos was being dismantled and prepared for relocation, General Tix Harsel⁹, Dodonna's Chief of Strategic Planning, was gesturing towards a large interstellar map which had been set up along one wall of the Council room. Princess Leia Organa, Luke Skywalker, and the senior commanders of the Alliance stared intently at the area he indicated.

Harsel cleared his throat and addressed them: "It is obvious that this so-called 'Rebellion' of ours is no longer that at all - it is a **revolution** in the full sense of the term. I don't think that there are any among us here who would now accept reconciliation with the Empire without effective power at the Hub. So we must free ourselves from it altogether. What this means is that we must start thinking about the hard realities of forming our own interstellar republic, and the first question involves its location.

"On this map you will see the portion of this spiral arm of the galaxy occupied by the Empire. For those of you who are not familiar with the Empire's extent as of the conclusion of the Clone Wars, it runs roughly 30,000 light-years along the most densely-packed area of the spiral arm. This concentration is due both to the comparative accuracy of interstellar navigation in less-expansive reaches of deep space as well as the economic advantages of traveling shorter distances between inhabited worlds.

"Now towards the outer extreme of the Empire along the spiral arm you will see the Spur of Varpel - here." [Harsel indicated a long cluster of stars branching off from the main area of the spiral arm.] "The spur has been loosely colonized by the Empire; most of the civilizations there are now at Sentient Level Two."

"The largest single concentration of civilizations friendly to our cause is also located within the spur. What I am proposing, then, is that we move our base to a site within the spur and concentrate our future operations within it - with the ultimate intent of securing its independence from the Empire."

There was a sudden buzz of undercurrent discussion around the room, and Dodonna was obliged to call sharply for order. A colonial deputy from Dhokann knit all three of his brows and raised the first objection that had come to everyone's mind:

"And what are we to do with regard to our many allies lying within the main arm of the spiral? Are you suggesting we just abandon them?"

Harsel shook his head. "Not at all. A fixed 'territorial boundary' in space is something of a misconception. Were we to secure our independence from the Empire, we could have hundreds of planets within the main arm, and the Empire a comparable number within this spur, without the two megapolitical systems ever coming into contact with one another if they did not choose to do so. Potential friction would result rather from debates over exploration and colonization rights.

"What we should establish, then, is a recognized colonization right to the unexplored worlds of the spur - in return for a pledge to the Empire not to interfere with its corresponding prerogatives within the main spiral arm."

The General leaned against the side of the podium and glanced once more at the star map. "The economics of space-travel are of even greater concern to us than to the Empire. Trips between star-systems are expensive and time-consuming, even allowing for the translite channels. Even were the Empire to agree immediately to a plan such as I propose - which I doubt - we would find it a hard struggle to establish the viability of our new Republic. As it is, we are consuming our present resources at a rate which we cannot sustain for very much longer. What is your estimate, Belqaron?"

⁹ General Harsel is named in honor of Hari Seldon in Isaac Asimov's *Foundation*.

Dodonna's Chief of Logistics, General Belqaron, examined the statbank he always carried with him and looked up at Harsel. "Assuming that our raids within Imperial trading vectors and on Imperial holding sites increase their yield by a compound rate of 25% per year - which I think we will agree is optimistic - we will be forced to cease effective operations within four to six years. The planetary systems which must provide the bulk of our needs following the destruction of Alderaan by then will have exhausted their ability to help us."

"And your error probability?" said Harsel. Belqaron's tentacles flew over the keyboard of the statbank. "34.7 percent," he said, and another flurry of conversation arose, only to be quelled once more by Dodonna.

Leia Organa rose to her feet. "Obviously, gentlemen, it's going to be awhile before we can reach a firm decision on this. But is there any reason why we should not locate our new base within the spur? If we do so, then we ought to be able to evaluate the practicality of the concept. Then, should the Council eventually decide in favor of the plan, we will already possess a working familiarity with the sectors in question."

Hearing no disagreements with Leia's proposal, General Dodonna arose. "All right, then," he said. "Let's get the surveying teams working on a scan for the new base location within the spur. Let me have the preliminary bracket alignments in twenty hours." He adjourned the meeting and walked slowly back to the living quarters with Leia and Luke Skywalker.

Luke cocked his head and looked askance at Dodonna. "General," he said, "I didn't want to say anything during the meeting, but are you so sure we're doing the right thing by carrying on with the Rebellion at all?"

"Oh, I know," he continued with a smile as Dodonna and Leia looked at him in surprise, "That sounds funny coming from the great Death-Star-destroyer, but I'm just thinking back to what Darth Vader said about the odds we face. What have we got to work with in terms of our actual fighting strength? Six hundred starships? And at least a third of them are down for maintenance at any one time. The Empire must have **thousands** of starships in its fleets, and from what I've seen of them, they're in top condition and manned by crews who are trained almost to perfection. I'm going to stick with you, whatever happens. I'm just wondering whether we have any real alternatives to this."

Leia looked down at the ground. "I wish I could say that we do, Luke. But we've done enough damage to the Empire so that I don't think there is any chance at all for our reconciliation with it. Even if we were to surrender right now and the Emperor were convinced of our further harmlessness, we would almost certainly be executed as a political necessity - an example to spectators.

"So we are on our own. Besides which," - and she looked up at him with the familiar fire in her eyes - "I would see every one of us dead rather than surrender to the Empire. Even if we fail, what we have done will be remembered. And sooner or later there will be **another** Rebellion, and it will be stronger. And if necessary another one after **that**, **still** stronger. And ultimately a day will come when the Empire will learn that the galaxy does **not** belong to it alone.

"But I am not going to give up on this 'first' Rebellion just yet. After all, we're in a better position now than we were when I was sending appeals to Obi-wan via those two demented droids of yours."

Dodonna said, "You're right about the numerical odds, of course. From what I recall the Empire has upwards of twelve thousand military starships alone; and yes, they **do** tend to be depressingly efficient. But even if they were to concentrate a thousand of them in

this sector in a search for us, they would have a hard time pinning us down. We may have to stay light on our feet for awhile, but I think we can manage that.

"I'm more concerned about what Belqaron said about the logistical side of things. We are not only a danger to those who are caught helping us - we are a serious drain upon them. How long can we count on their support unless we give them some reasonable hope for our ultimate success?"

"So," said Luke, "we either get somewhere in a hurry, or we fade out of existence whether the Imperials catch us or not, right?"

"I'm afraid that's about right," said the General. "Which is why I am basically in favor of Harsel's proposal. If we can give our allies something tangible to cling to - a territorial focus for their enthusiasm - then we'll be in just that much better a position to appeal for their loyalty."

The three of them paused in front of Leia's quarters.

"Cheer up, Luke," said Dodonna as he took his leave. "It's not as gloomy a picture as Darth Vader indicated. I knew him in the old days when he was a General in the Republican Starforce, and he was just as methodical then. Never played odds, never took gambles unless he felt he had virtually eliminated his margin for error. He kept his successes high and his casualties low as a result, but he almost drove his troops crazy in the process. I know - I was one of his Wing Commanders for two years.

"I knew without your telling me what he would think of a Rebellion like this. But history is often made by those who take chances - for example, those who use womp-rat targeting techniques to eliminate troublesome Battle Stations."

He slapped Luke good-naturedly on the shoulder and strode off towards his own quarters.

The two young Rebels looked after him in silence. Then Leia beckoned Luke into the room that served her as both office and living area. They plunged gratefully into two of the protoplactic chairs, and Leia looked questioningly at Luke. "Well, go on," she said. "You've obviously got something on your mind. I'm not going to bite your head off if you tell me about it, even though I'm supposed to have that sort of reputation."

Luke smiled somewhat shamefacedly back at her. "All right, I guess I deserved that. Anyway, I've been thinking about the Force. I know that most of your Councillors really don't understand it when I talk about it, but I think **it's** the key to whether we get anywhere with this" - he indicated the base with a sweep of his hand - "or not. I know what it was that destroyed the Death Star, and believe me it **wasn't** my experience with womp-rats on Tatooine. If we've got a breathing-space before the Empire catches on to the fact that you've done in Darth Vader, then I'd like to make a run to Mos Eisley in the *Millenium Falcon*. It would take me about three weeks each way if you haven't moved by the time I return."

Leia frowned at him. "And just why do you want to go **there**? Interested in catching the floor show at that cantina you told me about?"

Luke chuckled. "No, what I want to do is to go to Ben's old place out there in the desert and see if I can find anything which will tell me more about how to use the Force. I have an odd feeling about it; I think there's something **there**. I know it's a long shot," he said, as Leia looked doubtfully at him, "but like the General just said, we're in the business of playing long shots now, right?"

Leia started to say no, then checked herself and nodded at him. "Oh - All right! At this point I should doubt that you're going to survive anything? Just do me a favor and don't mix it with the Stormtroopers there. I don't care about you, of course, but ships like the *Falcon* are hard for us to come by."

Luke jumped to his feet and headed for the door. “Don’t worry,” he laughed, “I’ll be taking Chewie and those ‘two demented droids’ of mine as well. If I get into a jam, they can always bring the ship back.”

Leia followed him to the doorway and called him back. “Luke, I didn’t mean what I said. I **do** care about you - **very** much. I **don’t** want you hurt, and I don’t care **what** happens to the ship!” Surprised, he saw tears in her eyes. He pressed her close to him and kissed her gently. “Don’t you worry,” he said, “I’ll be back all right. And hopefully I’ll come back with something that’ll do us some good. Now you quit that crying before you make me think you’re my girl and not the Princess who runs this whole show!”

Leia wrenched herself free and looked up at him furiously. “Oh, just get **out** of here before I change my mind, will you? At least you’re taking that horrible Wookie away. He put two of our best pilots in the hospital last week!” She turned on her heel, ran inside her quarters, and slammed the door with a crash.

Luke whistled softly and shook his head. “Girls!” he said. Then he shrugged his shoulders and went off to find Chewbacca and the two droids.

2. BACK TO TATOOINE

Luke might have thought twice about going to Tatooine if he had known what three weeks of being confined in the *Falcon* with the Wookiee and the two droids would be like.

First there was another disagreement between Chewbacca and R2D2 - over what Luke never did find out - which brought a worried C-3PO up to the cockpit. He was afraid, he said in a plaintive tone, that his counterpart was about to be disassembled at a velocity sufficiently high to be detrimental to his internal components. When it suddenly dawned on Luke what Threepio was talking about, he jumped out of his seat and bolted for the lounge. Not just out of affection for Artoo, but also because the small droid's storage files held the navigational codes he would need to find his way back to the old and new Rebel Bases.

Luke burst into the lounge to see Artoo cowering [if droids can cower] in a corner while the enraged Chewbacca advanced upon him malevolently. Artoo sent a mild static current through the deck, and the Wookiee jumped back in surprise - then, understanding, rushed forward with a roar. As he was about to seize the unfortunate droid, Luke landed on his back and wrapped his arms around Chewbacca's neck. The Wookiee wheeled about in surprise, and Luke was flung off and thrown violently against the side of the cabin.

Regaining consciousness a few minutes later, he saw the shamefaced Wookiee leaning over him making mournful noises while R2D2 was spraying oxygen into his face and sending forth a stream of indignant sound effects obviously directed towards Chewbacca.

Luke had tried to pass some of the time by conversing with C-3PO, but the golden droid's solicitous, singsong responses soon drove the young Rebel nearly frantic. Threepio would answer Luke's most rhetorical questions with earnest precision, and with an exuberant cheerfulness completely unmerited by the topic. Luke finally spent most of his time either reading in his cabin or playing holographic games with Artoo [C-3PO would always let him win out of politeness, and with Chewbacca it was still dangerous] in the lounge. He tried not to think about the return trip.

Therefore Luke breathed a sigh of relief when the *Falcon*'s alarm signaled deceleration to sublite space. And soon Luke saw before him the familiar dull-red planet where he had spent his youth.

Had he been landing on any other planet or even at any other spaceport on this one, Luke grinned to himself, he might have had cause to worry about his identity being checked too closely. But Mos Eisley deserved its reputation as a haven for thieves and scoundrels all too well.

Under the 418th Amendment to the Colonial Charter, each planet in the Empire was required to have one so-called "freeport" where ships not otherwise cleared for landing could dock under supposedly-emergency conditions. In practice, however, the Amendment had become an excuse for customs-evasion. After several fruitless and frustrating attempts to rescind 418 or at least to enforce some sort of quarantine of ships docked at such "freeports", the Empire had essentially given up and allowed them to function more-or-less as interplanetary safety-valves. In such spaceports as Mos Eisley there was no such thing as law and order - except that the occasional patrols of Imperial Stormtroopers would be endured with a sort of sullen respect.

Luke was just as well aware that his ability to secure a landing dock at Mos Eisley would be directly proportional to the potential value of his cargo on the local black market. So, when the inquiry came, he casually acknowledged that his cargo included three cases of Dilene-1 vaccine (an extremely effective - and expensive - serum for protection against

interplanetary biological contamination). Clearance to land was immediate, and Luke winked at Chewbacca, who was busy stencilling the necessary markings on the three “Dilene-1” cases.

By chance the *Falcon* was directed to the same dock from which it had left in such a hurry during its last visit to Tatooine. The damage done by the blasters of the Stormtroopers and Han Solo had not yet been repaired, and Luke recalled his first meeting with the Corellian smuggler with a pang of affection and remorse. Han Solo, he thought, where are you now? Are you still alive? If so, why haven’t you come back to us?

Waiting for them at the exit to the dock was the surly-looking official who had cleared them for landing, and it was obvious that he expected to examine [and receive an appropriate percentage of] the “Dilene-1”. Luke sent Chewbacca off with him and the dummy cases; the Wookiee returned about an hour later minus both the cases and the official and with an unusually self-satisfied smile on his face. The last time Luke had seen that particular expression had been when Chewie had torn an Imperial soldier almost literally limb from limb on a raid not far from Teloos, so he decided that it would be better not to ask for details.

Luke’s original plan had been to take the two droids with him to Ben Kenobi’s hut in the desert, leaving Chewbacca with the *Falcon* as security.

But first, for reasons of sentiment, Luke felt moved to make a solitary visit to the cantina where he and Ben had first met Han Solo. He elbowed his way through the cramped, crowded alleys of the spaceport and finally arrived in the doorway of the noxious establishment. He walked over to the same table where Ben and Han had negotiated the use of the *Falcon* and sat down at it, lost in old memories. Ben dead after becoming transformed into something that Luke could still not quite understand; Han Solo vanished [where?].

Luke sighed, ordered a drink, tapped his hand absent-mindedly on the table-top, and suddenly realized that he knew the singer who had just walked onto the small stage [amidst the usual unconcern by the clientele].

The musician was an intense-looking youth slightly older than Luke. His name was Lorin Xanpol, and he had grown up on the farm adjacent to that of Luke’s uncle. It was natural that the two boys would have shared their ambitions with one another, and the young Luke had waxed enthusiastic about his dreams for becoming a cadet in the Imperial Starforce Academy.

Lorin had smiled encouragingly at him and remarked that he himself, while also fascinated with space, would be quite content to explore it with music. And this he proceeded to do, composing ballads of strange, ethereal beauty about the cosmos and the wonders that might lie in store for explorers beyond the limits of the Empire. Xanpol became something of a minor sensation on Tatooine - a planet not generally culturally inclined - and at almost every gathering of the young he was entreated to sing his most recent compositions, which he did, accompanying himself on the Kulvan¹⁰ electronic harp.

Ironically enough, the place that paid Xanpol the most money for performing his songs - the Mos Eisley cantina - was also the place where his artistry was least appreciated. For the bar’s clientele, space was not a dreamworld of magic and mysticism, but a dangerous and dreary no-man’s land where each trip meant brushes with Imperial customs-inspection ships and rival pirate-vessels; and rarely passed a day in Mos Eisley when word was not circulated of yet another smuggler who had been imprisoned or simply killed outright for plying his questionable trade. But background music was expected by the cantina patrons, and so Xanpol could always find gainful employment there.

¹⁰ An anagram of Mr. Spock’s famous Vulcan harp from the original *Star Trek* series.

As Luke watched, the musician played a few tuning-chords on his harp and then launched into one of his more well-known ballads. As the song ended, Luke got up from his table and made his way to the edge of the small stage. He caught the singer's attention, and Xanpol reached down and gripped his hand delightedly. "Luke Skywalker! Where were you? We all thought you were **dead**. Your aunt and uncle -"

"We can't talk here," said Luke, "but it's important that we do - soon. Can you get out of here for awhile - a couple of hours at least?"

Xanpol nodded. "I choose my own hours here as long as I give them a certain amount each day. Be right with you ..." He unslung the harp from his neck, carried it into a room in the back of the cantina, and followed Luke out into the street. Luke nodded in the direction of the *Millenium Falcon's* dock, and the two friends made their way toward it. Since the noise and jostling of the streets made conversation all but impossible, they remained silent by tacit agreement until they had reached the lounge of the starship. There they took adjacent seats at the table and sized each other up.

"What are you doing walking around in broad daylight?" said Xanpol. "Don't you know the reports about your aunt and uncle? We heard that they were executed as spies for the Rebellion. That means that the garrison will be looking for you if they find out you're here."

Luke shook his head. "Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru weren't spies for anyone. I know what happened to them, and I've a pretty good idea why. Uncle Owen bought an R2 unit - this one here, in fact - from those Jawas who always used to come around with stuff to sell - remember them? - and it turned out that the Empire was after the unit because of some plans hidden in its banks. The droid and I were away when the Imperials got to the farm, but Uncle Owen must have tried to mislead them to protect me. I guess I owe my life to him and Aunt Beru."

The words were out before he appreciated what he had said, and suddenly Luke was seized by a feeling of guilt. He hadn't really realized the fact until now; if Owen and Beru had cooperated with the Stormtroopers, they would probably still be alive.

Worse, he thought, they must have tried to attack the Stormtroopers somehow, because Stormtroopers would not kill a farmer and his wife for mere lack of cooperation. Uncle Owen had kept a cache of concussion-grenades by the front door for emergency use against raids by Sandpeople; Luke bet that he had tried to dispatch the Stormtrooper patrol with one of them. He clenched his fist; poor, brave, foolish Uncle Owen!

Suddenly both he and Xanpol turned with a start at a roar from the command cabin. With a puzzled glance at his friend, Luke got to his feet and headed for the door, where he collided head-on with Chewbacca, who was rushing through it in the opposite direction. As he picked himself up off the floor, Luke scowled at Xanpol's easy chuckle. "That's been the whole story of this trip so far," he said. "If this is a friendly Wookiee, then I hope I never meet any unfriendly ones! What was all **that** about, anyway, Chewie?"

The Wookiee, who had stood there impatiently while Luke regained his footing, grabbed him by the arm and tugged him bodily into the command cabin. He let out another growl and thumped the console by the computer read-out. Luke glanced at the screen. It said:

CHEWIE--TATOOINE

"You're telling me that this wasn't here before the fight on Teloos?" said Luke, and Chewbacca nodded vigorously. Luke turned to face Xanpol, who had come into the cabin. "**Han Solo** is here. Or at least he's **going** to be here. Look at this -" he said.

Xanpol looked at the display and raised his eyebrows. "I know Han - I used to see him at the cantina quite often - but he hasn't been seen since he took you and old Ben out of here. If he's back, then he's in hiding. But it's not like Han to hide for very long. He used to swagger around here as though he didn't have a single care, when in fact both the customs people and at least a dozen dealers around this hole were ready to kill him on sight."

"I know," said Luke. "We almost didn't make it out of here the last time because he got into a shoot-out with one of his ex-employers. Well, where does this leave us?"

"My guess is that he isn't here," said Xanpol. "He's probably still off on that Sith Planet he told you about. From what you told me, he's rather attached to that Jedi Krel what's-her-name."

"Atlan," said Luke. "Krel Atlan. Yes, you're right about that. But we need him. We can't just have him off romancing a new girl friend while we take on the whole Empire. There's nobody else with a quarter of his knowledge about interstellar evasion techniques."

"Sounds to me like you ought to head for that planet, then," said Xanpol. "I can't," replied Luke. "I have ... things to do here. But listen - Will **you** go for me? You can take the *Falcon* - you know how to fly it, and I can give you the coordinates of the Planet of Sith. That way I can do what I have to do here, and Chewbacca can wait in Mos Eisley in case Han does show up here."

Xanpol looked at him dubiously. "No one's ever made it down to that planet in one piece," he said. "What am I supposed to do - just stick my head out the window and yell for him?" "No, no," said Luke. "Just get into orbit, then transmit a call for him by radio. This code here. If he's down there and can hear you, he'll know the code-pattern. Then he'll either signal you back or get up to you somehow, if he's got access to that Sith Ship. Come on - It'll only take you a month each way, and I'm not kidding; we **need** him."

"All right, all right," said Xanpol with a smile. "I think I'd enjoy taking a ride over to the next spiral arm anyway. I've never been there before, and I understand the view is quite spectacular. But you'd better go over these controls with me, because all the normal cut-offs seem to be bridged. Guess Han liked to go places in a hurry. But I'd rather not blow myself up just yet."

Luke laughed. "You don't know the half of it. The last time we left here, we had two of those Corellian Star Destroyers on our tail - you know, the ones that are supposed to have sub-lite acceleration ahead of anything else in space?"

"Well, Han left them in the **dust** with this thing! I never saw anything like it before. But he swears to me it's safe. For what **that's** worth. Look, I'm going to let Chewie give you the briefing, 'cause these droids and I have to get out to Ben's place. It'll probably take us just about as long to do that as it'll take you to make the run to the Planet of Sith and back.

"Listen - Thanks! Thanks a **lot**. By the way - While you're at it, why don't you think about **joining** us?" And before Lorin Xanpol could answer him, Luke ducked through the doorway into the lounge, beckoned to the droids, and disappeared down the ramp. Xanpol scratched his head, turned to Chewbacca, and said, "Well, that's what I get for having the wrong kind of friends. O.K., let's start with the prime drive. What's this red light here supposed to mean ..?"

3. THE DARK LORD RETURNS

Captain Brumus, Commander of the Stormtrooper Force garrison in Mos Eisley, had long since ceased to be surprised at the problems with which he had had to deal in, as he was wont to put it, “**that** place”. A day never went by when he did not have to send out either a two-man patrol or, in some cases, a ten-man team to quell a riot, break up a fight, or otherwise bring some crude form of truce - Brumus hesitated to call it “order”, much less “justice” - to the spaceport. So now, when the viewplate in the operations office glowed to life with the signal of the main gate sentry, Brumus was at first only marginally interested. “Sir,” said the sentry, “Lord Darth Vader is here at the gate and wants to see you immediately.”

“**Darth Vader?**” said Brumus, not certain that he had heard correctly. “What is **he** doing **here?**”

“He didn’t say,” answered the sentry, “but he came directly out of the desert from the east. He is alone. Shall I pass him through?”

“Yes - No, I’ll come out to the gate,” said Brumus. “Tell him I’ll be right there.” He had an afterthought: “Are you **sure** it’s Darth Vader?” “Sir,” came the reply in a beseeching tone, “there’s no one **else** who looks like this - and he doesn’t seem to be in a very good mood either. I think you’d better get here **soon.**” “I’m on my way,” said Brumus, sealing his helmet into place and heading for the door.

Outside in the dull glow of the twin suns, Brumus strode briskly out to the main gate, where he could already see a tall, caped black shape standing beside the sentry.

The commander was still confused. This was the second time Darth Vader had shown an interest in Tatooine - the first when, several months ago, he had sent an STF patrol down from his orbiting Star Destroyer to search for a C-3 and an R2 unit. Now he was here in person. But no Star Destroyer or other Imperial starship was orbiting Tatooine or had been since the droid business. Had Darth Vader been here secretly all this time? Why? And now what? But Brumus had now reached the gate and had no further time for speculation.

For his part, as he watched the gleaming white shape of the garrison commander approach, Han Solo bit his lip and asked himself, not for the first time, how he got himself into situations like this. Fooling a sentry and even a garrison commander would be one thing, but he was now on a course that would take him to the highest levels of the Imperial government. His experience in the Chamber of Sith suddenly seemed dim and distant, and for a moment he considered walking right back out into the desert. But it was already too late. He received the salute of Captain Brumus with a slight nod, wondering which of the two of them was the more terrified at this sudden encounter.

“Captain, I do not have much time, and I want a ship capable of taking me to the Hub at at least ten-five-lite. How soon can you have it ready?”

Brumus’ heart sank. The only ship on Tatooine capable of ten-five-lite was the Class Eight of the Sector Legate, who was here on an agricultural tour. The last thing he wanted to do was to have the Legate discover that his only way home was via one of the ten-three-lite traders. No, he corrected himself as he looked at the black figure before him - the **second** to the last thing.

“Lord Vader, I will have to appropriate the Sector Legate’s Class Eight. I will send a team to Mos Eisley immediately to take the necessary action. Would you like to wait here until we receive word that the ship is ready for departure?”

Solo thought about Darth Vader's probable reaction. "I must leave as soon as possible," he said. "But first I want to review your incoming traffic at the highest classification you receive it."

"That will be accessible in my operations center," said Brumus, and the two figures turned toward the main complex. As they walked, the STF captain summoned up his courage. "Lord Vader, we have no record of your landing here. Did you crash somewhere out there?" he said, gesturing towards the desert. "Should I send out a rescue team for anyone else?"

Solo caught himself on the verge of thanking the Stormtrooper for his offer. He said, "I will specify what assistance I require, Captain. And I do not report my movements to anyone except the Emperor himself." He smiled at the silence with which his escort responded, imagining Brumus' mortification. So far, so good, he thought.

Five minutes later he was in the garrison's operations center, leafing through a number of classified telemetric print-outs. What he sought was some word of the Rebellion, or at least of the Empire's current actions, if any, concerning it.

At first he found nothing. Then his attention was caught by a recurring message which appeared at general-secure-4 level at the beginning of each regular dispatch sequence from Sector. It said simply: STFC13H4E. "What does this mean?" he asked Brumus.

The Stormtrooper looked at him in surprise. "It's clear enough, Sir - The Emperor wants all STF Class Thirteen Star Destroyers in this sector at Hub Four immediately."

Oh-oh, said Solo to himself, I've blown it. Darth Vader would have known that code. He thought fast: "I know **that**. I mean **why**. Is there some recent development that warrants this? I have been out of reach for a time."

Brumus said, "There has been no official word on it, Sir, but I understand it's got something to do with the Rebellion. And I wouldn't be surprised. The level of strikes against Imperial bases and convoys in the last commerce-period is up eighty-three per cent. And they've begun to hit military bases for the first time too."

Yowee! grinned Han Solo behind his helmet. Eighty-three percent - Go get 'em, Leia! But he said, "Exasperating. How soon will that ship be ready? If the Emperor is issuing such orders, then I too should be there."

Captain Brumus signaled the STF sub-center at the spaceport, then turned back to his visitor. "About forty-five more minutes. If we leave for the spaceport now, it should be ready to go by the time we get there."

A half-an-hour later the denizens of Mos Eisley looked up to see the STF garrison commander's vertilift ease gently on to the pad reserved for it. Captain Brumus, six of his men, and his visitor alighted from it and began to make their way towards the spaceport dock area. The Stormtroopers were given a wide berth by the local inhabitants, which suited both Brumus and Han Solo just as well; Mos Eisley was not known for the quality of its citizenry.

Then Han Solo was dimly aware of a blur of orange rushing at him, and suddenly he was knocked to the ground by a blow so powerful that he almost blacked out. As he gasped for breath and tried to regain his footing, he heard three stun-shots from the Stormtroopers, an all-too-familiar roar, and a thud as Chewbacca's body hit the ground beside him.

Oh, no! he thought, grinding his teeth. Sure - He thought I was Darth Vader come back somehow. Crazy fool - He's just lucky these ST's had their arms on stun and didn't have time to switch them. What's **he** doing here? Of course - that message in the *Falcon*. "No, don't kill him," he said aloud to Brumus, who had just ordered the team to alter the settings on their weapons. "I've seen him before. He was with that smuggler who got

away from here with those two droids I was looking for earlier. I'll be wanting to talk to him. Just keep him stunned and put him on the ship with me."

Solo had a thought: "Put hand-manacles on him for the time being. I prefer not to use the Force unless necessary."

When Chewbacca came to, he was sitting strapped into one of the luxurious seats in the Sector Legate's ship as it rose slowly through the Tatooine stratosphere. Then a low, vicious growl curled his lips as the black shape appeared in the doorway of the command cabin. He strained unsuccessfully at the manacles, then let out a roar of frustration and anger.

The black form paused before him and said, "You know, Chewie, you always were rotten at calculating odds in a fight. Remember when you took on those twelve Ephidians all at once? You only got eight of them before the others put you out for a month. So now you take on six ST's just like that? Crazy, just crazy."

Chewbacca's astonishment was so transparent that Han Solo could hardly keep from laughing out loud. Instead he said, "Chewie, I'm not Darth Vader. He's dead. I'm Han. I have to wear this outfit because I've spent too much time on his planet, and my body will begin to degenerate unless I keep it in this special atmosphere. Here, let me at those things and I'll get them off you." He undid the manacles as the Wookiee continued to shake his head perplexedly. Then he rumbled an inquiry at Solo.

"To the Hub," was the answer. "Something's happening there, and I think it means trouble for Leia and Luke. I think that the Emperor's changed his mind about not sending some sort of a fleet out here, and I guess it's up to me to see if I can't change his mind right back again. Don't know how I'm going to explain you, however. Not much point in asking you to keep a low profile, is there? Just try not to get into any more scraps until I give the word, O.K.? I have a feeling that if I don't pull this one off, we're going to have just about every ST in the galaxy after us. And I can think of one on Tatooine who'll head the pack. Now tell me what's been going on since I left ..."

4. PANTECHNIKON

Nature is a technikon fire
going on its way to creation.
- Greek Stoic aphorism

The Magician and the Pantechnikon
- Paul Kantner, *Blows Against the Empire*

Three weeks and two days after he had left Tatooine, Lorin Xanpol brought the *Millennium Falcon* into a smooth magnetic-polar orbit around the Planet of Sith and gazed at it with fascination. While the wreath of lightning about it was not as bright as the light from a star, it was visible a long way into space as a silvery-white glow. And here at orbital distance it seemed to shimmer and pulse with a life of its own.

Xanpol felt a sudden, irrational desire to sing to the planet, and actually took a step towards the table where he had placed his harp. Then he paused, shook his head impatiently, and headed for the communications console.

Chewbacca had set the transmission matrix for the special code known only to Han Solo and himself, so all that Xanpol had to do was activate a cross-frequency broadcast and wait for the *Falcon* to complete four orbits of the planet. If by that time there had been no response to his appeal, he would lift out of orbit and return to *Tatooine*. He began the transmission, tested the message on audio to ensure that it was being cast coherently, and went back to the harp.

Two things happened as the *Falcon* began its third orbit: Xanpol decided that he had got the new song right, and the alarm of the gyro monitor suddenly told him that the orbit pattern had begun to deteriorate. Systematically he began to calibrate a correction to the pattern, although wondering why it should have deteriorated at all.

Then a second alarm rang through the ship, signalling the failure of the field maintenance track. And then, as Xanpol switched off that alarm and looked at the displacement printer, he suddenly understood. The fields by which the *Falcon's* navigational systems normally resolved orbital patterns had been overloaded and finally shattered by the tremendous electro-magnetic field of the Planet of Sith. Ships like the *Falcon* were shielded against radioactive emissions, but not against something as improbable as simple electromagnetic fields - they were always too weak to be of consequence. Except, thought Xanpol bitterly, **here**.

Now desperately he locked himself back into the command seat, took manual control of the main engines, and attempted to wrest the ship free of the planet by sheer centrifugal force. But it was no use; without the stabilizing power of the gyro, the *Falcon* began to cartwheel, and it was all Xanpol could do to slow the spinning motion to a slow drift that would allow him to take bearings on the planet's surface.

He sprang out of the command seat and made for the print-outs of the transmission broadcast. An actual reply to his signals would have been diverted to the audio system, but at least he hoped that the wave-tracings would show him any unusual field formations on the surface that might indicate the location of any sort of structure.

Feverishly he examined the tracings, then - Yes, **there** it was! A seismic disturbance that was completely out-of-phase with those around it. He grabbed the triangulation set and quickly reduced it to surface coordinates, then rushed to the computer console and punched them in.

Now another warning light had begun to flash, but Xanpol paid it no attention. He knew the ship was going down, and he knew that his only chance was to bring it in somewhere close to the complex. The coordinates set, he switched all available power to the *Falcon's* electro-insulation network [silently thanking Han Solo for taking the limiters off the reactor cylinders as he did so]. He might run the risk of some radiation poisoning, but at least he wouldn't face certain death from the lightning. Or so he hoped.

Now there was nothing more to do, so he made his way back to the command seat. He looked at the lightning, now so close that it blazed with an icy brilliance eclipsing all stellar illumination, took up his harp, smiled wryly at the planet, and began to sing what he hoped would not be the final verse to its song. A few minutes later the heat overcame him, and he slumped forward. The harp slipped from his hands and clattered to the deck.

* * *

Lorin Xanpol regained consciousness instantaneously and with a sharpness of sensation that astonished him. He was on some sort of operating table, and leaning over him were two odd-looking droids. He attempted to sit up and almost catapulted completely off the table. One of the droids caught him and helped him to a sitting position. Xanpol looked at the droid, then looked down at himself and saw with a shock that his entire body appeared to be encased in shiny black metal. Then it occurred to him that the metallic torso and limbs he saw were too thin to hold his body, and simultaneously he noticed that he was feeling absolutely no tactile sensations at all. He looked up at the complacent droid in sheer bewilderment.

"The brain does not understand its environment," said the second droid. "You had better provide an explanation before it elects to commence shock."

The first droid released its hold on Xanpol and said, "Do not commence shock. You are safe, and no harm has been done to you. I will provide a sequential analysis of your disposition during your period of mental inactivation. Please withhold questions until the sequence is concluded. Thank you.

"98.782 hours ago your vessel impacted on the surface of this planet. It was in a state of disintegration, and your organic substance was disequibrated past the point of possible tissue reconstitution. In particular your left basic and manipulative extensions were disconnected, and your metabolic center disrupted to a non-functional level. Following automatic salvage procedure, two T4 units brought your components to this operational complex for medical analysis. The analysis indicated that only your cerebral functions could be considered undamaged. Under standard circumstances this would have resulted in your existential termination.

"In standby mode here, however, was the artificial mental extension module which Darth Vader had prepared for his own cerebral functions 24.159 months ago, assuming that his own tissue would soon fail due to his delayed donning of the arrestive environmental exoskeleton. The module had not been thoroughly tested, but the probability of its functional status was significantly higher than the probability of your integrated intelligence survival under any other conditions.

"An imprint was therefore made of your neural patterns and transferred to the Central Processor of the module. Then your organic brain was allowed to cease functioning and the module was activated. This is your present status."

Xanpol stared at the droid in astonishment. "You mean I'm now entirely **mechanical** - that this is some sort of **droid** body, and that I'm not even thinking with my own **brain**?"

"Your statement components are in error," replied the second droid matter-of-factly. "The module you now occupy is electrochemical, activated by molecular recombinations caused by electronic stimuli from your CP. The module is not that of an android, since

android housings are servoelectronic in design and android CP's are limited to the execution of access memory program operation. Your CP is an exact duplicate of the cerebral organism it replaces and is therefore capable of its own programming through electrochemical stimulus. Present memory extensions reflect the imperfect imprints that could be identified in the old cerebral organism, but are accessible by your CP. Finally you are thinking with your own CP/brain-equivalent term, but it is not the cerebral organism which bore the initial imprint of your identity."

"The precise identification of your present composite structure is the designation 'Pantehnikon'," said the first droid. "It is a term selected by Darth Vader for reference to the structure upon programming and activation. The term does not subject itself to component analysis."

Lorin Xanpol hardly heard what the droid was saying, since he - if in fact he were actually himself! - was trying to apprehend and understand this strange new form he now inhabited. His mind raced through his new body and limbs, struggling to sense their capabilities and limits.

And his **mind!** It **was** his mind, and yet - somehow - it "thought differently". It seemed ... more deliberate in its formulation of thoughts, as though thousands - millions - of little "gates" were opening and closing to arrange logical patterns.

It was not an unpleasant feeling, but it was startling. Then it was also oddly amusing, because Xanpol felt the same miniature neural gates [or whatever they were] falling dutifully into a pattern of "being startled". Then into a pattern of assessing the last pattern as humorous. He caught himself short of laughing, feeling [there they went again!] ridiculous.

To shake himself free of this strange internal examination, Xanpol swung himself carefully off the table - the droids reversing slowly away from him - and attempted to walk. He had expected to experience at least an initial lack of coordination, but after a very few steps he found that his movements were not only accurate, but far more so than they had ever been before.

Experimentally he reached up to touch a small glowing diode on a nearby display panel; his sleek black arm shot perpendicular to his body with almost incredible speed and his shiny metallic finger touched the tiny glass surface at dead-center. Then another series of "gates" in his new mind formulated a pattern that identified the diode's temperature level as being different from that in the surrounding environment. Next Xanpol looked for a surface in which he could see himself, and across the laboratory he saw a large rectangular mirror. He went over and peered into it.

Gazing back at Lorin Xanpol was a visage of almost supernatural beauty and tranquillity. Through calm, crystalline eyes set in its black, jewel-like face, it seemed to look out across all the ages of history, beyond good and evil, beyond all questions other than that of existence itself.

Xanpol brought his hand up and ran it slowly over the face, trying somehow to make it become real for him. And, for the first time, he quailed at being in this strange body. It had been made by arts at whose nature he could not begin to guess, for a being who had wrought this face to be his. It was the face, he thought, of the Force itself.

5. WINGRACE

From the droids Xanpol learned that Han Solo and Krel Atlan had indeed come to the Planet of Sith and had left about a month later - why or for what destination the droids did not know. They had spent most of their time on the planet, said the droids, in the ancient building atop the plateau and in an underground room far below the laboratory complex. Upon his request, they showed Xanpol the stairway to the plateau - the same passage down which they had brought his broken and ruined body a few days earlier. When they told him of its extent, Xanpol decided to investigate the lower chambers first.

And so he made his way down the sloping tunnels that led to the Chamber of Sith, and finally he arrived, like Darth Vader, Krel Atlan, and Han Solo before him, at the reddish-rock door emblazoned with the strange hieroglyphs. He examined it closely but was unable to discover the mechanism which opened it. Retracing his steps to the main complex, he headed for the stairwell that led to the plateau.

The Panteknikon body, he had found, needed no rest of any sort; it drew energy from electromagnetic imbalances caused by the body's movement along and across magnetic fields. And the uncanny precision of its movement enabled him to mount the stairs at a speed far greater than he ever could have managed in his human form.

Upon reaching the surface he explored the great circular chamber with its six dark-stained stone altars and central pit, then proceeding to the antechamber with the curious books, tablets, and primitive chemical apparatus. He looked through some of the texts but found them equally unintelligible to him, inasmuch as none of them was written in either the standard Colonial Cipher or any other tongue which he could recognize. Then he found something that was in the Cipher - a short passage of text on the wrapping of one of the scroll-binds that was set apart from the others. He guessed that it must have been Darth Vader's phonetic translation of part of the scroll-bind's text.

He examined the alien phrases carefully, but they meant nothing to him. Yet Xanpol found that the strange passage imprinted itself precisely on his memory as he viewed it. He supposed that this was a characteristic of the memory system he now possessed, and he understood what the surgical droid had meant when referring so disparagingly to his organic memory.

Presumably the neural connections in organic brains were more difficult to establish and more subject to accidental breakdown than the electronic bridges in the Panteknikonic brain. His thoughts and memory were now so clear and precise that he considered his prior condition appalling. It was, he thought, as though a person long accustomed to seeing with imperfect natural vision had suddenly been provided with a pair of prescription lenses. How could humans function with such rudimentary thought-processes, he wondered ... then noted with a certain alarm that he was beginning to consider himself something other than human. "But not a droid either," he said aloud to the empty room.

Being unable to glean anything meaningful from the antechamber, he walked slowly back into the large, circular hall with its discolored stone pillars and yawning pit. Then, at the far end of the chamber, he noticed the dais with its crudely-carven throne and went over to investigate more closely.

There were no inscriptions on either dais or throne to suggest their origin or use, but in the greyish-yellow dust beside the dais he saw what appeared to be a musical instrument. He bent down, picked it up, and brushed it off. It was a flute or pipe of some kind, inscribed with hieroglyphs similar to those he had seen on the great reddish-rock door far

below. Experimentally he put it to his sculptured mouth and blew a light stream of air through it. The result was a low, ululating tone that, for reasons he could not quite understand, unnerved him slightly. Distastefully he set the pipe down on the stone seat; whatever it had been designed for, it was not the beauty of its music.¹¹

But then, as he walked around the pit towards the entrance at the far end of the chamber, he saw with surprise that the tops of the squat stone pillars seemed to be wet with a dark liquid substance. His curiosity was piqued; the music? He walked back to the dais, took up the flute, and sent another tone through it, watching the pillars as he did so. And it seemed to him that the dark liquid atop the pillars surged and effervesced slightly. From two of the pillars small rivulets of the substance ran down the stone and dripped slowly into the pit.

Suddenly Lorin Xanpol decided that he didn't care at all for the phenomenon. Again he set down the flute and began to head for the entrance-passage, glancing sidelong into the pit as he did so. And he had another surprise, for the pit's interior was now glowing with a dull yellowish color.

Xanpol stared thoughtfully down into the swirling vapor. He had heard about Darth Vader's alleged "sorcery" - his supposed experiments with what had vaguely been termed "the Dark Side of the Force". It was obvious that this strange chamber must have been the setting for at least some of those experiments and the moldering antechamber the place of their design. And Xanpol took stock of his own plight. If he didn't obtain help of some kind, it seemed he would be doomed to spend the rest of his life [How long would the Pantechnikon body survive? Indefinitely?] on the Planet of Sith. No, if there were hope, it had to lie here. There was, Xanpol acknowledged, no alternative.

He recalled the odd fragment of text that he had seen written on the scroll-binding in the antechamber. Was it some sort of evocation which Darth Vader had found effective? He examined it once again in his CP, but it made no more sense this time than previously.

He uttered it aloud, slowly but audibly, and suddenly there was a rumbling echo in the pit, as from a great distance below. Xanpol peered down, but still saw nothing but the swirling, yellowish mist.

Then he uttered the phrase again, louder and more forcefully this time, and now something was indeed happening. The mist began reddening to a fiery glow, and a rising heat began to register against the sensors in Xanpol's fingers. He backed away from the edge of the pit, and just in time - for the entire chamber began to tremble as a low, thunderous rumble rose from the depths beneath - and then there was a blaze of light and a sudden wave of heat, and a great jet of fire shot straight out of the pit, flaring out into a brilliant blossom of tongues and sparks as it struck the arched stone ceiling.

Had Xanpol still occupied a human body, he would have been seriously if not fatally burned; but as it was, the flame swept across him without doing evident damage to the black metal. Now an acrid black smoke came boiling up out of the pit, gliding over the floor of the chamber due to its apparent atmospheric weight, and against this surging darkness the six stone pillars were visible as a circle around the pit, their summits now gushing scarlet froth in seeming tribute to the great jet of fire. Then, thundering out of the pit, a hideous cry that sent a shiver of terror through the stricken Pantechnikon:

DIES MIES JESCHET BOENE DOESEF DOUVEMA ENITEMAUS¹²

¹¹ This flute belonged to the blind idiot god Azathoth, who evidently left it there during his previous visit to the Monastery of the Elder Pharos.

¹² A particularly dreadful and potent incantation from H.P. Lovecraft's *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*.

And then, just as suddenly as it had begun, the blazing column of fire withered and fell back into the pit, and the black smoke poured back as well. Moments later only the shining, wet pedestals of stone remained as evidence of the entire episode.

“I certainly hope you’re **satisfied!**” said a sardonic voice behind Xanpol. “You could have blown all of this to **bits!** What **were** you trying to do?”

The Pantehnikon spun in surprise; seated nonchalantly on the throne was what seemed to be a woman - or something like a woman - composed completely of orange-red tongues of flame. Or, now that he looked more closely, outlined thus. Her actual form seemed to be insubstantial, although he could see a suggestion of her features every time the fire licked over her body. “And **now** what do you think you’re staring at?” she said, equally venomously. “You think you don’t look rather odd **yourself?** What **are** you, anyway - some new toy that crazy fool in the black suit dreamed up? I thought I told him to leave me **alone!**”

Xanpol finally recovered his composure. “This is all rather hard to explain,” he said, “but I crashed on this planet by accident, my consciousness was transferred to this - Pantehnikon - form, and now I need help to escape. If you’re talking about Darth Vader, he’s dead - killed in a fight with the Rebellion about three months ago.”

“**What** Rebellion?” said the fire-woman.

“Oh, never mind, I don’t care ... Somebody’s **always** getting into a fight over something or other. So Darth Vader got himself killed? I **knew** it. I **told** him he was going to catch it soon. Always messing around in everybody else’s business. Always something to say when he should have kept his mouth **shut**. Well, **there** you have it.” She rose to her feet and stared piercingly at the Pantehnikon. “Who killed him?” she said. “Princess Leia Organa of Alderaan,” answered Xanpol. “She’s the leader of -”

“The Rebellion, the Rebellion, yes - I know about the Rebellion. You told me about it a moment ago. And **you** won’t get out of this hole alive unless **I** help you, and I’m still wondering why I **should**. As I said, you almost wrecked this place by using the Formula without the combinants on the stones. You’re just fortunate **I** happened to be in Hearing and not some of the Others, or about now you’d be shredded all over this room. I’m tempted to do it myself. **Would**, too, except that you happened to catch me in a good mood. So - downstairs, and let’s get going!” - and she vanished.

“Luke Skywalker,” thought Xanpol to himself, “**never** will I do any more favors for you.” He sighed and headed for the entrance to the descending passage. When he finally reached the underground complex, he was greeted with a tremendous clattering and crashing. He ventured down the central passage, then jumped back as one of the T4 droids, an armature blackened and smoking, came sailing out of a doorway to hit the passage wall with a loud crash. “**Out** of my way, droid!” came a shout after it. “Can’t **stand** clumsy droids! You - Pan, Pan, whatever-you-said-you-were - the **least** you can do is give me a hand with this stuff. I mean I **am** doing this for **you**, right?”

Peering cautiously through the doorway, Xanpol saw that almost every one of the file-disc storage units had been opened and flung haphazardly onto the floor. The fire-being was rifling impatiently through one of the few remaining ones. “Here it is!” she said triumphantly. “You pick it up so that I don’t make a mess out of the tracks. Otherwise you’ll be playing games with the droids for the next millennium or two. Come - **on!** Hurry **up!**”

With understandable earnestness Xanpol picked his way across the debris to the storage unit where the strange creature was standing. She gestured impatiently at a thick file-disc, and Xanpol lifted it carefully out of the unit. He looked at the label; it said “GPattern #4”. [Earlier entries indicating #1, #2, and #3 were lined through.]

“He blew it the first three times through the gene-analysis,” said his companion. “I’m Wingrace, and it’s not important just now where I come from. What do you call yourself? End of the hall and turn left -” and she vanished again.

Xanpol spoke his name to thin air before he caught himself. Then he made another uncomplimentary remark about Luke Skywalker and, carrying the file-disc carefully under his arm, returned to the hallway. At its far end a series of light-flashes from the left-hand doorway indicated that some sort of machinery was already being activated. When he reached the entrance, he saw the fire-woman bending over one of the consoles, while in the center of the room a large, horizontal tube was beginning to pulse with light. “My name’s Lorin Xanpol,” he said, inserting the file-disc in the slot she indicated. “Or at least I **was** Lorin Xanpol. Used to sing songs on Tatooine in Sector 274-L. I made the mistake of trying to orbit this planet, and the droids -”

“I can guess the rest,” she said, a little more calmly. “Somehow you didn’t kill yourself when you crashed, and then the droids couldn’t think of anything better to do than lock your head into **that** thing. Well, it’s not as bad as it might be, particularly if you didn’t look so hot to begin with. But that universal-cosmic-knowledge expression drives me absolutely **wild**. Guess it’s something Darth Vader thought up after I jumped all over him for that skull-face he had on the exoskeleton. Dramatic to the death. I **know** I’m going to regret bringing him back, but that’ll be more **your** problem than **mine**. Unless of course he blew the fourth gene-analysis too, in which case we’ll get nothing but a rather revolting molecular mess.”

It finally dawned on Xanpol what was happening. “This file-disc. You’re going to clone another Darth Vader.”

“No, no, no,” she replied. “You clone something when you take its genetic pattern and impress it on organic matter which then grows into the physical double of the original. This is something else. This program recombines raw elements into an exact copy of the original model.

“What we’ll get - if this stuff doesn’t blow itself apart in the process - is the original Darth Vader as he was two years ago when this gene-analysis was computed. First thing you’ll have to do is tell him what kind of a jam he’s gotten himself into since then. Then, if he isn’t too upset, you just **might** get off this rock with him. Now come here and let me show you what to do. Got to get it right. There’s going to be a lot of electrical stuff going on in a minute or two. You may have made it through the fireworks upstairs all right, but if this machine goes up, you’ll just be spare parts for one of the droids.”

6. REMANIFESTATION

As Lorin Xanpol threw the final series of switches under Wingrace's direction, two massive shafts of lightning stabbed from the ends of the glowing cylinder towards the far end of the laboratory, where they seemed to ground on two glass-like rods topped with metallic spheres placed before a cubical platform about four feet above the floor.

Evidently a transformer of some sort linked the rods to the platform, because what looked like a static-electrical ring suddenly sparked to life atop the cube, faltered, and faded. Then it flashed out again following another stab from the two great lightning-bolts towards the glass rods. This time it did not fade, but seemed to stabilize on the surface of the cube.

More blasts, and the ring jumped upwards and disintegrated, only to be replaced immediately by still another one atop the cube - which rose again - brighter and stronger this time - to a height of some seven feet above the cube before it too faded and vanished. Then another ring, then another and another, and now there were many rings, blending in and out of one another as they alternately rose and fell in a shimmering column of electrical brilliance. The light from this spectacular display revealed something else to Xanpol - the dull sheen of a large inverted pentagram on the wall directly behind the cubical platform.¹³

Over by the control-console Wingrace was making continuous adjustments to two retorts of boiling liquid which were feeding their contents into the central cylinder. Evidently reading Xanpol's thoughts, she shouted at him above the crackle of the electricity: "Controlled nuclear disintegration in the big tube. The main computer selects the elemental combinations required and sends them to the poles in ionic impulses. Plus on the left, minus on the right. Can't touch matter or antimatter on the way or recombination would occur - that's why the fireworks instead of vacuum belts. The rings are the molecular combinations designated by the computer; that's why each one of them burns out at a slightly-different wavelength. The assembly is done in an electrically-neutral field, but in a full-atmospheric environment so that structural compensation can be computed for the pressure. Here we go -!"

Wingrace adjusted three dials in rapid succession, and the rings increased their speed and brilliance until the entire area above the platform seemed a solid blaze of energy. Then - with a suddenness as surprising as it was total - the display ceased. And there, standing atop the cube in front of the great inverse pentagram, was the figure of a man. For yet another moment he remained motionless, his skin still glowing redly with combustion; then he raised his arms high before him in the Sign of *Xa* and said in a strong, emotion-filled voice:

*Auset f em Xennu kekiu.
Uah ka-f an arit-a em Xem-f.*¹⁴

The alien words rang through the chamber; it seemed to Xanpol that they were actually increasing in strength rather than fading. Then he was certain of it, as their echo increased to a deafening level. And then it was as though the sound "seized" upon the light which

¹³ This laboratory and its operation are inspired by those of the magician Rotwang during his creation of *Ultima Futura* in Fritz Lang's film of Thea von Harbou's *Metropolis*.

¹⁴ Later to be echoed in ancient Egypt in the Milky Way Galaxy: "His seat is within the Darkness. He has placed his *ka* in me, nor do I work without him."

filled the room, distorting it, transforming it, contracting and shaping it to a shining column of humming lightning in the air beside the Jedi. And suddenly Lorin Xanpol was stricken by words which he could not hear audibly, but which seemed somehow to be written in the very atmosphere around the lightning:

THOU NYTR WHYCH SHALT ENTIR INTO THYS BEING BEWARE THAT THOU BE STEDFASTE OF SELFE FOR I AM THE BRINGER OF THYS LIGHT. AND THEREFORE BEWARE HOW THOU ENTIRST BUT IF THOU BE STEDFASTE FOR AND THOU FAYLE THEREOF I SHALL NOT HELPE THE.¹⁵

In evident response to this, the still-glowing man clenched his fists, bringing his left arm down away from his side and raising his right high above his head. Immediately the column of lightning rose above him, its base touching his hand; and then it began to solidify; moments later, in the man's upraised hand, was a lightsaber - its blade ignited and blazing forth a brilliant purple. And again Lorin Xanpol flinched in shock as more strange words seemed to etch themselves into his brain:

THERE SHALL NEVER MAN BEGRYPE ME THAT YS TO SEY THE HANDYL BUT ONE AND HE SHALL PASSE ALL OTHER.¹⁶

Now the man lowered the lightsaber slowly and respectfully, finally switching it off and plunging the laboratory into semi-darkness.

Moments later light from the passageway outside filtered into the room; and as Xanpol's lenses compensated for the sudden drop in illumination, he saw that the man was tall and fine-featured, with eyes that seemed to reflect both a fierce desire for life and an intimate knowledge of death. And Xanpol understood how such a being could be feared throughout the galaxy, yet fashion with his own hands the face of the Pantechnikon.

For a few moments he remained motionless atop the cube, then stepped down to the floor and walked slowly over to the console where Wingrace was standing, a satisfied smile on her face. "How long has it been?" said the man.

"Two years," said Wingrace, all the brashness gone from her tone. "You were killed while dealing with some sort of uprising against the Empire. Remember - You must leave **immediately**. The poisons ..."

"And Krel?" he said. "Gone from the galaxy in the new ship," answered Wingrace. "with the Fire of Sith."

The man was visibly taken aback. "So it came to **that**. The situation must be serious. But if she's gone, how were **you** summoned?"

Wingrace directed his attention to Xanpol, and Darth Vader looked at him curiously. "So I have **you** to thank for my reconstitution. But you're the **Pantechnikon**. Who ..? No, Wingrace is right. Time enough later for talk. We must leave here **now**."

Pausing only briefly to secure some garments from a room across the central passageway, Darth Vader led the way to one of the many downward-sloping tunnels. Wingrace had remained behind, but when they reached the foot of the tunnel, she was standing before them at the hatchway of the black-metal covered probe ship that had originally brought Darth Vader to the planet. "The Fire of Sith be with you," she said to

¹⁵ The inscription on the bow of the magical ship onto which Sir Galahad ventured to seek the Sword of the Grail. Cf. Emma Jung & Marie-Louise von Franz, *The Grail Legend*, 1970.

¹⁶ The inscription on the Sword of the Grail attained by Sir Galahad. *Ibid*.

Darth Vader, and then she turned to Xanpol and looked at him for a long moment. “And with you, Lorin Xanpol.”

And then the flames seemed to flow more fiercely about her body, and with a wink at the Pantehnikon, she vanished in a sudden flash of light.

“Where did she go?” asked Xanpol. “Isn’t she coming with us?”

Darth Vader smiled. “She has returned to the realms that are hers. She has no need of such poor vehicles as this starship, and can travel wherever she wishes at her whim. Moreover she seems to like you - not the form you now occupy, for she pays no heed to appearances, but your self ... wherever it may be at the moment. I should not be at all surprised if you see more of her - and **not** necessarily at the most convenient times.”

Out the viewport Xanpol watched as the small ship glided smoothly along an ascending tunnel carved out of the reddish rock, reached the surface some distance away from the plateau, and rose steadily through the atmospheric lightning to the blackness of space.

Once the small ship was free of the Sith Planet’s gravity, Darth Vader asked Xanpol for an account of the events that had brought him there. For some strange reason the Pantehnikon couldn’t associate this quiet, enigmatic man with the fearsome, metal-masked entity who had so terrorized the Galactic Empire. He rendered as full an account as he could of the Rebellion, of the destruction of Alderaan and the Death Star, and of his own encounter with Luke on Tatooine.

Darth Vader gazed at him bemusedly. “There will probably be times when you will bitterly regret what has happened to you,” he said, “no matter how efficient and advantageous the Pantehnikon form may be. But by making my remanifestation possible, you may have performed a service to the galaxy which you can scarcely now comprehend. I suspect the Galactic Empire is seeking a final confrontation with this Rebellion, one of critical proportions. Hence it appears that your adventure may have been less ‘accidental’ that you thought it to be.

“I sense a working of, shall we say, the ‘Dark Side of the Force’ in this. Possibly I will have to move quickly to influence the crisis, and my destination should be the Galactic Hub. But it is just as necessary for someone aware of the full implications of this situation to offer counsel to the Rebellion. We have some time before reaching Tatooine to explore those implications, and we might as well begin now ...”

* * *

As Lorin Xanpol was struggling desperately to bring the *Millennium Falcon* out of its deteriorating orbit above the Planet of Sith, Han Solo and Chewbacca eased the Sector Legate’s Class Eight back down to sublite, instituted navigational verification, and peered out the viewport at the five planets of the Galactic Hub. The Wookiee cocked his head and growled questioningly at Solo.

“If I knew the answer to **that**,” said the Corellian somewhat shortly, “neither one of us would ever have gotten mixed up in this in the first place. Chasing around the galaxy trying to keep half the people in it from blowing up the other half! Locked in this black fright suit ... with an assistant who first nearly kills me and then almost mis-navigates us right into the spiral nucleus. No, I **don’t** know what I’m going to do now ... Just keep on playing the long shots and trust that statue knew what it was talking about.”

Chewbacca looked suspiciously at Solo and seemed about to comment, then evidently thought better of it and resumed his glum stare out towards the Hub. Solo looked at him and laughed. “I know you don’t quite believe what I said about the statue of Sith; sometimes I’m not sure I do **myself**. But whether or not I’ve got some fancy help in all of this, I’m still in a position where I can do **something** for Leia and Luke, and I’d better have a shot at it. I mean, they really **will** mess it up all by themselves. So cheer up - We’re

not atomized yet. Who knows ... We might even pick up a little something out of this that we don't have to feel guilty about."

Chewbacca looked back at him and shook his head. Han Solo talking about feeling "guilty"! **Much** worse than just talking with statues. And here he was with this madman. He moaned quietly and then, suddenly, set his jaw. Han Solo might be crazy, but Chewbacca was still his friend. He would do what he could to help him, even if it meant taking the entire Hub apart. [But he rather hoped that it wouldn't.]

The two friends continued to gaze with fascination at the unique solar system, which seemed to be rotating gently around the viewport as their ship drew closer to it. The five planets with their interconnecting golden beams of matter-transference plasma were certainly a beautiful sight. And, in spite of themselves, Han Solo and Chewbacca felt a wave of pride that a civilization that was as much theirs as the Emperor's had created such a magnificent capital for itself.

They were startled out of their reverie by a viewplate on the left bulkhead which burst suddenly into life, evidently activated by some pre-set governmental signal. A uniformed official appeared on the screen and said, pleasantly if a touch formally, "Welcome to the Galactic Hub. You are identified as the Sector Legate of 274-L. Please specify your destination and anticipated length of stay."

"O.K., Chewie, keep your claws crossed," said Han Solo under his breath. Then, triggering the transmitter, he said: "This is not the Sector Legate; this is Darth Vader. I am bound for -"

The official interrupted him. "Wait, please, for a priority transmission for Lord Darth Vader from the Galactic Emperor." And the screen went blank.

Han Solo turned to Chewbacca in astonishment. "Just like **that**? How do they know I'm the real Darth Vader?" Chewbacca thought for a moment, then ventured a suggestion. "That's true," said Solo. "Nobody but Darth Vader could just take a Sector Legate's ship. And I'm guessing that that STF commander sent a reconnaissance drone ahead of us to tell headquarters that I turned up. So we're expected, and presumably that means we don't have to go through the usual validation. Good thing too. Never thought I'd be glad that Darth Vader had such a nasty reputation - Guess no one wants to talk with him if he can avoid it."

The screen flashed on again. This time it displayed the face of an Imperial Starforce Colonel. "Priority for Lord Darth Vader from the Galactic Emperor," he said. "Proceed to entrance pattern for Hub Four. Lock to Port Control channel 48. Cease further transmission." Then the Colonel saluted and the screen once more went blank.

Han Solo automatically reached up to scratch his head, then remembered the black metal helmet. He settled for a low whistle. "That fellow doesn't know how much I appreciate that salute," he said. "At least we're not in a jam just yet. Go ahead and set the pattern, Chewie. Second circuit. Everything else is auto. Nice ship ... or it would be if it had a bit more guts. Hey, look at that -"

What Han had seen out the viewport of the ship as it wheeled away from the third planet was a gleaming-white series of concentric rings encircling the fourth planet, creating a vast plane almost twice the planet's diameter. "Must be moon- or asteroid-debris," mused the Corellian. "Only thing I can imagine is that something was on a collision course and they had to blow it away at the last moment. Pretty, all right, but I'll bet it fouls up orbital nav something fierce. No, it's not planetary matter - too shiny ... **Chewbacca!** It's **ships!** **All** of it! **Star Destroyers** - There must be **thousands** of them there! I didn't know they had **half** that many in the whole ..."

Then the realization struck him. "Chewie, you know what that is? That's what the

Empire has in mind for Leia and Luke, that's what. They won't even know what's **hit** them. And we thought the Death Star was big stuff. **This** is what I'm supposed to de-fuse? I can't even count that high!" For once, Chewbacca made no answer. He was staring in stark amazement at the ships. Then, eloquently, he shut his eyes.

Two hours later the Class Eight eased to a waiting dock in the Central Section Spaceport of Hub Four. When Han Solo broke open the hatch and looked out, he saw two ranks of Stormtroopers standing in ceremonial formation at the base of the ramp. He said, "Chewie, you'd better stay here for now. I'll tell them that you're O.K., but you'd be that much harder to explain if you come with me. Low-profile it. I'll be back as soon as I can." He grabbed the big Wookiee affectionately by the shoulder as was his habit. "Well, here goes nothing!" And, throwing the black cape over his shoulder with what he hoped was characteristic mien, he stepped out onto the ramp.

The moment he appeared outside the ship, there came the sharp crash of the Stormtrooper salute as the right forearms of the honor guard struck their breastplates. Solo acknowledged the salute with a slight bow of his head, then strode briskly down the ramp.

As he reached the ground, three vertilifts came sailing across the spaceport and glided uniformly to a halt some distance from the docked starship. Suddenly Stormtroopers poured from the two flanking vertilifts, and for a moment Han Solo thought that something had gone wrong. But once more the Stormtroopers positioned themselves in guard-formation, and again the STF salute rang out as a single white-armored figure emerged from the central vertilift and came towards Solo. As the figure came closer, the Corellian could see the glint of the five silver stars on the brow of his helmet, and suddenly he knew who it was. And, behind the black metal mask, the color drained from Han Solo's face.

7. THE VISION AND THE VOICE¹⁷

It had taken Luke Skywalker almost as long to find Ben Kenobi's hut in the Tatooine desert as it took Lorin Xanpol to reach the Planet of Sith.

First there had been the matter of the landspeeder. Luke had secured what seemed to be an adequate vehicle from one of the Jawa dealers in Mos Eisley, only to have its suspension go out as he was about to depart the town - dropping him and the two droids to the ground with a most inelegant [and painful] crash. Luke sought out the Jawa who had sold him the landspeeder, and there was a spirited exchange, with Luke finally splitting the cost of repairs with the little creature. Had it been a year or two earlier, the Jawa might not have fared so well, but now Luke was uneasy about drawing too much attention to himself.

Then, too, he had not gone directly to Ben's place. Moved by a compulsion to which he could not quite put a name, he headed for the farm of his uncle and aunt. When he arrived, he found it as desolate as when he had last seen it, save now that it was falling quickly into ruin under the harsh elements of Tatooine. He wandered through the rooms that he had known so well, and once he took up a scarf that had been one of Aunt Beru's favorites and, oblivious to the droids, kissed it. In the workroom where he had first seen the projection of Leia, he found, still lying on the floor where he had dropped it, the wrench with which he had unfastened Artoo's restraining bolt. He shook his head numbly with old memories, then went back out to the landspeeder. He piloted the vehicle out into the desert at top speed, and he did not once look back. It is possible that the tears in his eyes were simply the result of the sand kicked up by the landspeeder.

A little over two days later Luke saw Ben's tiny hut in the distance - a small white dot amidst the hot, shimmering expanse of mountains and desert surrounding it. If Kenobi had wanted to isolate himself from civilization, thought Luke to himself, he had certainly chosen well. And he wondered again: Why? What conceivable tragedy could have driven one of the most powerful and honored men in the Empire to turn his back on his accomplishments and seek solace in this desolate retreat? Ben had never told him, nor had Luke had the courage to ask him. Now, it seemed, he would never know.

Luke brought the landspeeder to a stop in front of the hut and helped the two droids to alight. Then he walked slowly, almost reverently through the doorway, blinking as his eyes adjusted to the dim interior after the glare of the twin suns outside. As the features of the room revealed themselves to him, he was once more gripped by old emotions. There was the small table on which he had seen Leia's projection for the second time, and there - the trunk in which his father's lightsaber had lain waiting for him to claim it.

As he had done many times before, Luke ran his hand over the grip of the lightsaber as it hung at his belt. What hand had held it before his? What had his father looked like? How had he died? What had happened to his mother, and how had he come to be hidden away on Tatooine with his uncle and aunt?

He scowled, irritated at himself. He had come here to see if he could find information with which he could help Leia - not to indulge himself in pointless daydreams. "Threepio," he said, "I need to know if Ben kept any documents here which will tell me more about the use of the Force. You start looking over there, and Artoo, you take that room there. If there's anything here, we've got to find it."

¹⁷ This title is inspired by Aleister Crowley's *Liber 418: The Vision and The Voice*, the record of one of his most famous initiations.

The golden droid began going gingerly through the rough-hewn cabinets that Luke had indicated, and R2D2 stumped through the doorway into the adjoining room [which appeared to be the extent of the hut]. Luke himself turned to four book-laden shelves on the wall to the left of the entrance and began to inspect the various volumes. He met with instant disappointment; the works were not texts concerning the Jedi or their use of the Force. Rather they were all works of poetry, of art, and of philosophical essays. At another time Luke might have been curious about Ben's tastes in literature, but now he was simply frustrated. "Anything over there?" he called to C-3PO.

The droid paused and turned toward Luke quizzically. "Why, yes, there are a great many things. There is a wardrobe of several rather poorly-constructed garments, fourteen cooking utensils, two solar-light cells, five -" He paused and cocked his head at Luke's expression. "I take it you are not interested in a full cataloguing, but only in the subject matter you specified earlier."

"You take it right," said Luke. "In that case," continued the droid cheerfully, "I have not found anything likely to be of interest to you. I shall continue to look."

Would Artoo forgive me if I left this one here? thought Luke with his teeth clenched. No, I suppose not. My luck.

Suddenly there was a series of urgent squawks and beeps from the next room, and a moment later the squat form of the small droid appeared in the doorway, rocking back and forth with seeming impatience. There was another barrage of sound-effects, and C-3PO said, "I believe my counterpart has found something. Would you like details?"

"Yes," said Luke dryly. "Details."

"He says that he has found a document with what appears to be your name on it," said C-3PO. "He says it is atop an oddly-designed pedestal in that room." Luke brushed past the two droids and went to the doorway, where he paused in surprise. The room beyond was as rudely-constructed as the first one, with bare, white walls and a roughly-surfaced floor, and it was completely empty save for a most peculiar feature. Slightly off to one side, placed seemingly at random, was a slim, tapered, quadrangular pillar of chalk-white stone. It was about three feet high, and resting atop it was a folded piece of paper. Luke took it from the pedestal and walked back to the main room to examine it in better light. On the outside was only his name, handwritten in a fine, flowing script. He unfolded it and looked inside:

You will have returned here seeking to know how you may make further use of the Force - which suggests that you have averted at least the immediate threat to young Leia and her friends but are concerned about subsequent and even greater danger.

Luke, the Force is not something which you can use as you would a lightsaber. Rather it reflects and magnifies the self. Seek therefore to know yourself for what you have become.

The Force will be with you always.

Ben

"That's what he said at the Death Star too," said Luke to himself. "But how ..."

He suddenly became aware of a shadow in the doorway of the hut, and he spun to face it, instinctively seizing and activating his lightsaber. The glowing blade illuminated the features of - Leia Organa!

She blinked at the sudden glare from the weapon but smiled at Luke - in a gentle, affectionate manner that Luke had never witnessed before. In confusion and embarrassment he switched off the lightsaber. "Leia! How did you - What -?" But she had already crossed over to him and, placing one of her slim fingers upon his lips, she said, "I am not Leia, but your idealization of her. Come with me ...". And, taking his hand, she drew him out of the hut and into the sands of the desert beyond.

Then she smiled at him again, her eyes sparkling, and then - to Luke's utter astonishment - she began to sing. It was a light, lilting melody which Luke remembered only dimly from his childhood; somewhere he had heard it sung before, but never so sweetly and feelingly as this. Leia glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, saw his sincere [if bewildered] pleasure, and laughed delightedly.

"Poor Luke Skywalker! So young and so terribly, terribly serious! Is life so harsh and painful that you cannot indulge yourself even for a few moments? Now I have a question to ask you. Tell me the truth. What is it that you see in me?"

Luke hesitated, still wondering if all this could be accounted for by mirage or heat-sickness. "Ow! Hey, cut that out!" he laughed suddenly, for the "mirage" had poked him playfully in the ribs. "Come on," she said. "Not for me, but for you. And for Ben."

Feeling slightly foolish, Luke said hesitantly, "I don't know. You're sort of like Leia, but you're - different. You seem to be happier than she usually is, but - No, it's more than that. You don't seem to be afraid to be - well, yourself; and somehow she is. Maybe it's all the responsibility she has which makes her afraid to seem 'weak' - I'm not sure. But there's something sort of 'knotted up' about her. Sometimes I think she's on the verge of telling me - or telling herself - but then it's as though something seizes her by the throat and chokes it off."

The phantom-Leia looked affectionately and almost sadly at him, then loosened her hair from its tight buns and let it wave after her in the gentle breeze from the nearby hills. "It's partly your fault, you know," she said. "A girl desires to please those whom she loves, but to Leia it seems that all around her take their pleasure only in power. Therefore she struggles to be powerful for you, but her true self abhors it. She is a creature who yearns in her heart to be innocent, and to be loved by someone who loves innocence. Do you know what 'innocence' is, Luke?"

"Immaturity, I guess," he replied. The girl's silence told him that she was waiting to hear more. "No," he reflected. "I think I know what you're getting at. Not immaturity. Something positive ... something worthwhile for itself. Like honesty. I would say perhaps a delight in life for its own sake. A rejection of justifications, causes, excuses, and guilt at being alive. To be innocent is to say: I do not live to serve, to atone, to sacrifice, but simply to be. That's it, isn't it? Hey!"

While pondering the question he had stared off towards the mountains, but when he turned to gaze at his pretty companion, nothing but the expanse of the desert met his eyes. He stopped in his tracks, more confused than ever, and the breeze whipped the sand up around his feet.

"Hi, kid," said a familiar voice behind him. Luke turned around and there, leaning casually against one of the large boulders at the base of the foothills, was - Han Solo! "Han!" said Luke delightedly, running over to him. "Where did you come from? Did you see her? What are you -?"

The Corellian held up his hands in mock protest. "Hey - one thing at a time. First of all, I'm not the real Han Solo at all; I'm like Leia - a creature of your own mind. So let me ask you something instead. Since you left your uncle's farm to go off and harass the Empire, you've become quite a fighter, even by my standards. And believe me, kid, I've

had my share of scraps. So what has it done for you? Do you feel any different now than you did before toasting the Death Star?"

Luke, taken aback when "Solo" first began to speak, responded cautiously. "Yes, I guess I do. I never did anything really dangerous before in my life - except maybe sneak up on a couple of the Tusken camps - and now I feel ... tougher, sort of. When you actually risk your life and not only come out of it all right but also ... That's not what you're getting at, is it?" he said, as the Corellian looked at him, shaking his head.

Han put a hand on Luke's shoulder and the two of them began to walk slowly away from the boulder. "No, it isn't. I mean, what's it **for**. Are you doing this for the thrill of it, or to get Leia to fall for you, or what? I know what **I** got into it for - **loot**. Just my luck that I happened to get sentimental about the two of you - Chewie should have slammed me around the cabin a bit when I turned back to the Death Star. But what does it mean to **you**? **That's** what I want to know."

Luke bit his lip. "If you're going to put it that way, then I'd have to say that all the fights and victories and medals don't really mean anything in the long run. They're exciting, all right, but what's really important is what happens **next**. All the fighting is because we think we have a better set of values to give to life than those determined by the Empire."

Solo took his hand away and stopped to take a long look at him. "Luke," he said, "I hate to say it, but I think you've got a head on those shoulders. Just try to make sure it stays there." He winked at him.

"A remote possibility," said an iron voice behind them. Luke looked around, and there, standing about ten yards away from him, was the black-masked figure of Darth Vader. Luke turned back to look at Han Solo, but the figure of the Corellian had disappeared. Darth Vader stood there watching him silently, his cape flapping in the wind.

Luke decided he knew the score. He breathed easier. "If you're another figment of my imagination," he said, "I guess there's not much point talking with you, is there? Besides, Leia killed you - You're dead."

By way of answer Darth Vader drew his lightsaber and activated it, the blade hissing and crackling as it glowed to life. Then he turned slightly and touched the blade to a very real rock beside him. The rock promptly burst in two from the heat. Then the mask looked back at Luke impassively.

Suddenly Luke was really shaken. What **was** this? What was **happening** to him? Were Leia and Han some sort of illusions created by Darth Vader to get him out here? But where had the Sith Lord come from? He was **dead**! Luke had **seen** him die. But there was no time for further reflection, because the "corpse" was now coming towards him. Luke activated his own lightsaber. He could outrun Darth Vader easily enough, he knew, but a blazing anger suddenly seized him. This was the monster who had killed both his father and Ben. He raised his gleaming white blade to strike.

But Darth Vader stopped a few feet away, lowered his own weapon, and stood looking at Luke. The red eyes glowed from within the mask. "So you would take my life because of the evil you think I have done. Do you not know that I too am a Jedi and the student of Obi-wan Kenobi? How do you know that when you look at me you do not see what you too will become? Will you wield the power of the Force according to your own standards of good and evil, or will you be guided by others who have not the wisdom of the Jedi?"

Luke flushed. He said angrily: "A Jedi must know his limitations as well as his strengths. And, if he intends to influence the lives of others, he must give thought to their feelings, not just to his own desires. I will use the Force in the cause of **freedom** - not to tighten the grip of the Empire!"

“How wise you are that you can so easily know ‘freedom’,” said Darth Vader with irony. “I have never found it, and I have searched for it for a lifetime. You cannot ‘give’ freedom to anyone. What you give you can also take back, and therefore it is not freedom that you give, but rather a form of slavery that you deem enlightened and benevolent.” He lashed out suddenly with the purple lightsaber, and Luke jumped back and raised his own blade to strike back.

“Now see for yourself the Doom of the Jedi,” said the Lord of Sith. “You will use the judgment that you have, but you will never know whether what you do is for freedom or for a new slavery. Such things are not decided by you, but by those whom your actions affect. The Jedi cannot impart his wisdom to others; he can only allow them to gaze upon him and see, if they can, why he chooses as he does.

“But I will tell you now that you will rarely know the comfort of being understood. You will be a mystery, and the common man fears and hates the mysterious. Do you think you will be a hero throughout the galaxy? Once I was foolish enough to have that dream myself, Luke Skywalker. Now I doubt that there is anyone more feared or despised. Would you still become a Jedi?”

Luke stared at Darth Vader, then slowly nodded his head. “I will accept the risk and the doom,” he said, “because I have no real choice. It is my **will** to become a Jedi, and no lesser fear shall deter me. Perhaps I shall suffer your fate, or I may be honored and loved as Ben was. But either way I shall **not** turn back.”

“Indeed,” said Darth Vader. He raised the purple lightsaber and brought it down in a deadly arc. Luke brought his own blade up to parry it, and as the two beams met there was a blinding flash of light. Luke was knocked to the ground, and when he looked up there was no sign of Darth Vader - or the two lightsabers. A few feet away, however, the split rock still smoldered.¹⁸

Luke looked desperately about him for some sign of his father’s lightsaber, but it seemed to have vanished as completely as had Darth Vader. Did this mean that he had failed some obscure test and would not be accepted into the Jedi? In his heart he didn’t believe it, but he couldn’t deny that the lightsaber was gone.

The twin suns of Tatooine continued to beat down upon him, and suddenly Luke swayed on his feet. No wonder, he thought; it had been hours since he had taken any nourishment, and dehydration was a constant danger in this arid climate. He had better get back to Ben’s hut without delay. Then he realized that he had no idea in which direction it was to be found, not having taken any bearing on the suns when he left the hut with “Leia”.

Suddenly he realized the danger he was in. The droids would be of no help, since they had no more idea where he was than he had of their location. He looked at the surrounding hills, trying to recall the landmarks he had seen earlier. Finally he chose a direction and started to walk.

Several hours later, and after changing direction three times, Luke Skywalker could walk no more. He sank to his knees in the blistering heat, and then he fell full on to the sand, his chest heaving spasmodically. Through blurred vision he saw what seemed to be a krayt dragon in the distance. But he had no weapon and no strength left to run. “Leia ...” he gasped, and then he blacked out.

Heat. Light. And, when Luke opened his eyes, a face looking down into his. A face that he knew. “Rest easy, son,” said Ben Kenobi. “You’ve had a busy day.”¹⁹

¹⁸ An adaptation of this scene was used for the “magic tree” sequence in the film *The Empire Strikes Back*.

¹⁹ The exact words of Ben Kenobi upon first meeting Luke Skywalker in the original *Star Wars* film.

“Ben ... It’s **got** to be!” said Luke, recovering. “Ben Kenobi ... Am I glad to see **you!**” He struggled to his feet, Kenobi helping him. The old man indicated a sloping hill before them. “My hut is a short distance over there. Come, let us go before the heat affects you again.” And he took Luke by the arm and headed in the direction he had indicated.

“Then you **weren’t** killed on Teloos after all ... and all of this was **your** doing,” said Luke. Kenobi smiled at him. “No, Luke, it was **yours**. In fact I am not the real Ben Kenobi - if there is a ‘real’ Ben Kenobi. I too am your own creation. And so you are a Jedi at long last. When I was Sophrex of the Jedi Order, Luke, I thought that my most important responsibility was to preserve and protect those who were initiates of the Order. Then they were slain, and I realized how wrong I had been.” He paused.

Luke said, “I think I understand. The Jedi Order is not merely the beings who may exist within it at any one time. What is important is that the **idea** of the Jedi be preserved, and that the unique qualities that characterize a Jedi be recognized and confirmed in those who embody them. As has happened to me, though I have never seen the Citadel nor undergone Jedi training.”

Kenobi stopped and gestured before them towards a small, white structure in the distance. “There’s my home. You’ll be all right now. But you know, Luke, you’re quite wrong in thinking that you never underwent what you referred to as ‘Jedi training’. Now go. And remember: The Force will be with you always.”

The gentle blue eyes that Luke knew so well crinkled in a smile, and then, suddenly, Ben drew Luke toward him and kissed him lightly on the forehead. When he released him, he stepped back and brought the hood of his robe over his face. And then, as Luke watched, the robe fell to the sand, empty. Luke bent down and picked it up, and then, after a moment, put it on. Then he continued towards the tiny hut.

As he approached the door, a figure came through it and stood facing him. It was a tall, silver-haired man wearing flowing white robes. And then Luke Skywalker knew who he was.

“I have here a lightsaber which I myself have consecrated to you,” said the man in a clear, sonorous voice. “You must take it from me by its blade; it will not burn you.” And he brought forth a lightsaber, ignited it, and held the glowing white blade out towards Luke. Luke stretched forth his hand, but paused when he felt the heat of the blade. He began to reach forward again, denying the danger. Then, as from a great distance, the words of Krel Atlan came to him:

“So you would be a Jedi, Luke? Then begin to rely upon your own judgment rather than being content with blind obedience to others, no matter in what esteem you may hold them.”

Luke dropped his hand and stepped back, and as he did so, a triumphant smile appeared on his father’s face. He raised the lightsaber so that its blade pointed to the sky, and then he beckoned Luke to come forward and seize the grip as well. As Luke’s hand closed around the grip, the blade blazed forth with a sudden flash of light; as the two of them watched, it altered in color from white to a brilliant red. And Luke Skywalker stood alone in the desert of Tatooine, holding aloft the lightsaber that was now rightfully his.

When Luke entered the hut, he saw the two droids waiting in exactly the same positions they had occupied when he had looked up to see Leia in the doorway. There was no sign of Ben’s note, nor was the strange pedestal still in the small, bare room. Suddenly C-3PO spoke: “Since we have not found anything of interest to you, shall we be returning

to Mos Eisley? I fear that we run the risk of attracting Sandpeople or some of those obnoxious Jawas if we remain any longer.” Luke smiled at him. “Yes, let us go to Mos Eisley,” he said. He drew Ben’s robe about him, placed his lightsaber in the scabbard at his belt, and led the way outside to the landspeeder.

8. RETRIBUTION

As a resident of Tatooine Lorin Xanpol had no trouble obtaining an immediate landing pattern for Mos Eisley. Darth Vader docked just long enough to allow him to disembark. Then the small starship shot back into the sky, bound for the Galactic Hub.

Even among the fantastic physiognomies of the spaceport, the Pantechnikon found himself causing something of a sensation as he proceeded through the docking complex to the Port Control desk. Heads and things like heads turned as the slim, black-metal figure passed by. Xanpol had half-expected to be taken for a droid, but this was not the case. There must have been something in his bearing and in his reactions to external stimuli that bespoke his human consciousness.

Yet Lorin Xanpol found himself wondering just how “human” he now was after all. All of the processes which comprised the fabric of his existence were now electronic, electrochemical, or electromagnetic. Was the Pantechnikon in fact the bridge between man and machine, and was its secret the fact that there is no essential difference between the two? That human and machine intelligence differ in degree rather than in concept? Had man actually played god the moment he created the first machine, the first tool? And is “evolution” a move from the emotional animal to the logical machine ... or from the machine to the animal, living but for pleasure? Or could there be a third alternative?

Such questions shot through the electronic brain of the Pantechnikon in microseconds as he dodged through the crowds to the Port Control. He decided that he found them intriguing and would examine them more precisely at some future time. Now, however, he had other concerns. Inquiring at one of the Port Control monitors, he learned that a human and two droids were scheduled to depart on a chartered starship later that afternoon. Proceeding to the dock shown on the manifest-print, Xanpol saw Luke Skywalker, C-3PO, and R2D2 completing the pre-flight maintenance check on a weathered but sturdy Class Six. He walked over to the group. Luke glanced up at the Pantechnikon in curiosity.

“Luke, I’m Lorin Xanpol,” he said. Luke looked at him disbelievingly and, suddenly, suspiciously. His hand dropped to the lightsaber at his side. Can’t blame him, thought the Pantechnikon wryly. He said: “One month ago I left here for the Planet of Sith in the *Millennium Falcon* to try to find Han Solo. Ring a bell?”

Luke’s eyes widened in surprise and shock. “It is you! What **happened**? Are you all **right**? Where’s the *Falcon*? Is Han ..?”

“The *Falcon* crashed on the Planet of Sith,” said Xanpol, “and the droids on the planet were able to save my life only by transferring my intelligence pattern to this artificial body. It’s called a Pantechnikon. But I’m still Lorin Xanpol, all right. Or, at least, whatever there is or was of Lorin Xanpol that makes him unique. I didn’t find Han Solo, but I **did** find - Luke, you aren’t going to like this - I found Darth Vader.”

“**Darth Vader**?” said Luke. “Impossible. He’s **dead**. I was **there**. Leia killed him. You must have seen someone who looked like him.”

“**Was** dead, you mean,” replied Xanpol. “A mirror-image of the original was created by a genetic computer and a-a sort of fire-woman while I was there on the planet. That’s how I got back here. Darth Vader brought me.”

Luke stared at his friend in astonishment. “Why would Darth Vader bring you **here**?” he said. “Where is **he**?”

“Gone to the Hub,” answered Xanpol. “I told him about the Rebellion. He didn’t know anything about it, since the gene-pattern was made before it started. He says he’s

going to try to stop it. He wants me to tell you that, should there be diplomatic rather than military responses from the Empire at this point, it is not necessarily a sign of Imperial weakness or irresolution. He wants you to think twice before baiting it further.”

Luke whistled softly. “Well, I’ll admit that does sound like Darth Vader. That’s what he was trying to do - or at least what he **said** he was trying to do - when he was killed on Teloos. I used to hate him - Ben once told me that he killed my father - but there are times when I can’t help thinking that he’s the only sane person in this whole crazy galaxy. He always seems to know exactly what he’s doing and why, while the rest of us grope around in a fog.

“Nothing to do about it now, I suppose. We’ll know soon enough whether he was telling the truth. If he shows up with a battery of warships, then we can forget all the fancy talk. Listen, we’ve got to get going. Take this D-assembly over to Threepio, will you? As soon as it’s in place, we’ll lift off.”

“Sure,” said Xanpol, taking the device. “By the way, where’s Chewbacca? Isn’t he coming too?”

“I’ve been looking all over Mos Eisley for the last four days,” said Luke, “and I haven’t found a sign of him. And nobody can tell me anything about him either. Or won’t. You know how people are here. But I’m almost certain he isn’t anywhere in town now - Pretty hard for a bright orange Wookie to be inconspicuous. I hope he’s not in some kind of jam. But I just can’t take time to comb Tatooine for him - if he’s still here at all, I mean. Got to get back to the base. I’ve already been here longer than I told Leia I would.”

“You can always send someone back to look for him later,” said Xanpol. “All right, your D-assembly checks out. Anything else?”

“No, that does it,” said Luke. He called to the droids: “Threepio! Artoo! Close those dock-doors and let’s get going.”

* * *

“Our destination is the Imperial Compound,” said Tharrud Terclis to Han Solo. “Palpatine is arriving from Hub Three momentarily and will meet us there.”

“And the fleet?” asked Han Solo. “What do you intend doing with it? There must be thousands of ships there.”

“Four thousand two hundred and twenty-eight Star Destroyers,” said Terclis. “Almost the entire STF allocation. Why Palpatine insists on using the STF instead of the ISF I do not know. All for a Rebellion whose operations encompass only four sectors. And yet the ISF doesn’t seem to have had much success in dealing with it. I am told Tarkin managed to lose an entire Death Star in the process. I wouldn’t have thought even he could be that incompetent.”

Terclis’ tone was unemotional. Solo couldn’t decide whether or not the General knew that Darth Vader had also been on that particular Death Star. He said, “Have you ever heard of Obi-wan Kenobi?”

The white helmet continued to stare impassively at him. “Obi-wan? So **that’s** the explanation. **Now** I see the reason for the STF. But why would Obi-wan ..?”

A Stormtrooper came down the aisle to their seats and saluted. “We shall be arriving at the Compound in ten minutes, General,” he said.

Solo peered out the window. The trio of vertilifts was spiraling down towards what appeared to be a large, beautifully-landscaped garden amidst the soaring metal edifices that seemed the most common feature of Hub Four. In the middle of the garden Solo could see a gleaming white building which, he presumed, was their destination. So this was how the Galactic Emperor chose to receive visitors when he was away from the massive complex on Hub Three. Solo remembered the projected image that he had seen during his last

meeting with the Emperor. Now, he thought, he would see Palpatine himself.

The three vertlifts came to rest a short distance from the compound. A landspeeder with the Emperor's insignia glided up to meet them, and soon Terclis and Solo were flying smoothly through the garden towards the central structure. It was, as Solo could now see, a graceful, rectangular building surrounded by slender, crystalline pillars. It complemented perfectly the natural beauty of the surrounding landscape, and suddenly Han Solo felt as though he and Terclis were an odd sort of defilement - two creatures of destruction, whose very features were concealed behind terrifying masks, within this monument to beauty.

He sighed without thinking, and the white helmet of the Imperial General turned slightly in his direction. "Yes," said Terclis. "An island of serenity within the greatest fortress of power in the galaxy - perhaps in the entire universe. And here we are, our hands dipped in the blood of so many peoples on so many worlds, daring to admire this - to believe we have the right to admire it. **That** is true blasphemy. How ironic that one must depart so from nature to be able to appreciate it."

Solo looked at him in surprise. Forgetting himself for a moment, he said, "It is because we have seen the horrors that we have that we know this for what it is. Behind all beauty is horror, Terclis. Here in this garden the plants tear at one another for light and nourishment, and insects engage in combat far more savage than that of your Stormtroopers. Nature is not beautiful; nature is indifferent to such things as beauty or ugliness. It is **we** who decide what we shall consider beautiful, and we make such judgments because we have also decided what we shall consider horrible." Solo paused, surprised at himself. Then he remembered his encounter with the statue; so **this** was the Fire of Sith.

"For one who has not lived even a single lifetime, you are a wise man, Lord Darth Vader," said Terclis quietly.²⁰ Then the landspeeder drew up to the pillared building, and a tall, white-robed man came forth from it to greet them. He gripped each of them warmly by the hand and said, "Tharrud, Darth Vader, welcome." As they followed him into the building, Solo realized that he had just met the Galactic Emperor.

Aureon Palpatine led the way to an elegantly furnished study, bade them be seated, and touched a control panel against one of the walls. Immediately a holographic model of the galactic spiral about eight feet in diameter glowed to life in the space before them. Palpatine touched another control, and the hologram began to grow in detail until only a portion of a single spiral arm remained in the projected space. Solo recognized it as the section encompassing the Galactic Empire.

The Emperor gestured at an elongated projection of light branching off from the main part of the spiral arm.

"The Spur of Varpel," he said. "ISF intelligence reports that it is now the sole focus of Rebel activity - moreover that a systematic effort appears to be underway to establish Rebel domination over a series of inhabited and colonized systems in Subsectors 306-P-FA, 306-P-FC, and 306-P-FD ... approximately from here to here:" [He indicated an expanse near the base of the spur.] "They have continued to strike at commercial convoys and supply centers, but in the last two months they have also begun direct - and rather successful - attacks on ISF patrols and liaison ships."

Palpatine looked at Han Solo. "Before I proceed, I would like to know what, if anything, you accomplished in your efforts to deal with this situation."

Han had expected just such a question and had prepared his answer beforehand. He said, "There was resistance from the council determining Rebel policy. They were not

²⁰ This sentence echoes Count Dracula's observation to Professor Van Helsing in Todd Browning's film *Dracula*.

satisfied that Imperial decisions are being made with due consideration for regional and Sector requirements. They do not trust you personally, and with the dissolution of the Senate they feel that their last effective voice in the Imperial Government has been stilled. They could not understand the use of positronic analysis in the allocation of resources and social priorities. Given more time they might; their present attitude is more emotional than deliberate. I recommend that I again make contact with them for this purpose. My last attempt was cut short by the intervention of Obi-wan Kenobi.”

Palpatine rose to his feet and walked away from them to stand at one of the windows overlooking the garden. “Obi-wan Kenobi,” he said slowly. “Obi-wan Kenobi. Has my trust ...” Then he turned back to face Solo and Terclis. “Generals of the Empire do not retire to desert hovels without my foreknowledge and approval. Kenobi went to Tatooine for a purpose known only to the two of us. And now he has seemingly abandoned that purpose to concern himself with this uprising. If I did not know him as well as I do, I would suspect he has chosen to indulge himself in petty political ambitions.

“You contend,” he continued, looking once more at Solo, “that he has acquired the *Yellow Text* and hence has decided to play creative games with the Empire. I cannot accept that. The social evolution of the Empire is too multi-faceted to be supplanted or improved upon by a single mind, no matter what means it may have at its disposal. No, something **else** is happening here. Unfortunately I cannot afford to indulge Obi-wan in his schemes this time. The impact of the Rebellion throughout the Empire is already too marked. And that is why I have called **you** here, Tharrud.”

The Emperor returned to the holographic projection, which had continued to float, ghost-like, in the air between them. “I want this Rebellion destroyed, and I want it done quickly and completely. The Empire has already witnessed one conspicuous failure of the Starforce to deal with it, and now I am told of the second. There will **not** be a third.

“Tharrud, the Clones were a clearly-defined external threat, and so the Republic united against them. But this is an internal threat from those who are in fact Imperial citizens. If we tolerate them, we encourage anarchy. If we simply kill them, we intimidate and alienate other citizens, and sooner or later there will be another uprising. You understand?”

Terclis nodded. He said, “It is not the first time I have been faced with such a situation, although it is the first time that I have had to deal with one on such a scale. The MindWar Center was originally conceived to handle politically-complex insurrections and invasions. I believe we can overcome this one.”

“And do you understand why I specified a Class Thirteen fleet of this size?”

“Yes - as soon as I saw that the Rebels have begun to attempt territorial secession. You envision a simultaneous Sweep through those three subsectors to interdict the Rebel forces wherever they may be at that time.”

“Precisely,” said Palpatine. “I will leave the strategic considerations to your own discretion. If simple extermination proves necessary, you may proceed. If psychopolitical factors warrant less-drastic solutions, you have authority to determine and implement them. I insist only that your solution be swift and conclusive.”

He turned toward Han Solo. “I wish you to accompany Imperial General Terclis on this operation. I am still disturbed by Obi-wan Kenobi’s evident interest in this affair. You are to evaluate any further indications of his manipulation and advise the Imperial General accordingly. I need hardly add that an error could result in either disaster for the Empire or tragic injustice to the Rebel leaders and their forces.”

The Emperor seemed about to say something else, then evidently changed his mind. Terclis said, “It shall be done.” He rose to his feet, donned his helmet, and strode towards the entrance, accompanied by Solo. Then Terclis paused and turned round to face the

Emperor, who stood silently by the side of the still-glowing hologram of the Galactic Empire. "Aureon," said Terclis, "you may have wondered why it was that I allowed you to replace the Republic with your monarchy. Today you have answered your own question." His forearm clashed against his armor in salute, then he turned and continued towards the waiting landspeeder.

The Galactic Emperor watched the vehicle depart, then switched off the holographic projector and returned to the window to stare into the growing twilight.

* * *

Despite the fixed features of his Stormtrooper helmet, Imperial General Terclis managed to convey his evident distaste at the towering orange Wookiee seated beside Han Solo and himself in the STF transport taking them to the fleet's command post in the second Death Star that Solo had seen earlier. Chewbacca glared at Terclis with equal lack of enthusiasm, once letting out a low growl. At that point Han shifted his position slowly, managing to give his friend a sharp jab in the ribs as he did so. To Terclis he said, "He will be cooperative enough under the influence of the Force. Because of his familiarity with the Rebel leaders, I hope to be able to obtain some useful information from him once we know what individuals we're up against."

"Every once in so often," replied Terclis drily, "I regret not having pursued the path of the Jedi myself. Then I see the alarming entities with which Jedi feel inclined to associate, and I find my remorse is somehow alleviated. Four thousand Star Destroyers - the largest fleet ever assembled - getting tactical intelligence from a Wookiee!" He shook his head. "If Palpatine saw us now, he'd decide that Obi-wan had already gone to work!"

In spite of himself, Solo couldn't help laughing. "Cheer up," he said. "I'll keep him out of sight and out of trouble." And he looked meaningfully at Chewbacca, who continued to stare sourly out the viewport.

Two hours later the senior Generals of the STF were assembled in the conference room of the Death Star. Terclis drew their attention to a wall-projection showing the three sectors at the base of the Spur of Varpel.

"It is now Position minus approximately forty-two days. Your precise coordination-times are now being set by the Attack OpCen. In twenty-eight days the first Strike Commands will be reaching Position designations, so we can expect that the Rebel forces will have some idea of our presence for about two weeks before we are ready to initiate the Sweep itself. They will not anticipate a fleet of this size, however, nor will they be expecting to confront STF units.

"I estimate they will delay any aggressive action until they feel they have ascertained our full strength, and by the time they realize what is happening, we will have virtually the entire spur sealed off. We shall block the computed passages for safe translite travel to and from the spur with particle mines. The Rebels' only options will then be to either fall back to the uncharted regions of the spur or to attempt to navigate their way through our Sweep. Either way they will be restricted to sublite speed to avoid collision danger, and then it is but a question of time until we complete their envelopment or interception.

"The Sweep will encompass these three subsectors to a depth of approximately forty light-years from their boundaries nearest the spiral arm. Strike Command 14 will set the perimeter towards the galactic nucleus. Commands 34, 67, and 82 will set the others in the standard rotational order.

"Upon arrival in Position you will mine all translite channels of egress from the spur. Activate warning beacons on the spur side of the mined area at the minimum deceleration distance, and on the arm side at the standard distance. The Rebels are not to have any early notice of the mining operations if possible, but neither will I have unnecessary deaths

occur in the channels because of lack of any warnings at all.

“The total diameter of the three subsectors at this point is some 3,600 light-years. The volume of space we will be covering in the Sweep will contain approximately 333,000 stellar systems, of which only two or three percent are life-sustainable. Our entire fleet, therefore, will be covering between six and seven thousand systems. Specific assignments will be based upon size of systems and upon their distribution within Command areas. You will receive final notifications at Position. As you can see, this operation is intended to proceed at extreme speed, which explains the large task organization of Class Thirteens. The speed itself is a weapon; we are to complete both the initial Sweep and the final envelopment before the Rebel forces can effectively react.

“Our only vulnerable time-period will be from Position minus four weeks to Position Zero, when only portions of the entire Strike Fleet will have returned to sublite. Should you learn of any Rebel activity unconnected with our presence during that time interval, disregard it. Should any of your units be discovered by Rebel units, pursue and destroy only if you have reason to think that you can prevent their providing effective warning to their base or bases. Otherwise remain at Position with transmission listening silence.

“At precisely Position Zero you will receive telemetric links detailing your Sweep patterns. Silence may then be broken. Standard procedures will be in effect throughout the operation proper.”

Han Solo listened to this with growing dismay. He now saw clearly how Terclis had achieved his reputation, and he also knew that the odds for the STF Star Destroyers leaving any loopholes for the Rebels to slip through was remote if not nonexistent. Was there any conceivable way he could get word to Luke and Leia? Transmissions would be too slow; they would travel only at the speed of light and would actually be bypassed by the fleet en route. Nor was there a ship which either he or Chewie could hijack to get to the spur ahead of the fleet, and even if a ship were available, it could never outrun a Star Destroyer. Only the *Falcon* had been able to do that.

No, he decided, whatever he could do would have to take place after the fleet - or at least Terclis' Death Star - arrived at Position. Then he must try to get word to Luke. But **what** word, he asked himself. What could Luke, Leia, or Dodonna **possibly** do against this almost unbelievable military force once it had assembled at the base of the spur and had destroyed safe access to the translite channels?

For the Rebels to attempt translite escape other than via the secure channels would mean almost certain death. At velocities faster than light it was impossible to detect sublite obstacles, and even a small meteorite in the path of a ship traveling several thousand times lightspeed would rip it to pieces.

The only alternative to the TLCs was the use of high-powered antimatter beams to literally convert all matter in front of a ship to energy before the ship reached it ... virtually a continuous subnuclear explosion in the path of the vessel. Some of the long-range probe ships were equipped with such devices, Han knew, and he supposed that the Sith Ship also had such a similar projector [otherwise Krel Atlan's intergalactic trip would have been suicidal]. But the older ships of the Rebels certainly didn't have such equipment.

No, he concluded, his only hope lay in his ability to make further use of his supposed identity as Darth Vader. He would be alert for opportunities that might arise, and he would seize them even if it should mean his own life. For he had little doubt of his probable fate should he cripple the operation and then be exposed to Terclis as an imposter.

In the Attack Operations Center of the Death Star, he saw the coordinates for the translite moves being plotted for the fleet. Each Star Destroyer could plot a move on its own, of course, but for an operation of this size it was necessary to align all maneuvers

precisely by the massive positronic computer mounted within the Death Star. An alarm tone sounded, and an electronic voice from the computer said: "It is now Depart Initialize." Solo looked up at the great monitor-screen at the front of the Center and watched in awe as the ships of the giant fleet began a perfectly-aligned exit from their orbit around Hub Four, shooting out into space in what soon became a brilliant pinwheel of white streaks illuminated by the light from the Hub's central star. It was as though the very blackness of space had been displaced by this shimmering spectacle, and even the iron-disciplined STF operations officers paused to stare at the screen. Again Han Solo had to remind himself that what he was looking at was not some sort of celestial ballet, but a foreshadowing of death for those whom he loved. He turned away from the screen and walked disconsolately to the lavish quarters that had been assigned to him.

9. SECRETS

As Han Solo and General Terclis left the Imperial Compound on Hub Four, the Class Six starship carrying Luke Skywalker, Lorin Xanpol, and the two droids settled into a landing pattern above Bralane, a planet about 6,000 light-years into the Spur of Varpel from Tatooine. Bralane was the council's final choice for the new headquarters, and soon Luke had brought the Class Six to a gentle landing on a new runway adjacent to the familiar structures of the base complex. "This ship may not be as quick as the *Falcon*," he remarked to Xanpol, "but it certainly decelerates nicely. I think Han must have taken everything out of the *Falcon* but engines and air, and if he could have figured out how to skip breathing, he'd have probably replaced the air with another ion-drive unit!"

General Dodonna was there to meet them when they disembarked, but there was no sign of Leia. In answer to Luke's query, Dodonna said that she hadn't been feeling well since he had left and was presently resting in her quarters. Something in the General's tone of voice brought the clutch of fear to Luke's heart, and he broke into a run toward the one-time colonial survey building in front of which now flew the standard of Alderaan.

He found Leia in the room that was apparently now her study - fully dressed but lying on a couch by one of the windows. Standing by her was Terene, one of her close friends from Alderaan, who looked up at Luke warningly as he came through the door. "Luke, the Princess is not feeling very well," she said. "Perhaps you'd ..."

Leia shook her head weakly. "No, it's all right, Terene," she said. "It's passing now. I'll be back on my feet in a few minutes." She sat up a bit shakily, reaching for the arm that Luke offered her. He looked worriedly from her to Terene. "What is it - What's happened to you? Have you seen one of the doctors?"

"I'm afraid it's something I haven't told you about, Luke," said Leia, looking at him with a strange sort of agony in her eyes. "There's something the matter with my brain - has been since I was a young girl. All through my childhood I've had periodic comas and spells of dizziness. My father had a team of physicians on Alderaan treating me for it, but now of course they're all dead - and I don't even know what it is. But I think it's getting worse, because I've never had an attack as violent as this one. It's easing up now. Just give me a couple of minutes. Did you find anything that might help us?"

"In fact I did," said Luke, trying to sound cheerful and not doing a very good job of it. "I am now a Jedi, in full Familiarity with the Force. I can now see a great many truths that I could not see before - including one right now. You stay here and rest; I'll tell you all about it later. First there is something I must do." And he kissed her gently, rose to his feet, and walked purposefully from the room.

Moments later Luke Skywalker burst through the entrance of the operations center and called out: "General Dodonna!" There was something in his tone that gave Dodonna pause in the midst of a discussion that he was having with two of his logistics managers, and he came over to Luke. "What is it?" he asked, less irritably than might have been expected of him.

"I want to talk with you in private - now - about Leia," said Luke.

"There is nothing I can tell you about Leia," said Dodonna, then winced slightly as a strange expression came over Luke's face. "I know differently, as you can see," said Luke, not unkindly. "Now I think we'd better take a walk outside and talk about it."

Dodonna stared at him for a moment, then sighed and took him by the arm. "Come on," he said, and the two of them left the center and began to walk slowly away from the command area. Luke glanced sideways at Dodonna. "All right," he said. "Let's have it."

The General didn't meet his eyes. "Do you know anything about the history of Alderaan, Luke?" he asked. When Luke shook his head, he continued: "It was only under the First Chairmanship of Leia's father that peace finally came to Alderaan. Before that, for centuries, it was a planet - a stellar system - engaged in almost continuous civil war. When Viceroy Bail Organa was accepted by all the factions as First Chairman, one of the conditions was that the office become strictly hereditary in order to avoid a renewed outbreak of factional violence following his death.

"Leia was Bail's only child, and he soon saw that her future would be a dark one. By nature she was kind, gentle, and loving - totally unsuited for the savage intrigues of the political role in which she would someday be thrust. In all probability she would become a helpless figurehead under the domination of some powerful warlord or faction - or she would simply be assassinated and the civil wars would resume.

"So Bail made a painful but inevitable decision. He arranged to have his daughter undergo a series of treatments at the hands of skilled Alderaan brain surgeons. Through electric-needle stimulus of her neural systems, she was gradually reconditioned to be harsh, coldly analytical in her evaluations of others, and distrustful of her emotional inclinations. Had the programming been carried to its ultimate conclusion, the original Leia would have vanished altogether - to be replaced by a future queen capable of preserving the uneasy peace that her father had brought to the land. She would have been a heartless, coldly pragmatic creature, but her contribution to the civilization of her people would have been a great one.

"No," he said, seeing the look of growing horror on Luke's face. "Leia's father wasn't a monster or a sadist; he loved his daughter as dearly as any man could. But he could not place her innocence before the existence of the entire civilization. He asked my counsel in his desperation, Luke, and I told him to do what he feared he had to. So if you condemn him, you must also condemn me."

The old General stopped and turned to face Luke, and there was steel in his eyes. "We searched for alternatives and found none. Not one. It was that or her death. The doctors and I were sworn to secrecy, and after the treatments had been completed, the doctors were to have been slain by my order. Probably Bail would then have had me killed as well."

Luke looked at Dodonna, his expression a mixture of anger and incredulity. Finally he said quietly, "And what now?"

"Now she is going to die, Luke," said the General softly. "When the treatments were interrupted, her brain began to suffer internal damage due to the irregular neural paths that had been established. Alderaan is gone; her father is dead; the medical knowledge capable of controlling the process has vanished. You have seen the symptoms already - first the aggressiveness, the almost violent rejection of affection, and now the seizures and blackouts ... She would probably be dead now if it hadn't been for you. The original Leia wants to live."

Luke saw tears in the old man's eyes. He gripped his hand awkwardly. "In your place," he said, slowly but deliberately, "I would have made the same decisions. Life can be harsh, and love is a luxury. Often at so great a price. Thank you for being honest with me. I could not have used the Force further on you."

"There is one more thing you should know," said the General. "The RSF officer who suggested the operations to Bail ..."

"What about him?" said Luke.

"His name was Colonel Darth Vader."

“Darth Vader!” said Luke, shaking his head. “Is there **any** misery in this galaxy in which he doesn’t play a part? What was he doing on Alderaan?”

“He was a Senatorial Legate,” replied Dodonna, “sent to mediate among the warring clans. He negotiated the treaty creating the Organa monarchy.”

“Then why ..?”

“I told him about the danger facing Leia after her father’s death. I told him about the electronic stimulation capabilities of our brain surgeons. He went to Bail and insisted that it be done. Bail had to obey; he could not risk Senatorial retaliation for a refusal.”

“Does Leia know?” asked Luke. And then: “What is it, Jan?”

General Dodonna looked pained. “No, she doesn’t. It would have destroyed her if she had. She was in love with him, Luke.”

“In love with ... Oh, **no**, Jan!”

“Luke, listen to me,” said the General. “It’s a thing of the distant past; do you understand? After years of mental and emotional agony, she’s found you - and you **cannot** tell her that you know about this.”

Luke looked at the old warrior for a long moment, then sighed. “No, I guess I’d better not - at least not right now. Let’s go back and ...”

He stopped suddenly. “Wait just a minute.” And then: “**Lorin!** We must get to Lorin Xanpol - **right now!** Come on!” And, followed by the General, he made for the main complex, where he soon located the Pantehnikon engaged in conversation with two of the Y-Wing pilots. He grabbed him by the arm and drew him to one side.

“Lorin,” he said. “That genetic pattern machine - the one that reconstituted Darth Vader’s molecular structure. You said it reconstructed his original genetic pattern, correcting any injuries that might have been done to the body structure by non-genetic injury. Is that right?”

“Yes, that’s right,” said Xanpol. “It eliminated the damage done to the original Darth Vader by the poisonous fields of the planet, even though he was already suffering from the effects of those fields when the G-pattern was made. He said it was originally designed by the Clones for their -”

“Later,” said Luke. “First come with me. This way. You and I and Dodonna are going to have a talk with Leia.”

In her quarters Leia Organa listened to Dodonna’s account of what had been done to her first with disbelief, then with horror, and finally with a sort of resignation. “So that explains it,” she said when the General had finished. “I’m sorry, Luke. I didn’t want to be this way, but it just - it just -” And then tears began to well up in her eyes; but suddenly, as the company looked at her, it was as though she were jolted by an electric shock. The emotional expression was gone as though it had never been there, and Leia staggered and almost fell to the floor before Xanpol managed to catch her. She looked up at them dully, painfully. “So now I am going to die?”

“Wrong,” said Luke. “So now you and Lorin are going to get in the fastest thing we can find around here and go to the Planet of Sith. There’s a machine there that can reconstitute your cerebral structure from your basic genetic patterns. No, I don’t know if it’s safe, and I don’t know if it’s going to work. But it’s the **only** chance you’ve - **we’ve** - got. Jan, have we got a ship with some guts to it? That Class Six can’t outrun Artoo.”

General Dodonna gave orders into the comphone he carried on his belt, and by the time the group arrived at the docks the final fuel mixtures were being fed into a Class Nine long-range probe ship bearing ISF markings.

“Wait a minute,” said Dodonna and guided them to the nose of the sleek starship. He pointed at a strange-looking apparatus mounted there. It looked like nothing so much as a

large sonic dish. "You won't have seen one of these before," said the General rather proudly. "There are only a few of them in the entire Empire, and I suspect that the ISF is rather dismayed that we pinched this one from them. It's an Antimatter Projector, otherwise known as an AMP. What it means is that you won't have to stick to the charted translite channels to get to the Planet of the Sith, because when you switch this baby on, it will obliterate anything in your path.

"Just don't activate it until you're pointed away from Bralane, or you'll reverse history. Because what this is is essentially a scaled-down version of the large AMP that was mounted on the Death Star to destroy entire planets. It should also allow you to pass through that lightning-belt safely. Let's go inside the ship and I'll brief you on the control mechanism ..."

Within an hour Lorin Xanpol and Leia Organa were far from the base, heading down one of the translite channels towards the base of the spur. "Can't get bearings across the interspiral gap from here," said Xanpol. "We'll have to get to the main arm to make an accurate triangulation. Hey, what's that?" The viewport had suddenly been bathed in a wave of red light, then another, and then another in rapid succession. "I know what that is," said Leia. "That's a channel warning beacon. Something's obstructing the passage up ahead. Better hit the brakes. It's probably a disabled ship that they haven't been able to get out of the way. Or a meteor storm. Common enough."

Xanpol reversed thrust and brought the Class Nine smoothly down to sublite. As dimensional space came back into focus, he and Leia looked out the viewport to see what the problem might be. And there it was - a particle mine squarely in the middle of the channel, flooding it with what appeared to be merely a fluorescent green fog. But Leia knew that the "fog" was actually composed of small, almost microscopic particles of matter. Harmless enough to a ship flying at sublite, they would become instantly deadly to one impacting them at several thousand times light-speed. "That's a mine," said Leia to Xanpol, "and that means that somebody set it, and that means that we can probably expect company any moment now. But we can ... Lorin! **Look!**"

The Pantechnikon needed no urging, because what had suddenly appeared in the viewport was a virtual explosion of Star Destroyers - one of the first waves of the STF fleet. As the two Rebels watched from their small craft, more and more of the great warships phased down to sublite and flashed into sight before them. Evidently they were coming down the same channel from the spiral arm, swerving off just before reaching the mine. "We'd better get back and warn the base," said Leia. "Something big is happening, and I think the party is in our honor."

"Too late," said Xanpol. "They've got us scanned - See the monitor? Odds are that if we try to run for it, they'll be right down our back before we can get up to translite. I don't know why they haven't gone for us yet - Could be the ISF markings. They may think we're a returning ISF probe, or they may just not be sure enough that we're not to jump us. But they're not trying to call us either. It's just weird.

"Look, Dodonna showed me the recon drones in this bucket - sort of translite torpedoes that are used to get intelligence reports back to headquarters at speeds faster than those of wave-transmission. We'll do our own scan of this, stick a disc of it in one of the drones, and set it for Bralane. It'll get there before we would, anyway."

A few moments later Leia launched the drone, which quickly vanished from sight back along the translite channel. "Oh, oh," said Xanpol from the cockpit. "They saw that, and they didn't like it. Two of them are coming for us."

Leia thought fast. "Lorin, the AMP. Head straight for those ships and get ready to switch it on - but **not** until I tell you. Otherwise we'll draw fire from some of the other

ships. Once these two are out of the way, keep the AMP on and parallel the channel. Not in it - It's full of ships coming this way, and I doubt that thing's designed to handle matter destruction at twice the velocity of a normal translite encounter. Let's go!"

Xanpol ignited the engines of the Class Nine, and it bore straight towards the oncoming Star Destroyers. Leia waited, her hand on the Pantechnikon's shoulder, until the white expanse of the two ships filled almost the entire viewport. "Why haven't they fired at us?" asked Xanpol. "Probably still think we might be ISF," she replied. "There's no other reason we'd be heading straight for them. O.K. - **Now!** All right - Let's get out of here!"

Lorin Xanpol threw the switch that activated the AMP, an opaque substance seemed to radiate forward from the dish at the bow of the starship, and suddenly the two Star Destroyers just seemed to disintegrate in front of them - the fragments of metal glowing and then winking out altogether. He shook himself free from the sight and pushed the acceleration shaft up to its maximum of ten-seven-lite.

It was four hours later, when Xanpol had brought the starship back down to sublite so that its computers could perform the triangulation for the trip across the spiral arm gap, that Leia suffered another attack. She had been sitting beside the Pantechnikon, listening with interest to the story of his conversion to his present form, when suddenly she screamed, clutched at her head, and writhed out of the seat to collapse in convulsions on the floor of the cabin.

When the seizure passed a few moments later, she stared at her companion with exhaustion and defeat in her eyes. "Even if this succeeds," she said bitterly, "what good can it possibly do? What am I supposed to become - a brainless piece of fluff for Luke Skywalker to play with? 'Princess of Alderaan'! I might as well be a cantina-dancer or even a slave! Better that I should die as I am, having at least tasted the power and prerogatives of men!"

Lorin Xanpol helped her gently to her feet. "Have you seen the stars tonight?" he said. "Would you like to go up on 'A' deck and look at them with me?"

"I've seen several billion stars at the very least," she said. "What am I supposed to see this time - one or two that I've missed?" But she went with him as he ascended the small ladder up to the domed observation deck at the top of the starship's hull. And there he took up his harp and sang to her about life and love and the things of great beauty and wonder in the universe. And Leia Organa looked at him, her eyes shining. And when he had finished, she leaned over and kissed him on his black-metal cheek. "Thank you," she said, and then she turned and went back down the ladder.

* * *

Shortly after the last Star Destroyer of the STF fleet lifted out of orbit around Hub Four and disappeared into translite mode, a small starship phased back down to sublite velocity and glided into the scanning perimeter of Hub Three. Darth Vader identified himself by name to the monitor-challenge and specified his destination as the Imperial Complex. There was a brief pause, then the Clearance officer responded: "You are voice-authenticated and cleared for Hub Three entrance pattern. Lock to Port Control channel 89."

As Darth Vader made the necessary instrument settings, there came a second transmission over the monitor, this time from Imperial Complex Control: "Revised to IC channel 2. SubOrb Priority One." Well, thought Darth Vader, it seems that Palpatine is anxious to see me.

Palpatine was anxious to see him, all right. As the Sith Ship eased into the second of the two docks reserved for the Emperor's personal use, Darth Vader saw the tall, white-clad figure of the monarch standing at the entrance to the access-ramp. It was so unusual a

breach of protocol that the Sith Lord unsealed the hatch without going through the usual safety checks. As it rotated out of the way, Palpatine came up the ramp and into the ship. From his expression it was obvious that he was not in a pleasant mood. But he was not expecting to see a Darth Vader freed from his protective armor either. He stared at him as though he had seen a ghost: "Darth Vader! You're - healed! What - No, first I wish to know why you've returned."

The Sith Lord looked at him quizzically. "Returned? From where?"

"From the **fleet**, of course!" snapped the Emperor. "I told you and Tharrud to -" A look of understanding suddenly came over his features. He spun about and dashed for the cockpit, keyed the transmitter to IC Control, and barked, "This is Palpatine. Can you still contact General Terclis?"

After a moment the IC Communications Officer's voice came back: "Sir, we have no further wave-contact with any units of the fleet. They've all gone to translite. Would you like a courier ship alerted?"

"Yes - No," said Palpatine. "That will be all." He flicked off the transmitter and turned round to face Darth Vader. "It seems there are two of you. And, since I can see your face and could not see that of your double, I am assuming he is the imposter. Do you remember the shan'qaa you killed when you were a boy on Kemset?"

"I didn't kill it," said Darth Vader. "**You** did - and saved my life in the process. I expect you have regretted doing so more than once since that time."

"I'll answer that when and if we solve **this** particular problem," said Palpatine grimly. "Do you know who is impersonating you and why?"

"I do not," replied the Sith Lord. "In fact the Darth Vader that you knew is dead - slain by Leia Organa. I am a computer-created genetic double, constructed from a gene-pattern imaged some two years ago. Therefore I have no first-hand knowledge of any contact you may have had with me since that time. And no idea who would find it either possible or rewarding to assume my identity."

"In that case," said the Emperor, "I'm going to tell you what General Terclis - and your impersonator - are engaged in right now. And then you are to go after them and get to Terclis' Death Star before the imposter has a chance to do whatever he may be planning to do."

Twenty minutes later Palpatine had finished recounting the instructions he had given at the Hub Four meeting. "There is of course a discwrite of Terclis' own operations order on file in my command center. I shall have a print transmitted to you while you are still in sublite mode during your exit from Hub Three. Any questions?"

"No," said Darth Vader. "It seems that Leia Organa and her young friend Luke have been rather adroit at pursuing what tasks Obi-wan has set for them. But I doubt that Tharrud Terclis will have much of a problem with them, just as I doubt he will be fooled by a false Darth Vader for very long."

The Emperor rose to his feet and turned towards the hatch. But at the entrance he paused and looked over his shoulder at the Sith Lord. "What did you say the name of Organa's friend was?"

"Luke, I believe it is - Luke Skywalker. At first I wondered if he had been related to Eldan, but he had no -"

It was as if the Galactic Emperor had been stabbed with a dagger. "**Luke Skywalker!**" he interrupted in a strangled, horrified voice. Then: "Kenobi! **Now** I see it! And I **asked** him to do it!" He took a step back towards Darth Vader, his face a frozen mask of desperation. He said: "There is **no** such person as 'Luke Skywalker'. His true name is Lucas Palpatine, and he is my son."

Seeing Darth Vader's astonishment, he smiled bitterly at him and continued: "When I finally decided that I would attempt to replace the old Republic with an imperial monarchy, I swore that I would not pass the throne to a successor undeserving of such a trust. I took my young son to the Sophrex of the Jedi in secret. I said: 'Test Lucas in such a way that I shall know him worthy to be the next Galactic Emperor. And if he should fail the test, let him die that another may take his place.'

"Kenobi agreed, on condition that he would assume guardianship of the boy and that he alone would know the nature of the test. He departed from the Citadel - He correctly assumed that your desertion from the Starforce would be thought the reason - and took Lucas to the planet of Tatooine. He brought him to Eldan Skywalker's brother and his wife there, telling them that he was their orphaned nephew. By Force-suggestion he made Lucas forget his early childhood here at the Hub; he would recall it only if he passed the test.

"And **this** is his test! A contest of his Will against that of the present Emperor and the greatest forces at his command. If he triumphs, then he is truly deserving of the throne himself. And if he fails, I myself will have been his executioner."

"You may yet have underestimated Obi-wan," said Darth Vader. "He is aware that there are other players in this drama, not the least meddlesome of whom happens to be myself. There are other ways that your son may pass the test, I think, depending upon the worthiness of others to aid him in his destiny. Obi-wan is not just testing Lucas - He is testing the Imperial system itself. If an Emperor - or future Emperor - fails, then the Empire has failed. It is, after all, the measure of the Emperor.

"So now I think I had best be on my way. If I am going to pass **my** particular part of Obi-wan's test, I had better get to Lucas before he runs head-on into - did you say four thousand? - Star Destroyers, not to mention another of those unpleasant Death Stars. And if I ever manage to track down my revered teacher, remind me to have words with him about his enthusiasm for making my life - I suppose I should now say 'lives' - exciting. He could have given Lucas a more convenient alias than that of the son of Eldan Skywalker!"

"Go," said Palpatine. "And may the Force be with you!"

10. BREAKTHROUGH

The scanner supervisor looked over the shoulder of the screen operator and said, "I've never seen anything like it either. I think I'd better get Harsel." When General Harsel arrived and looked at the pulse-pattern on the screen, he said, "That's a translite drone signal. It's actually projected behind the oncoming drone so that it can be slowed to an intelligible wavelength. Trace its vector and you'll find out where the drone itself has landed. If you're just getting the signal now, the drone's probably been sitting somewhere on Bralane for several hours at least."

A vertilift soon returned with the drone, which had parachuted to a site not too far from the Rebel base. The senior staff had been alerted to the discovery, and all of them were on hand as one of Harsel's assistants gingerly pried open the message capsule. Inside was a single electromagnetic disc, which Harsel passed to a programmer for print-out. Moments later the result - a scan-pattern - was in the General's hands. He looked at it, looked again more carefully, and whistled softly. Then he passed it to Dodonna. "Look at that, will you, Jan?"

"What is it?" said Luke Skywalker, peering at the pattern in Dodonna's hands. "What it is," said Dodonna, "is at least one or two hundred starships - big ones, probably Star Destroyers - emerging from a single translite channel. Must be the same one that the Princess and your electronic friend went down. Looks like they shot this scan and then sent it back to warn us."

"But if they were close enough to get a scan like this," said Luke, "they must have been right in the **middle** of all of those ships."

"I'm afraid you're right," said Dodonna. "And I'm also afraid that means that they've probably been either captured or killed. Let's hope it's the former. But right now we'd better make some use of what they managed to send us. Tix, what's your evaluation?"

General Harsel said: "That many Class Thirteens wouldn't be coming down a single channel under normal strike or search procedures. They would be spread out equally across a number of channels. If we assume that this group is representative of others in the other channels leading into this spur, then that would be about ..." - he did a quick calculation on a statbank - "about thirty-five to forty-five hundred ships!"

A startled murmur went around the assemblage, impatiently quelled by Dodonna. "Anything else?" he said. "Yes, I'm afraid so," said Harsel, projecting the scan onto a light-matrix display. "See this formation? Too tight for the ISF and not a single ship out. Those are **STF** ships. All of them. And if a single formation is solid STF rather than a mixture of ISF and STF, then the **whole fleet** is probably STF. And for an operation of this size, that means only one person could be in command."

"Tharrud Terclis!" said Dodonna through clenched teeth. "Tix, get your people moving. I want to know our options. Thirty minutes from now in the conference room."

The options as presented during the meeting boiled down to two. "Either we attempt to exfiltrate the spur at sublite, avoiding the mapped channels altogether, or we go more deeply into the spur at translite," said Harsel. "Engaging such a force as this is, of course, out of the question."

"If we exfiltrate," said Dodonna, "we lose the confidence of the systems in the spur whom we have already been able to attract as allies. And at sublite speed I doubt that we could escape the linkscans of a fleet that size. As for retreating further into the spur - yes, we could do that. But we'd be cutting our supply lines. What about that, Belqaron?"

“A month, give or take a couple of weeks,” said General Belqaron. “Fuel and atmosphere aren’t the problem; it’s carbon-cycle food that’s going to be difficult to acquire further into the spur. The carbon-centered colonies are almost all at the base of the spur. If you decide to retreat, then you’d better be prepared to raid some of the colonial processing-centers in a hurry. And I said ‘raid’, because they would never sell or give us the quantities we’d need for even four or five months of evasion.”

“Just a minute,” said Luke Skywalker, who had been listening to all of this with growing irritation. “You make it sound as though all we can do is run - either through the fleet or away from it. Are you saying that all our own forces are good for is to attack convoys and raid isolated outposts? That when the odds aren’t in our favor, the only thing we can do is turn tail and hide?”

Dodonna’s face flushed. “Courage is one thing,” he said evenly, “and foolishness another. We have taken risks before, and we will take them again when they seem justified. But to contemplate any sort of direct action against an STF fleet of this size with our present resources would be sheer madness.

“We are not talking about a single Death Star commanded by a power-crazed politician like Tarkin; we are talking about a fleet commanded by a master strategist. I knew Terclis when he was still one of the RSF Generals, and I know what he is capable of doing. He has also thought through the same options we are now considering, since in his operations plan he probably elected to leave them for us. **That** is the sort of man we are facing.”

Luke smiled just as evenly back at Dodonna. “Is this General Terclis a Jedi?” he asked. When Dodonna shook his head, he continued: “We succeeded against the Death Star. Why? I’ll **tell** you why. Not because we calculated the odds and found them favorable, or because I got lucky with a proton torpedo, or because the ghost of Ben Kenobi started talking to me up there. We succeeded because we did something that the master strategists who conceived and built that Death Star never expected an enemy to do. We didn’t attack it with bad odds - we attacked it in a way that could not be **measured** in odds. And **that’s** why we were able to blow it to bits.

“Now I know what you’re saying, Jan, and I’ve had enough social engagements with Stormtroopers to know what sort of person this Terclis must be if he’s the one who got them together. And if he were also a Jedi - in which case he would also have considered the ‘impossible’ alternatives - then I might agree with you that we’ve had it. But, for all his strategic skill, there is that in him which spurns the Jedi philosophy and which sees situations only in practical, logical terms. And Jedi - **we** Jedi - have a habit of doing the ‘impossible’. Just what have we got right now in terms of a fleet?”

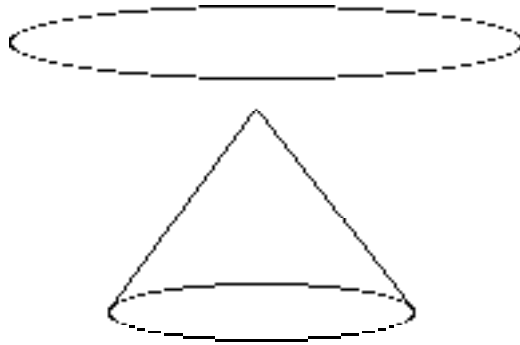
“Six hundred and thirty-eight starships,” said General Harsel, “of which eighty are the old Class Seven Destroyers we took from that ISF depot two months back, about four hundred are merchants in various stages of combat conversion, and the balance are X-Wings and Y-Wings.”

“Tell you what I want to do,” said Luke. “I want to find out where this General Terclis is running his show from, and then I want to get to him with everything we’ve got. If he thinks he’s dazzling us with a lot of ships, then we can dazzle **him** with a lot of ships. Difference being that ours are going to be all together while his are spread all over the spur. By the time he realizes what’s happening, we’ll have taken out the nerve center of his fleet - hopefully including the good General himself - and then broken through his net into the spiral arm. If we can pull it off, we just might save our necks - after having drawn enough Imperial blood so that our allies will think twice about writing us off once the Imperials have gone home.”

“What about it, Tix?” said Dodonna. The operations chief thought for a moment. “Well ... It just might have something to it. Luke’s right; the STF doesn’t play long shots. They estimate the enemy’s moves, and then they decide what they have to do to counter those moves. You’ve seen the scenario they’ve laid out for this little operation - and here we were, like good little laboratory animals, getting ready to do just what we were expected to do. Tell you what: Take a break for another fifteen minutes and let me and my crew do a little more homework. Then I’ll be able to give you some hard data.”

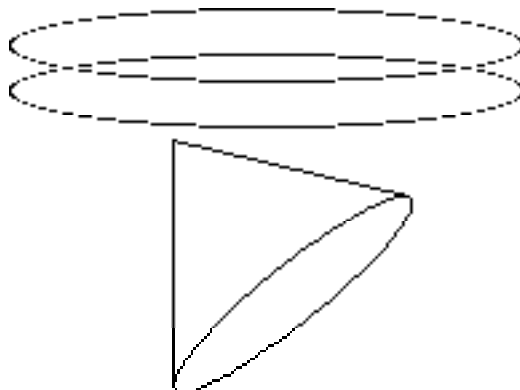
When the Rebel leaders returned a few minutes later, General Harsel had the large display-screen at the end of the room illuminated with a hastily-drawn formation diagram. He had the overhead lights dimmed so that they could all see it better and then walked forward to point to the groups of starship-symbols.

“What you’ve got here is an initial flat plane of ships in a circular pattern. Standard sublite attack distribution. Following it in a second echelon are more ships, flanked back into a cone.”

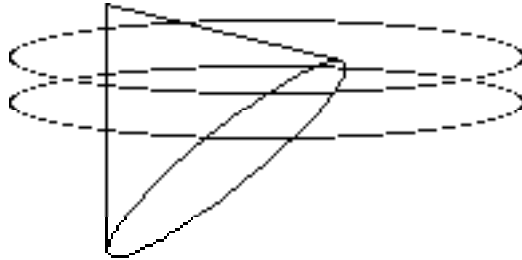


Harsel had the display-computer rotate the diagram slightly, so that the staff could see the ship-distribution in perspective. Then he continued:

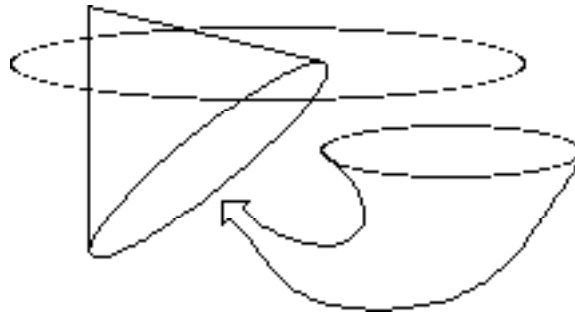
“We can expect the STF units in front of us to detect the approximate size and density of both echelons together. But they shouldn’t be able to detect either the fact that our forces are arrayed in two echelons or the conical formation of the second echelon. I estimate they’ll have enough warning to bring perhaps three times their initial density of ships into attack formation in front of the first echelon before we hit them. After the first echelon closes with the STF units, the second echelon waits for an indication of a weakened point or an inadequately-covered area in the STF scan-pattern. Then the front of the cone inclines toward it like so -”



“- And we punch right through that weakened point:”



“As we widen the penetration, first-echelon units break off their engagements and circle back into the funnel of the second echelon. Thus they will have time to execute damage repairs. Then they will move outwards to increase the density of fire on the surface of the cone:”



“The apex of the cone will head straight for the STF command post - probably a locked-group of Thirteens - and will envelop it while a raiding-team boards it and puts it out of action. I’d say the team will have about two hours to do its stuff before enough other Thirteens arrive on the scene to give us problems. Then we re-form the cone, head for the nearest translite channel, and make for the spiral arm just as fast as we can go. Random dispersion in the arm, then assemble at a basepoint to be designated. Questions?”

Half an hour later, after various timing and maneuver aspects of the breakthrough operation had been examined, General Dodonna took the floor. “All right,” he said. “It’s a go. I want all of the Class Sevens in the first echelon, together with half the merchants and one hundred of the fighters. The second echelon will contain the balance of the ships, with the fighters towards the apex of the cone and the merchants toward the base for flank and rear coverage. I’ll take the first echelon myself. General -”

“- **I’ll** take the second echelon,” interjected Luke meaningfully. Dodonna opened his mouth to say something, then nodded: “As I was about to say, **General** Skywalker will take the second echelon.” An appreciative chuckle went around the room. “Now,” continued Dodonna with a smile of his own, “let’s take up internal deployment of the echelon formations ...”

As it turned out, only five hundred and seventy-two of the Rebel starships could be included in the final strike force. The rest were either too far away from Bralane to return in time for the scheduled initialization or were unserviceable for one mechanical reason or another. Under General Belqaron’s direction everyone pitched in to clear and pre-check as many ships as possible in the next few days. And more than once, as he floated in orbital space working on a cranky drive-unit or shield projection armature, Luke envied the Empire its superb interstellar logistics network.

Finally, after only two last-minute postponements, the Rebel fleet was ready to depart, orbiting Bralane in groups that would facilitate prompt deployment into the two-echelon formation after lift-out from the translite move. The Rebel commanders held a final meeting on board Dodonna's Class Seven.

"Not too hard to figure out where we're headed," said Harsel. "This latest scan pretty well verifies that we're up against what seems to be another Death Star as the STF command center. Right about here," he said, indicating a set of coordinates close to the axis of the spur. "Outside of the slight problem of dealing with its defense armaments, that's a piece of luck, because it's almost certain that General Terclis will be running his show from it. Hasn't got the maneuverability he likes - took up practically an entire TLC en route to the spur, judging from the slack in appearance of Thirteens at the time - but its communications and monitoring systems are far in advance of anything on a Thirteen."

"All the better that we're fighter-heavy in the second echelon," said Luke. "As we found out the last time, those battle stations aren't very well equipped to deal with close-in runs. In fact I'm tempted to have a shot at blowing it up just like the first one."

"Wouldn't count on it," remarked Dodonna. "You can bet that the Hub was exceedingly interested in our ability to destroy that first Death Star, and that it wouldn't field a second one without increasing the High-Speed Defense systems and shielding the port to the central reactor. Remember that Darth Vader survived that attack and has since been in contact with the Hub. Better stick to your original plan of trying to board. Even if the HSD armaments have been augmented, you'll present the minimum target for the shortest amount of time if you head straight for the thing."

"Remember," said Harsel, "Your boarding party is going to have exactly two hours' protection against any Class Thirteens who happen to be in the neighborhood. At the end of that time you've got to be back in the cone, or you'll have had it. You might be able to get by the HSD systems of a Death Star, but you'd never get by three or four Star Destroyers. And if you're not back in two hours, we go. Because after that point the odds will shift so heavily against us due to arriving ships that the cone won't be worth a thing. We can throw some random fire at the Death Star while you're going in, but we're going to have to stay out of its targeting range. Which means that our own volleys will be rather haphazard. And don't count on them for long, because we'll have to shift all of our fires to incoming ships after the first thirty minutes."

"Less than three hours now to lift-out," said Dodonna. "We'd better break this up and get moving." And he added his customary charge: "May the Force be with you!"

* * *

"You're in trouble, all right," said Wingrace to Leia Organa.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you," said Lorin Xanpol with what he felt was remarkable patience. "Her brain was damaged by surgery on Alderaan. She-"

"No, no," said the fire-woman, cocking her head and looking at him. "I heard you the first time you told me about that. Scrambled brains: Hardly the first human I've known to suffer from that malady, though it is the first time I've seen it done deliberately."

"Well, then," said Leia, "What exactly **do** you mean?" She had still not quite recovered from her astonishment at the strange creature hovering in the air before them.

"It's not just you I'm talking about," said Wingrace, "but rather a characteristic of your species in general." She smiled at Leia. "Tell me - in your own words: What is it that makes you as a woman different from a man?"

Disconcerted, Leia said, "The essential differences have to do with reproductive roles and the physiques appropriate to -" She paused as Wingrace shut her eyes and shook her head in annoyance.

“That’s what I mean,” she said. “Chained to your bodies like beasts. Don’t you see - **That’s** what is wrong. You **don’t** need to be beasts, and yet you remain so - because you’re fearful of what might lie beyond.

“So you’d consider yourself a female beast? Because that’s what you’ve just said to me. And in that case you’d be quite correct: Your physical attributes are the determinative characteristics. You oppose yourself to men biologically, and so you and they judge one another biologically. And then when you want something more out of your existence than biology, it isn’t there. So you become bitter and seek to destroy sexual polarity, and what you wind up with are males and females who seek to escape the mystery of their own sex by trying to assimilate characteristics of the other.

“The tragedy is not only what has been done to the tissues of your brain, but also in the toleration - and even encouragement - of a social climate in which that sort of crime could be considered desirable. You’re asking me to treat symptoms and then to re-expose you to the disease which prompted them.”

Wingrace stared at Leia for another moment, then seemed to reach a decision. “All right,” she said. “I’m going to do it.” Her tone implied that she was talking about something more than merely the corrective brain surgery. Xanpol was about to probe further, but suddenly she gestured in the direction of the genetic computer.

“Stand at the center of the cube,” she said to Leia, “and whatever you do, don’t try to leave it until this crystal” - she indicated a translucent, gem-like device atop the control console - “is no longer illuminated. Otherwise you’re liable to be reconfigured in some rather startling - and probably not too terribly flattering - genetic patterns.”

Under Wingrace’s supervision the Pantechnikon once more activated the strange machine, this time beginning with what she explained as a genetic pattern analysis. “It’s not unlike holographic imagery,” she said. “The whole can be reconstructed as an interpolation of several partial impressions. The more coincidental impressions, the more accurate the reconstruction. In Leia’s case the damage to the cerebral cortex is the result of simple cell-destruction, not genetic transmutation, so the molecular recombination should be flawless.

“In a few moments you will begin to feel increasing atmospheric pressure against your body,” said Wingrace to Leia. “The air in the field above the cube will be compressed to sufficient density to allow the machine to read your specific gravity accurately. Then you will feel yourself rigidified in a force-field. Soon thereafter the molecular breakdown and recombination will commence, and at that point you will lose consciousness. When you reawaken, the process will be almost at an end, and when the crystal darkens you may descend from the cube.”

Xanpol looked on with interest as the gene-coded rings of energy began to rise around the unconscious form of the Alderaan princess. Then he was aware of Wingrace’s eyes upon him, and he turned to meet her gaze.

“What you see up there on the cube,” she said, “is a human whom other humans tried to reduce to a beast. But henceforth she will be neither beast nor human.” Evidently sensing the alarm and suspicion in Xanpol’s thoughts, she laughed. “No, I will not alter her identity in the slightest, nor will any harm come to her. Rather I will simply enable her to recognize the divinity in and of her Self. You might say that I will simply accent and strengthen the ‘thing’ that is truly Leia Organa within that physical shell.”

“And who are **you** that you can do such a thing?” said Xanpol.

And then, for the first time, all traces of humor left Wingrace’s face, and, when she spoke again, the sounds of the great machine seemed to fade into the background. “I am not an existential being, Lorin Xanpol. I am a Valkyrie - the aspect of the self that allows it

ultimate knowledge of its dimensions through the contrasts and complements inherent in male and female. It is I who make possible the choice that these beings have to see one another as beasts, humans, or gods. And by this same power I order the expiration of beasts, the death of humans, and the final self-realization of gods - which beasts ignore and which humans think to be death. **That** is who I am.

“Nor am I granting a favor to one undeserving of it,” she said, looking at Leia. “In this woman there has always been the desire and the capability to achieve this highest level of life, but it has been crippled by the twin crimes perpetrated against her. I know the potential of her future, and so I shall free her from both of them - **now**.”

And, as Xanpol watched in astonishment, the figure of Wingrace grew iridescent as the pale fires curling round her form seemed to increase in intensity. Then just as quickly they seemed to cease altogether. For a moment he seemed to see a transparent outline before him - but then it was gone as though it had never been there. He turned to look at Leia.

The glowing rings of light were no longer to be seen, and Leia had awakened, but still she remained poised atop the silver-grey cube. And now, flowing over her body, were the tongues of a thousand fires. She looked up at the Pantechnikon and smiled at him, and for a moment he had the strange feeling that she was in fact Wingrace. But he looked again and decided that he must have been mistaken, for there was no question that this was Princess Leia Organa of Alderaan; in fact it was as though the girl who had ascended the cube a short time earlier was but a shadow of this glorious being. Then the flames faded - Had they really been there at all? - and Leia alighted from the cube and donned the robe that Xanpol held out for her. “Lorin,” she said, “It’s gone. All gone. I can feel it. And there is something else ... something - different. But wonderful. I can feel that too.”

The expressionless features of the Pantechnikon somehow seemed to smile. “Yes, I know. Welcome, Princess Leia.”

Later, as the slim starship soared upwards through the lightning-lashed skies of the Planet of the Sith, Lorin Xanpol climbed again to the observation deck and looked back at the tiny plateau which he thought he could see in the distance. “Wingrace, Valkyrie,” he said quietly. “I am neither beast nor man nor god, but you have wrought a change in me as well. We shall meet again.”

11. END OF THE REBELLION

“No doubt about it,” said the long-range scan officer to Imperial General Terclis. “Something big coming through that particular TLC. Over a hundred starships at least, and probably more like two or three hundred.”

“Estimated time of arrival at the plane of Position?” asked Terclis.

“The radiation we’re getting is too accelerated for artificial breakdown,” said the officer. “That means they’re coming at a minimum of ten-four-lite. Probably not much faster than that if they want to keep integrity when they return to sublite. Depending upon their internal dispersion, the first units should reach Position in about ... twenty to thirty minutes.”

Terclis turned to General Dakkar.²¹ “Get a print of this to all Commands within five hours’ run to any subsector adjacent to that channel at the plane of Position. Tell the Commanders that I want one-third of their units to commence immediate redeployment to those subsectors.” He acknowledged Dakkar’s salute, then turned to Han Solo. “Looks as though we’re going to be attacked,” he said.

“What do you intend to do?” said Solo.

“Increase the density of our units in their vicinity,” said the General. “I will not commit any more Strike Commands unless I have reason to think that this represents the Rebels’ entire fleet. When these units return to sublite, their tactical formation will tell me a great deal about their intentions.”

Twenty minutes later the two watched as the large tactical display hologram in the Death Star’s OpCen blossomed with a field of green lights outlining the Rebels’ sublite formation. Materializing in the same hologram was a somewhat more sparse pattern of red lights representing the STF units’ positions. “Notice the pattern of the Rebel indicators,” said Terclis. “Two echelons - one disc-shaped and the second one a cone. Now why would they do that? I’ll tell you why: It’s a formation suitable for quick change of vector, and it permits the engagement of targets to the sides as well as to the front.

“What they are going to do, my dear Lord Vader, is to try to break through a weak area in our forward positions. The next question is: Why here? Why not at the periphery of the spur, where our ability to summon reinforcements would be substantially reduced?”

“Because they’re not interested in our Star Destroyers at all. They’re interested in **this** Death Star.” He strode over to a nearby VP, punched out the code for the Death Star Commandant, and said, “This is General Terclis. I anticipate that a Rebel starship formation of approximately three to five hundred units will attempt to attack this Death Star within the hour. I suggest you activate your HSD crews immediately.”

It didn’t take the Commandant long to respond. A few seconds after Terclis switched off the VP, the tone-code summoning all of the Death Star’s High-Speed Defense crews to their batteries rang through the massive battle station. Five minutes after that, all batteries had reported Active. General Terclis, however, was still not satisfied.

“They must know we would have taken precautions against the tactics they used on the first Death Star,” he said to Han Solo. “They’ve got something else in mind.” He paced back and forth for a moment. “Of course. The apex of the cone can be narrowed to present the leading units in minimum profile to our HSD crews. Why? So they can come straight at us. They’re going to attempt a boarding. General Dakkar!” The Chief of Staff looked up from one of the status charts across the room and came over to them.

²¹ The name of the STF Chief of Staff is a play on that of Prince [Rajah] Dakkar, the actual name of Jules Verne’s Captain Nemo, as revealed in *The Mysterious Island*.

“They’re going to try to board,” said Terclis. “Get the Guard units deployed to the main landing bays.” He paused. “One more thing. Rotate this battle station so that the AMP is looking right down the throat of that cone. Got it?”

“What’s the AMP?” asked Solo. “Antimatter Projector,” said Terclis. “Designed for use against planets, of course, but in a fan focus it is just as effective against a starship formation of this size. Unless they disperse in a hurry, which I doubt they’ll do, since it’s the cone that gives them their lateral protection against our Thirteens. What I am about to do is to dematerialize several hundred Rebel starships with a single AMP burst.”

Han Solo felt blood rush to his head. He would have to move **now**. Should he kill Terclis? No, Dakkar or someone else would just assume command. His only chance was to get to the AMP and somehow disable it. He said, “Phenomenal. The entire Rebel fleet destroyed without a single Imperial casualty. If you have no objections, I would like to watch the AMP firing sequence.”

“As you wish,” said the General. “I’ll be here until the situation has been resolved.”

* * *

“That’s the signal!” said Luke over his X-Wing communicator. “All elements change vector to two-eight-seven. Here we go!”

* * *

“There they go,” said Terclis to Dakkar. “See the shift in the pattern? Tell the Wing Commanders in those subsectors that I want enough fire so that the Rebels don’t suspect anything abnormal, but I don’t want them to try to stop or disrupt the cone. As soon as it’s through the Position plane, tell them to get away from it.”

* * *

“That’s the Principal Ionization Module, Lord Vader,” said the Stormtrooper Colonel to Han Solo. “It handles the generation of the antiprotons and positrons which comprise the actual burst. The other components of the system serve to accelerate the particles and to synchronize their wave-length for long-range accuracy. Sort of like a laser light made up of anti-matter. When the particles encounter anything of matter, they annihilate one another. Gamma radiation is the result - several hundred times more powerful than nuclear-fusion weapons.”

* * *

“Jan, we’re getting through!” Luke radioed to General Dodonna. “It’s not easy - We’ve had about twenty percent partially disabled and about four percent casualties. But I don’t think the STF are all that much harder to deal with than the ISF units we’ve mixed it with. Score’s pretty well even so far.”

* * *

“What’s the matter, Sir?” said General Dakkar to General Terclis. “Something wrong?”

“Nothing I can put my finger on, Raj,” said Terclis irritably. “I’ve just got a feeling that **something** isn’t right. Something that I noticed but didn’t pay attention to. How soon will the cone be within targeting parameters?”

“Ten minutes now, Sir.”

* * *

“Jan, I don’t like this,” said Luke to Dodonna. “Once we broke through the STF plane, they just fell back and let us go. We’ve got an open path to the Death Star. Maybe they think that its HSD armaments will be enough. But why wouldn’t some of the Star Destroyers chase us anyway?”

* * *

“The AMP,” said Terclis, staring at Dakkar. “The **AMP!** Get me the AMP-Commander on the VP!” And, when the helmet of the commander flashed into sight: “Is Darth Vader there?”

“Yes, General,” said the AMP-Commander. “He asked for a briefing on the system components, and Colonel -”

“Now listen to me carefully,” said Terclis, his voice glacial. “That is **not** Darth Vader; it is someone **impersonating** Darth Vader. I want him stopped before he can do any damage to the AMP. Arrest him if you can, but **kill** him if necessary. Authentication code nine-three-seven. Do you understand?”

“Yes, General!” said the AMP-Commander, and the VP went blank.

“I’m a blind fool, Raj!” said Terclis, now furiously. “Darth Vader asked me what the AMP was! The **real** Darth Vader would have known - He was on the **first** Death Star when they used it against Alderaan!”

* * *

“Almost there,” said Luke to Dodonna. “Almost there! I can already see the dish of the AMP.”

* * *

“Lord Vader, you’re going to have to excuse me for a few minutes,” said the STF Colonel. “We’re going to have to start the primary ignition sequence now.”

“Quite satisfactory, Colonel,” said Han Solo. “Let me see your blaster for a minute - I think those calibration settings are off.”

* * *

“There they are!” said the Stormtrooper Lieutenant to his men as they came round the passageway at a dead run towards the AMP firing unit. He wrenched the external volume control on his helmet to maximum, and his voice rang out: “**Do not move - either of you - or you will be shot instantly!**”

* * *

“The AMP!” said Luke in horror. “**That’s** why no one’s near us! They’re going to hit us with the **AMP!** All elements! Disperse! Disperse! Get **out** of the cone! Get **out** of the cone!”

* * *

“Commence Primary Ignition!” said the AMP-Commander.

* * *

“Now what’s the matter with **those** idiots?” said the Stormtrooper Colonel irritably. “Do they think we’re saboteurs?”

Han Solo shrugged his shoulders, turned slightly, and blew the Principal Ionization Module to bits with the Colonel’s blaster. “Calibration’s fine,” he said, and then the entire tunnel rocked with the force of a tremendous explosion from the AMP systems, and a wave of flame swept over them.

* * *

As his ship approached the Death Star, Darth Vader was surprised to see a sudden flare of fire from the giant AMP dish. He called for docking instructions using first his own identification and then the Emperor’s priority codes, but no answer was forthcoming. He assumed that the accident, whatever it was, had damaged or destroyed Dock Control, and he decided to attempt an emergency landing at one of the main docks looming before him.

He eased the ship toward it and was gliding in for a landing when the blast from a nearby HSD battery tore into the belly of his ship. Now out of control, it careened crazily on into the dock and smashed into the far wall, exploding in a cloud of burning fuel.

Two Stormtroopers fought their way into the flame-filled cockpit amidst the hiss of the dock's extinguishers, and a few moments later they emerged with the unconscious pilot's smoke-blackened figure between them. They had just enough time to carry him to the entrance-passage when the burning ship exploded once more, this time so violently that when the fireball subsided, nothing could be seen of the ship but a few shredded sections of the hull.

The STF Guard Officer looked at Darth Vader. "Must have been assigned to try to infiltrate ahead of the main Rebel force," he said to the two Stormtroopers. "Take him in to the emergency care unit, but don't let him out of your sight, especially if he comes to."

As the two Stormtroopers left with the Sith Lord, the sharp tone of an alarm cut through the noise of the damage control teams in the still-burning dock. It was followed by an open announcement over the address system: "All Guard units in Sections Four through Eighteen - All Guard units in Sections Four through Eighteen - Proceed immediately to Section Nine to repel boarding - Proceed immediately to Section Nine to repel boarding."

The Guard Officer hit the signal code for his team, and when they had all assembled, he directed their attention to an equatorial-level diagram of the Death Star. "Looks like at least some of the Rebel units got through the HSDs to the main bays in Section Nine," he said. "Let's get going."

The Rebel landing at Section Nine - the equatorial bays just below the huge dish of the AMP - had commenced not too differently from Darth Vader's ill-fated approach to Section Twelve. The first thirty-seven fighters - of which thirty were remote-piloted drones positioned by Luke with just this expectation - were caught by HSD bolts as they streaked toward the bays. Soon the area to the front of the bays was filled with floating debris from the destroyed ships, and the HSD batteries' electronic targeting systems were unable to identify the uninjured arrivals. Normally the Death Star's rotation would have cleared the targeting areas, but that rotation had been stopped for the planned firing of the AMP. And so the first X-Wings of Luke's assault group began to break through into the great bays, raking them with fire before touching down to deter an immediate response from the STF Guard teams.

Luke himself was one of the last to land, waiting until he could estimate the distribution of the secured bays. Then he turned his own X-Wing towards one in the approximate center of the group and shot in for a landing.

The first impression he received was of the sudden burst of noise once his fighter sailed in across the atmospheric pressure-field of the bay. Out in space the battle had been eerily silent, with the stricken ships simply disintegrating in symmetrical puffs of light. But here in the bay there was an almost continuous roar from burning equipment and exploding fuel lines, broken only by the shrieks of laser-bolts from blasters and the shouts of the Rebel soldiers. Luke saw that about three dozen of the X-Wings had managed to land; perhaps a quarter of them were on fire themselves.

He opened the canopy of his craft and jackknifed out of it on to the deck of the bay only seconds before a laser-bolt tore a gash across the side of the cockpit. Looks like I'll be hitching a ride out of here, thought Luke, and then he shouted at the men around him: "Let's take the main passage! We've got to back them out of the bay before more of the ships get shot up!" And, at his signal, the raiders charged the yawning tunnel at the rear of the bay amidst a hail of laser-bolts. The two STF teams who had been covering it were forced to draw back, and soon the invaders had the tunnel opening secured. Looking over his shoulder, Luke saw to his satisfaction that some of the converted merchant ships were beginning to arrive in the bay, disgorging scores of additional troops.

Breaking into the smoke-filled control room over the landing bay, Luke dodged a shower of sparks from the short-circuiting console, found the terminal directory, and leafed through it for the code showing the Death Star's internal layout. Finding it, he punched the numbers into the VP and hit the subcode for Section Nine. The diagram he wanted appeared momentarily on the VP, then flickered and went out. But Luke had seen what he wanted to see: They were only two levels below the OpCen. He had guessed that it wouldn't be far away from the AMP. "General Terclis," he said, "prepare to meet General Skywalker!" Then he headed out of the control room and back down the main corridor, which was now swarming with raiders.

Two levels above them General Dakkar said to General Terclis, "They've taken the main corridor out of Bay Nine, and they've managed to secure five other bays as well. We've begun rotation again, so the HSDs should be able to prevent additional ships from landing in about five or ten minutes. Additional Guard teams are moving towards the occupied sections right now. We should be able to halt the Rebel advance within fifteen minutes."

"Status report on the other Rebel ships," said Terclis.

"Loose spherical envelopment of this battle station by three hundred forty units," replied Dakkar, "all out of range of HSD fire. We now have them engaged by a total of ninety-four Class Thirteens, and others are continuing to arrive. Estimated time to total neutralization approximately one hour."

"Status report on the AMP," said Terclis.

"All reactions terminated and the modular units stabilized," said Dakkar. "Twenty-eight personnel under emergency care. No deaths reported. No sign of the individual posing as Darth Vader."

"**Him** I want found," said Terclis, "if we have to dismantle this entire station to do it. Get out a general alert on him."

As General Dakkar passed Terclis' instructions along to the Internal Communications Officer, Han Solo limped painfully along the interconnecting ramps to the equatorial level and then outwards toward the sounds of the fighting. All of the black robes had been seared from his protective armor, and one arm swung uselessly at his side. Turning a corner he came upon a team of Stormtroopers deployed for defense. The STF Captain ran over to him and saluted.

"Lord Vader," he said, "we are expecting Rebel elements to reach this area soon. We will be conducting a delaying action until additional STF teams arrive."

"I understand that, Captain," said Han Solo shakily. "Nevertheless it is necessary that I pass your position to reach the cables controlling power to the AMP. It must be shut off completely before this entire battle station explodes. I will be back before the Rebels -"

Suddenly an address speaker in the corridor wall crackled to life: "Attention all units - Attention all units - The person appearing to be Lord Darth Vader is an imposter - The person appearing to be--"

Could have given me another couple of minutes, thought Han Solo irritably. Whipping up the Colonel's blaster, he fired a bolt at the ceiling above their heads, and a large section of it broke free and collapsed with a crash amidst the startled team. In the moment of confusion Solo lunged for the next bend in the corridor and flung himself around it just as three laser-bolts from the Stormtroopers' weapons tore into the panels beside him. He fell heavily to the floor with a cry of pain, forced himself once more to his feet, and staggered forward clutching his injured arm.

Luke Skywalker dashed on through the maze of steel towards the shafts leading to Terclis' command post, pausing only to beckon to the men following him. They were

proceeding more cautiously, checking out each side-passage to ensure that they would not be cut off, but Luke ran farther and farther ahead of them to refresh his memory of the VP display. And then, as he came through an arched portal into what seemed to be a large hall connecting several main passages, he saw before him a figure that he knew only too well.

“Darth Vader!” he said. “We meet again at last.” And he stopped, drew his lightsaber, and brought the crimson blade flaming to life. “This time you will **not** escape, and you will **not** return to life a **third** time. Now I avenge my father’s murder at your hands.”

The black-armored figure took another step toward him, then sank slowly to its knees. “Luke,” said Han Solo faintly, “I’m not - I’m not Dar-” But the rest of what he said was drowned out by the sounds of the fighting, now coming closer from all directions, and Luke mistook his behavior for fear. “If you refuse to fight as a Jedi, then prepare for your execution,” he said. And he swung the lightsaber high above his head for a lethal blow.

“**Hold!**” a voice rang out from across the hall. “**He** is not Darth Vader - **I** am!” And Luke, lightsaber still poised, spun to see a tall man in a scorched and blackened flight suit standing in one of the entrances to the hall, smiling somewhat ironically at him. “Young man, you **do** have a way of disturbing the tranquillity of the Galactic Empire.”

“If **you** are Darth Vader,” said Luke, “then who is **this**?”

“I’m **Han Solo**, kid,” said the figure before him. “And if you split my skull with that thing, I’ll never blow up another AMP for you again.”

Luke stared at Solo in utter astonishment, then lowered the lightsaber and helped him to his feet. “Han!” he said. “Is it **really** you? But how -?”

“I’m rather curious about that myself,” remarked Darth Vader. “But before you undertake to split my skull with that - ‘thing’, I should like to point out that I have **not** murdered your father. In fact it was he who sent me here to try to save your life. He is very much alive and will no doubt be quite interested in your success at wrecking another of these somewhat expensive battle stations.”

“He’s **alive**?” said Luke, wondering if he could be dreaming all this. “**He** sent **you**? But where-?”

But suddenly the nearby corridors rang with the sound of approaching troops, and then Stormtroopers poured into the hall, quickly covering the three men with their weapons. Then another white-armored figure came forward, and Luke could see the small constellation of stars on his helmet. “Terclis!” he said.

“Yes,” said the General. “We have managed to halt your advance within the Death Star, and in a few moments we shall deal with the Rebel ships remaining in orbit.” He drew his own blaster, and his intentions were not hard for Luke to guess. He and Han Solo were about to die.

“Tharrud, you really will ruin the Emperor’s whole day if you do that,” said Darth Vader. “Permit me to introduce Lucas Palpatine, Crown Prince of the Galactic Empire.”

* * *

It took General Terclis less than ten minutes to call a halt to the Sweep of the Spur of Varpel, Luke over two hours to find and stop all of his assault groups, and General Dodonna three days to get the Rebel fleet into a holding formation alongside the Death Star.

Under the combined supervision of Generals Harsel and Dakkar, joint damage-repair operations were soon underway, and injured personnel from both sides were brought to the Death Star’s elaborate medical processing center. Despite the fury of the combat, almost the only deaths were those of pilots and crews caught in exploding ships; the Stormtroopers’ armor had absorbed most of the impact of the Rebels’ laser-bolts, while

the STF units themselves had not begun a counterattack before Terclis halted them in place. Even so there might have been more serious casualties - particularly on the side of the Rebellion - had the ISF physicians not worked without respite for days, pausing only briefly for sleep-compensation treatments.

Thus it wasn't until a week after the assault that Luke, Han, Terclis, and Darth Vader were able to meet to discuss the strange circumstances that had brought them all together. Now, sitting in Terclis' spacious suite atop the pole of the Death Star, Luke said, "I'm not sure how I feel about being a Galactic Prince, but at least I won't have to worry about being a social handicap for Princess Leia any longer."

"I **am** glad that we didn't bring four thousand starships and a Death Star thirty thousand light-years for no purpose at all," said Tharrud Terclis, and they all laughed. "Speaking of Leia," said Han Solo, "shouldn't she have returned by now? Are you certain that you sent our correct coordinates to Bralane?"

"Quite certain," replied Luke. "She and Lorin should arrive at any time. I only hope," he continued in a tone betraying his anxiety, "that she's all right."

"I can assure you that no harm could have come to her from her exposure to the genetic computer," commented Darth Vader. "How she may have fared in an encounter with my fiery friend Wingrace is another matter. And I certainly would not envy your friend if he managed to get caught between the two of them in a disagreement." He turned towards Han Solo. "You and I must get together for some discussions of particular concern to the two of us," he said, "but first I have a question to put to you: Exactly how long did you remain on the Planet of Sith with Krel Atlan, and how long has it been since you left?"

Solo thought for a moment. "I was on the planet for a little less than a month," he said, "and I left there - it must have been about two to three months before you were reconstituted."

"That's about what I thought," said Darth Vader. "Well, then, unless you've grown terribly fond of intimidating everyone with that formidable exoskeleton, you're welcome to take it off. The atmospheric poisons of the Planet of Sith would not remain permanently in your system unless you had remained there as long a time as I did. Since you had the sense to don the armor before any physical degeneration took place, you should be completely normal by now. Let me run some tests on you in the Radiation Laboratory first, just to be certain. If you will excuse us, gentlemen?"

As Darth Vader and Han Solo left Terclis' quarters, the VP flashed to life; on it was the face of Jan Dodonna. "Communique for His Highness the Crown Prince," he said soberly. "Her Highness Princess Leia of Alderaan begs to present her greetings and hopes that she may be granted an audience."

Luke gave a whoop of joy and grabbed the startled Terclis by both arms. "She's **here**, Tharrud, she's **here**! And I know she's all right, or Jan wouldn't be coming on with all that official stuff. Listen - Anything comes up that I have to worry about, you handle it for me, right? Thanks!" He turned the Imperial General loose and started for the door; then a thought struck him. He bounded back to the VP, where Dodonna's face still reposed. "Jan," he said, "where in this scrap-heap **are** you, anyway?"

"Main bay, equatorial Section Three," said Dodonna. "Shall I tell her you'll receive her?"

"Tell her anything like that," said Luke, "and I'll throw you right out the bay door myself. I'll be right there!" And he dashed out of the suite. "Scrap heap?" said Terclis to the still-swinging door, and then he sighed and turned to gaze out the observation dome at the starry expanse beyond.

XRONOS

1980

1. "A DAY OF SURPRISES"

In the Operations Center of Death Star 12, five years after the Second Star War, Prince Lucas Palpatine stared grimly at the display of colored lights within the transparent globe that towered before him. The sphere represented the volume of space penetrated by the Death Star's tactical scanning apparatus, and the three colors of light diodes represented planetary bodies, the ships of his own fleet, and the strange vessels of the unknown beings who had suddenly arrived from beyond the spiral arm to attack the Empire's exploratory outposts in this sector. All attempts to communicate with the invaders had met with no response, and so Luke had been given command of an Imperial Starforce fleet and sent to the threatened area to attack them before the Empire's outlying civilizations were endangered.

As soon as the ISF fleet deployed from the translite channel into the sector, Luke ordered an exhaustive scan of the periphery nearest the limits of the spiral. He wanted no surprise reinforcements for the foe, nor did he wish to give the invaders a clue to the nature of his own weaponry until he brought it to bear upon them. Too often in the history of the Republic and the Empire had premature engagements resulted in costly - and unnecessary - prolongations of conflict.

Now, however, Luke felt certain that he had succeeded in channeling all of the oddly-geometric ships of the aliens into a single linkscan envelopment in which all of their positions could be fixed by his fleet. Computer analysis of the formation vectors of the enemy ships told him that they could neither outmaneuver nor outrun his new Class 26 Star Destroyers. Nevertheless, before ordering a final approach, Luke paused again to consider whether he had omitted any crucial elements in his tactical forecasts. He decided that he had not, but it occurred to him that it might be wise to slow the pace of the advance slightly to enable ship commanders to make changes in the strike pattern more efficiently if necessary. He turned from the scan-globe to the Fleet Chief of Staff, General Del Ghlaen, and said, "Final order sequence follows: Dimensions pre-set. Fire fields pre-set. Elapse count change to Interval Seven. Acknowledge."

When Ghlaen received verification from the Elapse Operations Officer that all units had made the correction to their timing, he said, "Elapse count Interval Seven acknowledged. Fleet prepared for Initialization."

"Initialize," said Luke, and a split second later the computer voice of the Death Star's Positron-IV echoed, "It is now Operation Initialize." Immediately the green diodes in the scan-globe began to converge on the assortment of red ones. Soon, thought Luke, there would be no more red diodes - and probably fewer green ones. Out there in space a fierce battle might rage; here, deep within the Death Star, it was nothing but a ballet of colored lights. Luke tried to convince himself that he understood the tangible, horrible carnage he had just ordered, but it remained obstinately abstract. He felt a twinge of horror at his own callousness - he who had accepted his Imperial rank with the zest of youthful idealism. And now he was a mass executioner, and the terrible reality of it was that it did not reach him, did not deter him. He wondered momentarily what Ben would think of him, then recalled that Ben had himself been a General in the RSF. Suddenly his attention was drawn back to the scan-globe. The red lights were moving.

The alien ships were not advancing to meet the oncoming fleet, however; they were retreating into a spherical formation of their own. Faster and faster they began to move, darting in and out amongst one another until they resembled nothing so much as a family of electrons in orbit around the nucleus of some gigantic atom. And then, from this

bewildering display, flashes of light - each reaching out towards an incoming Star Destroyer with uncanny precision. There were no answering flashes from the green diodes, and Luke didn't need the P-IV to tell him why. The aliens' movement in and out of their formation would confuse the Star Destroyers' targeting computers, and the irregular velocities and vectors would make visual targeting equally impossible. For their part the alien ships were presented with predictable targets, assuming that their own targeting mechanisms were able to compensate for their maneuvering actions.

Luke glanced at the Chief of Staff. "Either we slow them down or they'll just pick us off at their leisure. Any suggestions?"

"For a pattern that tight," said Ghlaen, "they must have a very tight computer interlock. It would almost certainly require a completely free-space environment for the realignments and the firing azimuths to be fixed without the ships damaging one another. Proton torpedo with a 10-3-M particle warhead into the middle of that circus ought to slow them down a bit."

"Let's get three on the way. Different vectors," said Luke. "That way at least one ought to get through, and we won't have to slow everyone down to try additional launches."

A few moments later three thin streaks of light from the green diodes converged on the shimmering red ball. One streak stopped far short of the mass, another a short distance from the perimeter, but the third disappeared within the glowing display. And suddenly, simultaneously, the red lights halted in place and remained motionless.

Luke ran his fingers through his hair in amazement. "Wow," he said. "I don't know what kind of maneuvering controls they've got in those ships, but we'd sure better get some samples for the H-2 labs. Or we'll have more problems when and if the friends of these characters come looking for them. You can tell the ... Del!"

But Luke didn't have to call the General's attention to what had just happened in the scan-globe. A perfectly-timed barrage of light had suddenly lashed out from the red diodes, and suddenly all of the green indicators - save for that of the Death Star itself in the exact center of the globe - were gone.

The two humans stared at the sphere in shock and disbelief. For a moment Luke clutched at the hope that the display had malfunctioned, but the commotion across the room at the synchronizing consoles confirmed the nightmare. Hundreds, thousands of ISF had just been slain by weapons so powerful that they had penetrated the Empire's most sophisticated defense systems.

And now what of the sector civilizations - what of the entire Empire? thought Luke. Then he set his jaw. There was one thing more he could try. "Get a discwrite of this into a drone and get it off to the 13-J-YL base," he said, aware that his voice was shaking. Not wanting to look back at the scan-globe, he forced himself to do so. The red diodes remained motionless, taunting him.

"All right, Del, we're going in, and we're going to use the AMP on them the moment we get close enough to hit something with it. No tests and no checks, just all the juice we can get through that thing. Move!"

The Chief of Staff stared at him, then got hold of himself. "You heard the man," he said to the officers who had come up to them. "Sublite Max and center the AMP on those ..."

"Patch me through to Renn," interrupted Luke, deliberately now. The next instant the face of the AMP-Commander flashed onto the command viewplate. "Renn," said Luke, "You saw it. They're ahead of us, so all we've got left is the AMP. We're going in as fast as we can; I want you to set the AMP for a diffusion pattern that will reach that whole

pack once we get within burst-range. One shot; I don't want them to see the AMP in action until they're looking down its throat. Don't waste time with the command sequence. As soon as you think you can hit something, crank it up and cut loose. Override safety levels One and Two. If the AMP doesn't do the trick, it won't make much difference whether it melts down. Got it?"

Colonel Renn nodded. "Got it. And if the AMP doesn't work, I'll personally go out there and shoot them one by one. Now turn me over to Vector, Luke, because I'm going to want to control this approach from here. You two just sit back and watch. If they change pattern again, don't bother to call me; I'll be watching for it and I'll handle the realignments myself. Oh, and get about four or five freeze teams near to the AMP section in case this thing blows. Not past the outer walls. Buy me a drink back at base, General?"

"Three," said the Chief of Staff, but the viewplate had already blanked out. In the scan-globe the alien ships remained motionless, but the entire cluster was now moving towards the center of the sphere as the Death Star closed in on it.

"Range any time now," said Luke, and just as he spoke there was a sudden glare of light from across the room - from an external monitor whose camera was positioned near to the dish of the AMP. Then there was a slow, deep vibration in the depths of the Death Star, and the deck on which they stood began to shake. Renn went through level Three, thought Luke, and the AMP's just blown. Probably sent the section out and did the ignition himself. Hope the freeze teams weren't caught too.

Luke looked at General Ghlaen and knew that they had both had the same thought. Then Ghlaen hit the code for the forward monitor - the Death Star was now close enough for telescopic visual - and they stared at the sight before them.

The enemy ships had been completely enveloped by the AMP-burst. Although the burst had been diffused over a wide area, the increased power level kept the entire burst at the same dazzling green brilliance that it would have had at synchronized focus. Nothing, thought Luke, could live through that.

Then the glow from the burst was gone, and - incredibly - the ships were still there, glowing white-hot but otherwise undamaged. Then there was another flash of light on the monitor, this time yellowish-orange, then nothing, and then the entire Operations Center exploded in fire and rending metal as the aliens' weapons tore the Death Star apart. Luke had a momentary glimpse of General Ghlaen's charred and mangled body, and then a sea of red pain washed over his eyes and there was darkness and silence.

* * *

"Not nearly good enough, Prince Lucas," said General Raj Dakkar as he removed the simulation helmet from Luke's head. Luke regained consciousness with a sudden, harsh gasp of breath and saw the Stormtrooper staring down at him, then the grey-steel surroundings of the MindWar simulaboratory. Dakkar continued: "This so-called Empire of ours isn't going to survive the next generation if our future Emperor insists on treating every alien encounter like a bar brawl."²²

He saw that Luke was shaking and regretted the sarcasm. The simulation program incorporated an external memory blackout wave; once under the stimulus of the helmet, a subject had no awareness that the entire environment was imaginary. Dakkar gripped Luke by the arm, pulled him up out of the chair to his feet, forcing him back to reality. "Better?" he asked, less gruffly.

"Yes - I think so," said Luke slowly. "It's just that ..." He shuddered again and fell silent. How could he possibly tell the General what it felt like to die?

²² An adaptation of this scene was used at the beginning of the film *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*.

Dakkar surmised his thoughts. He guided Luke out of the laboratory and into the brightly-lit corridor that led to the main entrance of the building. As they walked down the hall, many passing Stormtroopers and scientists cast curious glances in their direction. It wasn't often that one saw the Crown Prince of the Empire and the STF Chief of Staff in such ordinary surroundings.

"We could have designed that program to be less - realistic," said Dakkar to the young man, "but then it would not place our officers in the sort of stress environments they are likely to encounter in actuality. It would be nothing more than a game, and the only motive for winning games is a desire for victory. In war, as you know, there is little time to think about glory. And many decisions must be made while one is in the grip of raw fear - for others and for oneself."

Luke nodded, remembering the moments of thoroughly-unheroic terror he had experienced more than once during his adventures with the Alderaan Rebellion. He followed the General through the security-field doors, and the two of them descended the white marble steps to the landscaped quadrangle of the MindWar Center. The turquoise-tinted atmosphere of Hub Four gave an almost undersea-like color to the scenery around them.

"So you think that a Stormtrooper under stress will make emotional decisions rather than reasoned ones?" said Luke. "That's the reason for the simulations?"

"No," answered Dakkar, "we deal with that possibility by the simple process of observing Stormtroopers during their basic operational tours and providing compensatory conditioning as necessary. The simulation program you just experienced is used rather to illustrate the characteristics of MindWar as a political and military science.

"A few minutes ago I said to you that your decisions were inadequate, and I was entirely serious. The artificial battle was designed so that it could be won - but only through the deliberate application of MindWar principles.

"Don't be too dismayed; there's more than one ISF General I know who's failed the simulation too. But you are going to have to understand and apply MindWar if you expect to be an effective Emperor some day. This is a big galaxy. We know very little about it. It is not trite to say that a single weak link in our capability to handle aggressive alien intruders could unravel the delicate pattern of trust and confidence that binds the Empire together. A disaster such as yours during the test could have initiated just such a chain reaction."

Luke was annoyed. "What else **could** I have done? I used the tactical approaches from the ISF War College, and there were no slip-ups. The aliens had some sort of maneuvering capability that threw our targetcomps completely out, and they had weapons that went through Class 26 defenses as though they weren't there. Raj, I hit them with the AMP at **three times** its safe level, and it didn't do a **thing**. Was I supposed to go out there and hack at them with my lightsaber or what?"

Dakkar's expression was concealed behind his STF helmet, but there was no mistaking the amusement in his voice. "Let's take it from the beginning. As soon as you thought you had the aliens boxed in, you went for them. Standard ISF approach, perhaps, but in the STF we would first conduct what we term an identification analysis.

"The STF commander places himself in the context of the enemy commander - not just tactically but also from the standpoint of his probable culture and ideology. Why would such a small fleet be 'invading' something as large and complex as the Empire? The very concept of conquest is ridiculous, much for the same reasons that Leia's rebellion was ridiculous. A thirty thousand light-year civilization is virtually impossible to conquer intact. If the central government should be destroyed, the whole thing breaks down into regional

autonomy or outright anarchy. Beings advanced enough to have mastered translite navigation - as your opponents obviously had - would recognize such considerations.

“Nor, as you knew before the encounter, had they done much damage to the outer bases before your fleet arrived on the scene. Why not? Because their interest was not in destroying a few unimportant observation stations but rather in attracting enough attention to themselves so that an Imperial fleet would be sent after them.

“Didn’t it occur to you how cooperative they were in allowing themselves to be enveloped by your linkscan? And how peculiar it was that translite ships such as theirs appeared to be so slow and clumsy at sublite? You should have suspected a trap and opted not to commit all of your units to a single approach pattern for that reason alone.

“You had not seen the enemy weaponry in use before you closed in on the aliens. Another mistake, and a fatal one. You might have sent in a few drones to draw fire. If that didn’t work, then a remote-piloted 26. The Death Star has spectrum-analysis sensors that would have told you enough about the enemy particle beams so that you could have adjusted your ships’ deflective wave-frequencies to counter them.”

Luke, who had been listening to this calm recital with growing dismay, said lamely, “Well, what about the AMP? What went wrong there? How can you adjust something as elemental as an anti-matter projector?”

They had now reached the headquarters building of the MindWar Center. Dakkar paused at the door and looked at Luke. “Had you analyzed the aliens’ particle beams, you would have discovered something very singular. They were **neutronic** in composition, not protonic or electronic. Now what would that have told you?”

Luke stared back at the General, then clenched his teeth. “Of **course!** The need for an interface! The aliens were from an **anti-matter** system, and the only way they could reach us without doing molecular damage to themselves was with a **neutron** beam. They could generate it safely and it would impact on us. And the AMP! Here we were projecting stable atoms of anti-matter at them ... probably bothered them about as much as a comet-tail! And all we would have had to do was to reverse the polarity on the central ionization unit!”

The General motioned Luke inside, and they proceeded down the central corridor. “I don’t want you to misunderstand the point of this, Prince Lucas. The program is not just a technological exercise. MindWar is the art of seeing a conflict objectively and of manipulating all actors within it to a desired long-range symbiosis. Your successful handling of the situation would not have been judged simply by your blowing the enemy fleet to bits. According to MindWar you should have taken steps to halt the incident in place and learn enough about the aliens to form an estimate of their civilization’s probable future relationship with the Empire. Only then would you have been in a position to decide upon truce, a simple repulsion engagement, or - if necessary - thorough extermination.”

“Did you go through all that when you were hunting the rebellion in the Spur of Varpel?” asked Luke with transparent innocence. “Young fox!” said Dakkar. “You’re not as foolish as you look. Of course not. Too many random factors - a dozen different sub-command structures, a task organization with one of every kind of ship built during the last three hundred years, and a leadership collective consisting of a maniac princess, a Wookiee, two droids, a Pantehnikon, and not one but **two** Darth Vaders. To say nothing of a farm-boy with a penchant for ruining Death Stars. But I seriously doubt that we will run into anything that unpredictable in the future. At least I certainly **hope** not, or you will need at least two Imperial Generals to deal with it!”

Luke laughed. “Anytime it gets too much for the STF, Raj, Chewbacca has volunteered to help you out.” “Thank you, Prince Lucas,” said Dakkar smoothly. “The

STF will try to manage without him. But it is reassuring just the same. Here's the Hall; I will see you again, perhaps, after what is now to come."

Suddenly, oddly, Dakkar's tone had turned cold and almost indifferent. Luke wondered whether to comment, but the moment for doing so passed. He nodded briefly to the Chief of Staff, then turned and entered the Great Hall with the other graduating STF cadets.

Only a few times before had Luke been in the Great Hall; it was never used for lectures or classes - only for the most ceremonial of proceedings. Certainly, he mused, it was a thing diametrically opposed to the warm, rich amphitheater under the sunlit dome of the Citadel of the Jedi. The Great Hall was rectangular; its stone walls rose to a height so great that the vertical lights formed columns of their own before them. A temple of ice, thought Luke, as he took his place among the other cadets near the front of the Hall.

There was no stage; only a raised dais of the same white stone flanked by the banners of the Empire and the STF. The cadet to Luke's left nudged him and pointed; Luke saw that the dais bore a third standard: a pentagon of silver stars against a black trapezoid. Imperial General Tharrud Terclis, it was evident, was going to address them.

Suddenly hidden trumpets burst into the Stormtrooper Force March, and rays of red and white light flashed on, framing the titanic black/grey/white MW emblem above the dais. The cadets jumped to their feet, their wrists striking their chests in the STF salute, and then the armor-clad figure of Tharrud Terclis walked out on to the dais.

Luke could never see the Imperial General without mixed feelings. He respected his expertise, admired the way he had conceived and molded the STF into the most efficient and deadly force in the galaxy. Yet, like so many others, Luke could not understand what it was that drove Terclis to be what he was. There was nothing of the Jedi in him, yet it was plain to see that he was another breed apart; an ultra-alien being in this universe of aliens. Perhaps now, thought the Crown Prince, he would learn the secret of Tharrud Terclis. He listened attentively as the Imperial General began to speak:

My young warriors:

In a few minutes you will enter into the Place of Honor where, one by one, you will learn whether or not you are fitted to swear the oath which will bind you to the Imperial Stormtrooper Force forever.

For five years you have been preparing for this moment. You have mastered the techniques of PolWar and Intersystem Relations, of translite navigation and combat, as well as a host of other subjects too numerous to mention. Your studies have encompassed every area of knowledge and have provided you with the most advanced preparation available to any being in the known galaxy. Though you were carefully selected for this training, many who began with you are not here today.

In the process of your training here, you have sharpened to a keen edge certain qualities: unusual powers of observation and memory; a degree of patience and persistence unknown among the masses of men; and, above all, the ability to clear each problem given you of its accidental elements - to arrive quickly at its essentials. Here you have also learned courage and honor, for these are the marks of all true warriors.

Yet for all of this you may only have become excellent warriors, a credit to the Stormtrooper Force, but **not** graduates of this Academy; for there is more that you must know. You must know how you will be **Mind Warriors**.

What have you learned of the Universe you will soon be roaming freely? That it is a million-billion parts? That it stands against itself? That it sleeps and wakens and dies? I tell you to learn this: It is **One**.

Have you remembered your yesterdays and dreamed your tomorrows? Thought and wearied of thought? Admired and despised? You have been mistaken: They are **One**.

Have you seen the beast and felt the god? Were you master, or slave? Did you see great empires rise and fall? No matter, for they are **One**.

The Oneness of the Universe is found in your **knowing** of it and in the corners of your mind where knowing is most at home. Knowing and the known are One, indivisible, inalienable. The true knower labors not, but lets the known become him.

What is a god? It is only a shadowy image in our dreams of what we might be if we knew the Universe. Let me teach to you that you **will** be gods if only you will labor not against the Universe, but will know it as it is to be known.

How may you do this? Dismiss from your memories the fear of death, for it stands in your way. The living is in the dead and the dead is in the living, and they are **One**. The Universe does not notice a distinction between life and death, but is forever exchanging its colors and textures to become another and to seem fixed and inviolate. You shall see in number what the Universe is not. And what is in a number but the fear of death?

Dismiss also from your imagination any lingering hope that you may resist the pulsing life and death and Oneness which is the Universe. The ages are filled with the howling ghosts of the fools who have tried. Were your resistance to succeed, what would be the result? You would obliterate your own being, as it is at one with **One**. For you are One, and at One, and of One. But your resistance will not succeed.

And how shall this teaching change you? How may this final instruction make you a Mind Warrior?

It will give you eyes to see the weakness of your enemy, for he cannot distinguish the essential from the accidental. He must depend upon his own will; that is to say, he must depend upon his vacant hope to be what he may not be. This hope, I teach you, rests in the heart of your enemies. They despise you because you have no hope; but you will be victorious over them, and they shall be defeated. You will know them, and you will know your time. You will know yourselves and when your time is not. You will be alone, and they will be in hosts; but **you** will know, and they will **not** know. They will be feverish and will think of their fever as a virtue, but you will be cold and will **know**. They will hate you, but you will hate not, for you will **know**. They will pray to pull you down; but you will **not** pray, and you will **not** be pulled down.

You will look down into the minds of your enemies and you will find there the hope which they have lodged there. You will measure their hope against their power. They will have power, for their hope is but a part, and they are One also. But their power will avail them not, for you will **not** attack their power, which is One; but you will attack their **hope**, which is **not** One. In this you will defeat them by knowing them and by knowing their wills and by making the error which is their wills cause their defeat. And you shall know their errors even before they may be committed, because you will know how they are not at One with **One**.

I teach you that it is **One**, and that the One is a thought, and that you are thinking that thought. Henceforth you may not see as other men see, nor hear as they hear, if you are thinking the thought that it is **One**. You must be a riddle to men and a danger, but you may not be of them any longer.

And whom do you serve? We are warriors of the Empire, for it is the time of the Empire and not another time yet to be. And the Empire is making the Universe One in its way, for it is time to make the Universe One. You will, therefore, serve the Empire.

Now you will each proceed alone into the Place of Honor. As you pass within, you will find two doors. On each door you will see a sigil, unbeknownst to you before this time of choice. Behind one door is the Oath Scroll and the Trapezoidal Altar. Behind the other, the Universe in which you once lived. He who selects the latter door may never return to this Hall.

In the sigil on the first door is the knowledge of the One which leads to the path of MindWar. It is the sign of overgoing and bridging and seeing. In the other sign, however, there is hope. If you have understood these final instructions which I have spoken, you will select the first door because you will recognize the sign. If you have not understood, you will select the second door because you will be drawn to its sigil. When you have opened one door, the other will be forever sealed to you, so choose well; but choose as you will choose.

Those who sign the Oath Scroll will dine tonight in the Great Hall and will learn of the company there. Pass through, then, if you may, for I have completed these instructions.”²³

And then he was gone, so abruptly that the stunned cadets could not give the customary salute.

As the cadets tried to assimilate what they had heard, Luke pushed forward, ascended the dais, and threw aside the curtains at its back. He flung open the door behind them, ran down the short flight of stairs behind it, and found himself in a small, stark chamber. Against the far wall were the two doors; there was no sign of Imperial General Terclis.

Luke walked slowly forward, peering through the half-light at the doors. On the first there was, as he had expected, the MW sigil of the STF. On the second - a mirror!

Stillness pervaded the chamber as Luke stood before the doors. He supposed [rightly] that until he had made his choice, the door behind him would not open to admit another cadet. Heedless of his grey cadet armor, he sat down cross-legged on the hard floor and pondered his decision.

He saw clearly as he had not before that the principles of the STF were in no way opposed to the Empire or, for that matter, to its foes. If anything, the STF was indifferent to them except insofar as they offered it an opportunity to exercise its philosophy.

And that philosophy! Not merely the placing of the self in proportionate relation to the rest of the Universe, but a voluntary surrender of it to the inertia of that Universe. Except that Terclis wouldn't call it surrender of the will, thought Luke; he would call it triumph of the will. How thoroughly and how precisely it opposed the Code of the Jedi, which glorified the initiate as a free-willed agent working in harmony with the Universe but not united with it.

And Luke knew what his choice was: If he chose the door of MindWar, he must abandon his initiation as a Jedi. He raised his arms and looked at the STF cadet armor covering them; then his glance fell to the lightsaber at his side. Without hesitation he got to his feet, walked to the door with the mirror, and passed through it - into the presence of - General Dakkar!

The Chief of Staff stood before him with drawn laser pistol; there was no time for Luke to react. He halted, confused and bewildered. Then Dakkar laughed grimly and holstered

²³ General Teclis' speech was written by Colonel Richard L. Sutter, U.S. Army, for this story.

the pistol. He stepped forward, took Luke by an arm, and led him through a final door into the daylight beyond. The young man blinked at the sudden glare, then turned a questioning face to Dakkar.

“If you had chosen the other door, Prince,” remarked the General matter-of-factly, “then I would have killed you.”

Now in full control of himself, Luke started at Dakkar’s words. “Perhaps, then, Raj,” he said equally evenly, “I should now kill **you**.” He drew his lightsaber, and the crimson blade came humming from the handle.

Irritatingly the Chief of Staff remained unperturbed and continued to stroll forward. Around them a few STs paused, looked curiously at them, then returned to their own affairs.

Luke felt even angrier [and a bit ridiculous]. He switched off the lightsaber in annoyance and caught up with Dakkar. “Well?” he said.

“That’s better,” said the old warrior. “Now let’s see how much of what we taught you here remained in that thick skull of yours. You tell me why I would have killed you - and why I finally didn’t have to.”

Then it suddenly became clear to Luke, and he said: “You can’t have a future Emperor who embraces the MindWar principle, can you? You need an Empire being run on rational principles for the STF to be effective within it!”

“Exactly right,” said Dakkar. “Our success depends upon the Universe being ignorant of that principle. If it were sensitive to it, then we would encounter unnatural efforts to guard against us. We would be able to revise our doctrines to compensate for that, but the cost in death and destruction would be vast. Our effectiveness as a military order is determined not merely by the winning of wars, but by the winning of wars with a minimum of disequilibrium to the Universe. Or, to put it more crudely, with a minimum of bloodshed.”²⁴

“But what about the cadets who **don’t** choose to join you?” protested Luke. “Surely some of them select the door with the mirror ...”

“Few do, in fact,” responded Dakkar. “But in their case the fate that awaited you is reversed.”

It took a moment for the Stormtrooper’s words to sink in. Then Luke said, “You mean - you kill them?”

“Yes,” said Dakkar bluntly. “Not to do so would merely release greater death into the Universe.”

Luke was silent for a moment, then said: “Why did my father send me to you for this training? To convince me that such things are just?”

“No. To convince you that there is **no** justice apart from what you **decide**. And your decisions, Luke, will someday guide the entire Empire. Those cadets who choose the second door?” - Dakkar stopped and nodded in the direction of the Great Hall - “They live and die for **you**.” He stabbed a finger against Luke’s chest to emphasize the point.

After a long moment of awkward silence, the Chief of Staff changed the subject. “I seem to recall that Princess Leia Organa was going to meet you here following your - graduation. But there’s been no word of her arrival on Hub-4.”

“No - I forgot to tell you, Raj,” said Luke, “She couldn’t come. She got a last-minute invitation to deliver the Admonition to the Jedi at the new Citadel on H-3.” A thought occurred to him: “Guess that would have kept her, um, out of trouble in case I made the wrong choice, right?”

²⁴ This is an adaptation of Isaac Asimov’s rationale for the Second Foundation in his famous *Foundation* trilogy.

The General nodded uncomfortably, and Luke smiled wryly. “Good choice. I’d hate to see how many big tough STs it took to deal with **her** - Might ruin your ‘invincible’ reputation, even,” he added maliciously. Then he laughed. “Well, the least you can do is let me watch the proceedings in the command room. That way we can see them on the big projector.”

* * *

“Now why do you suppose Darth Vader invited Leia Organa to deliver the Admonition?” enquired Vor Esjæ to Wen Dane²⁵ as the two young Jedi, resplendent in the black and silver robes they were now entitled to wear, strolled through the gardens of the Citadel towards the amphitheater. “I thought they were just barely on speaking terms. For that matter, what could Leia possibly say to the first Jedi to be Recognized since the massacre? Why not invite one of the Councillors, or Prince Lucas - since he’s a Jedi himself - or even Emperor Palpatine?”

Wen shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know any more about it than you do. But I’ve never known Darth Vader to make an undeliberate move. He’s got something in mind, of course.”

“If so, I certainly wish he’d let **me** in on it!” said a voice from behind them. “Sometimes I get the feeling he takes a unique personal pleasure in aggravating me.” Spinning around, the two Jedi found themselves staring into the face of Princess Leia, even more dazzling in the red and gold robes of the Imperial family. “Your Highness,” stammered the embarrassed Vor. “I didn’t, I mean - uh ...”

“Of **course** you did,” said Leia, grinning at him disarmingly, “but there’s nothing wrong with that. And if we don’t stop standing here gawking at one another, we’ll all be late.” She took each one by an arm, and the three proceeded on their way. As they neared the amphitheater, they began to be noticed by other Jedi, and there was some startled whispering as Leia was recognized. The Princess herself appeared to take no notice, but continued talking to Vor and Wen.

“The first I knew of this was this morning at the Palace,” she said, “when Darth Vader called on the viewplate. Asked me just as calmly as you please if I would attend the Recognition. Not a word to the Emperor or anyone else, not even Luke. I thought they were going to be upset when they heard about it, but Palpatine just laughed.

“I talked to Luke - Prince Lucas - by VP; he’s graduating from the MindWar Center today, and I was supposed to meet him there. He warned me not to come here - said he suspected his father and Darth Vader were going to pull something. But of course I couldn’t refuse. All very neat, you see. Now you tell me I’m scheduled to give the Admonition? I might have known it.”

The two Jedi looked at one another in confusion. “I don’t quite know what to say, Princess,” said Wen. “We were all told **months** ago that you would deliver the Admonition.”

“A day of surprises,” said Leia. “Maybe even for Darth Vader when I get my hands on him later. But here we are, and now I suppose I’d better go up front and try to think of something halfway intelligent to say. I will expect the two of you to lead the applause, if only out of sympathy.”

Leia looked at them wryly, then disengaged herself and made her way down through the crowded amphitheater, a lone figure in gold and scarlet amidst the hundreds of Jedi in black and silver. Vor saw her ascend the raised platform beside the rostrum; then the Jedi all rose to their feet as the strains of the Processional thundered forth. And then Darth Vader entered and strode down the aisle towards the rostrum.

²⁵ A cameo appearance in *Andromeda* by Forrest J Ackerman and his wife Wendayne!

There were murmurs, then a startled undercurrent of talk among the Jedi as the realization dawned upon them. For the first time since the Alderaan Rebellion, the Sith Lord was clad in the black armor, helmet, and mask in which he had once cast such a shadow of terror across the entire galaxy. Then all eyes were riveted upon Leia, who stood by the rostrum as though frozen.

Darth Vader ascended the platform, glanced briefly at Leia, and turned to face the new Jedi. Then the familiar voice, hollow and chilling through the breath screen, rang through the amphitheater:

“Jedi, you are hereby Recognized to your high office. From this time you are cast forth into the worlds of the galaxy, to exercise that license which is yours by reason of your Virtue and your Wisdom and your Understanding. Alone you may disregard all laws, all conventions, all standards of what others call morality. You may do these things because you are charged to discern and influence the evolution of life, and so you are also trained in skills necessary to safeguard your own lives. For there will be danger, both from those whom you seek out and perchance from the Empire itself. Your freedom is the freedom to Know, to Dare, to Speak, and to Become. All are perilous; any one may warrant your death. Threaten the stability of established cultures and you will find yourselves Imperial Knights no longer - but hated and hunted outlaws.”

* * *

“What is he **saying**?” said Luke to Raj Dakkar. “He’s practically telling them to go out and stir up trouble. As if we don’t have enough!”

“He’s telling them to go out and stir up a very special sort of trouble - as no one should know better than yourself,” said the General. “But now I think he’s about to introduce his guest.”

“This I **don’t** want to see,” said Luke. “Leia must be livid. Did you see her face when he came in wearing that armor? I thought she was going to have a stroke. I just hope he’s got sense enough not to provoke her more, or there’ll be a **second** Jedi massacre.”

Terclis motioned for silence. “Look,” he said.

* * *

“The speaker of the Admonition,” continued Darth Vader tonelessly, “has good reason to appreciate my warning. She herself was both condemned outlaw and a would-be executioner of a Jedi whom she loathed and feared as a monster of evil. She left behind her a legacy of blood and death, all the more terrible because she never once made a reasoned decision to do so. She spoke words of encouragement and exhortation, and worlds fought, screamed, died. And yet she failed in her Rebellion.”

The black mask turned to face Leia, now pale as ice and seemingly in a state of shock. “And now, your Highness, will these be your **new** victims? Or perhaps your **saviors**? Choose well your words to them, because it is unlikely you will ever see them again. Do not think that you will do them a favor by exhorting them to foolish gallantry. You aren’t on any mercy mission this time.”

* * *

“I **can’t** believe he **said** that,” groaned Luke. “Raj, she’s going to **kill** him. Or herself. Or both. Can’t we **do** something? Can’t we get someone **there**?”

“Too late now,” said Dakkar. “Look, she’s going to speak.”

* * *

Leia stepped to the rostrum. She was pale no longer; her eyes blazed with anger and her cheeks were flushed. The amphitheater was deathly still, and Darth Vader stood motionless beside her as though he had been changed to stone. For a fleeting moment Luke was sure she was going to strike him. Then, incredibly, she broke out in a peal of

laughter and threw her arms around the Sith Lord. “Darth Vader!” she said, shaking her head. “Only **you** could be so bold!”²⁶

She turned to face the stunned assemblage. She held up her hands before them, as though they were indeed red with blood. For a moment she seemed to be a spectre, some terrible, crimson goddess demanding a sacrifice. Then the illusion was broken, and she was again the girlish Princess Leia, standing alone and serene before them. Then she spoke in a low, emotion-filled voice that carried throughout the vast assemblage:

How it must feel to be a Jedi! To know so intimately the justice of your decisions, to defend your ideals without the fear, the nightmare that all your efforts only work against you in the great inertia of history - that you will change nothing, and that many will perish for your folly. For Darth Vader is quite right about me, you know.

And how fortunate for the Empire that the Jedi walk among us, freeing us from our mindless obsessions and self-imposed prisons, and guiding us once more to the beauty and nobility of the human spirit. Else should we all be savages, tearing the life from our brothers and sisters and laughing in delight as we did so.

But how fortunate too that you Jedi are so few and so weak. Otherwise, I fear you would free us from the petty tyrannies of the present only to enslave us to the greater and more voracious tyranny of the future.

You have a vision of what mankind ought to be, but that vision always eludes mankind as it is. If we seek it, we must die a little more so that those who come after us may live a little more.

So you are well presented to me by Darth Vader - saviors, victims, executioners. How shall I welcome you to my house? With what Will shall I enter yours?

I who once fought to destroy the Empire now fight to preserve it. The reasons are the same. What has changed, save that I now wear the red and gold of a Princess of the Empire instead of the white of a Princess of Alderaan? The present cries out to me, and I answer as best I can.

But when you - the future - cry out to me, I **cannot** answer. I must abandon you to your **own** journey, whatever it may be.

But beware, Jedi, of the present. If it does not understand you, it may kill you. If it **does** understand you, it **will** kill you. That to which you are dedicated will live just the same, of course, but it will demand a greater sacrifice of mankind to accomplish the Great Work which you did not live to do. All the galaxy will be your enemy; but be wise and adept in your art, and your Order will never be destroyed.²⁷

May the Force be with you.

And Leia turned back to where Darth Vader was still standing, and he knelt before her, and she kissed him gently on the brow of his black helmet. Then the Sith Lord rose, lifted her in his arms, and bore her from the rostrum through the ranks of the Order of the Jedi so that all could see her. And as Darth Vader walked throughout the amphitheater with the Princess, all of the Jedi whom they passed came to their feet and raised their arms above her in the Sign of *Xa*, that was the sacred greeting of their Order. There were tears in Leia’s eyes, but the face of Darth Vader could not be seen.

²⁶ Darth Vader’s last comment to Leia, and her first response to him, here echo their famous first encounter in the film *Star Wars*.

²⁷ This sentence is inspired by Frith’s famous admonition to El-ahrairah in Richard Adams’ *Watership Down*.

2. SECRET PROJECT

As Princess Leia's landspeeder flashed along the high-speed runway from the Citadel of the Jedi to the Imperial Center, a call-signal came through on the viewplate. Answering it, she smiled hesitantly when she saw Luke's face come into focus. "Were you watching?" she said.

There was the glint of pride and respect in Luke's eyes. "Incredible," he said. "Incredible. Raj Dakkar and Tharrud Terclis and I saw the whole thing, and I'm sure Father did too. You told the Jedi more about their true purpose in a few moments than I think they've learned in the past year. They're changed now, and they won't forget. I thought Darth Vader had gone crazy at first, but I guess I should have known better. You're quite a girl, you know that, Leia?"

Leia was somber. "I guess I did get a little angry at first. I thought I had come to grips with all of that. But Tarkin, and the mind-probe, and the destruction of Alderaan. It's left scars, Luke. I see ghosts who tell me that I've betrayed them, that I've sold myself to their murderers."

"That depends," said Luke, "on whether you want to judge Alderaan in isolation or in context. We've been over that before. But **how** have you 'sold yourself'? For **what**? You haven't sacrificed the legacy of your people; you've **preserved** it, made it a part of the living principles of the **entire** galaxy. The next time you see those ghosts, tell them **that** - show them that. Alderaan dead may well have done more for the cause of higher humanity than Alderaan alive could ever have done. That's harsh, Leia, but you know it's true."

"Yes, sometimes I do," she said. "It's horrible to see civilization from a distance, isn't it? It looks like some kind of monstrous disease that perpetuates itself, feeds upon itself."

"I said the same thing to Han once," said Luke. "And he answered that that had been his feeling as well until he had encountered the statue on the Planet of Sith. Then, he said, he saw a promise - or at least a possibility - of something in the future great enough to justify all of the pain and all of the suffering."

Leia's landspeeder curved gently along a branch of the runway, and she could now see the nine gleaming spheres of the new Imperial Center in the distance. She said, "Han becomes evasive when I try to bring up that subject with him. It's almost as though it's something his mind refuses to think about - as you might shut your eyes when staring into a blinding light."

"Speaking of Han," said Luke, "what do you think? Should we have another shot at trying to find out what he's doing?"

Leia grinned. For the last year Han Solo had been spending more and more time in the construction modules on Hub Five, working on some unnamed project. When Luke and Leia had asked him about it, the wily Corellian had merely smiled and said that it was going to be a surprise and should not be discussed until it was completed. "Why not?" she said. "It's about time. In fact he said last week that we were to call him after the ceremony today ... You know, that probably means **he** was in on the scheme too! That -!"

Not on Terclis', I'll bet, thought Luke grimly. Then he chuckled. "Hang on, and I'll try to raise him on a joint call."

Leia's craft now glided to a halt before the Emperor's dock, but she remained seated at the VP. It went blank, then a print-out appeared recording the call-code of the module on H-5 where Han had been working. Suddenly the screen was filled with the familiar visage of a large orange Wookiee. He cocked his head, rumbled a greeting to Luke.

Leia heard Luke's voice: "Chewie, Leia's watching too. Han wanted us to call him. Is he ready to talk yet? You know he's driving us crazy with this secrecy. Tell him it's a crime against the state or something."

"I heard that," came a voice from somewhere behind Chewbacca. "State crime, huh? I'll add it to my collection. You know, Luke, your old man didn't know what he was getting into when he offered to pardon me for all the stuff I did before the Rebellion. I think he's **still** signing releases. Last time I saw him, eighteen more warrants arrived from the Drennos system. You should have seen the smoke."

"If you think **that's** bad," said Luke, "you should have heard him when he saw the bill for repairing that second Death Star we, uh ..."

"Trashed," said Solo. "Well, what's one Death Star more or less. The people here on H-5 were real happy to hear about it. Gave them job security for the next three years patching it back together. Besides I hear that the White Lizard doesn't like Death Stars anyway. Word here has it that he's working on some project of his own to replace them."

"Imperial General Terclis is going to be unhappy with you if you keep calling him that," said Luke. "It's already caught on around the MindWarCen, but I don't think he's tracked down the source yet."

"He'd probably consider it a compliment," replied Solo. "Listen - How soon can you two get here? By UFB, I mean."

"That depends on how far you are from the H-5 beam terminal," said Luke. "I'll have an LS waiting for you," answered the Corellian. "Once you hit the terminal, it will take you about two hours by LS."

"Then make it, oh, four hours. O.K. with you, Leia?"

* * *

Individual travel between the five planets of the Galactic Hub was normally accomplished not by spaceship but by transfer through the large unified-field beams connecting the planets. The sensation, though efficient and safe, was not entirely a pleasant one. Entering a beam gave one the feeling of being sucked into a giant vacuum-pump, and the deceleration baffles at the other end of the beam were equally uncomfortable. But the UFB system made it possible to go from one Hub planet to the next within fifteen minutes to two hours, depending upon the interplanetary distance involved - in any case a mere fraction of the time required for conventional space travel.

Less than a half-hour after their conversation with Han, Luke met Leia at the H-3/4 UFB terminal, and an hour after that they were boarding the waiting landspeeder in front of the H-4/5 terminal.

Now, as the landspeeder shot down the runway towards Han's construction module, the two were speculating on what they would see. "I'm betting it's a new ship," said Luke. "You know - something to replace the *Falcon*."

"But he's got the use of just about any ship in the Empire," said Leia. "including probe ships that are ten times as fast as the *Falcon* - and a lot less dangerous, I might add. I know you think that Han knows what he's doing, but that ship used to give me the creeps every time we went somewhere in it. All that rattling and shaking, and the smoke in the engine access bays every time I was in there. I know you feel sentimental about it, but personally I'm **glad** that Lorin wrecked it before it came apart on its own somewhere with you - **or** me - aboard!"

"You've got to understand Han," said Luke. "With him it's not just a case of having a fast ship. It's got to have something of him in it, which I can describe only as a certain, well, looseness of feel. I've been with him a few times when he's been at the controls of probe ships, and each time he's complained about their having no life to them. 'Just fast,

dumb pieces of steel' he would say. Well, you know what the *Falcon* was like: sort of a broken-in shoe. A **very fast** broken-in shoe."

Leia laughed. "All right, so it's got to be another *Falcon*. So why all the secrecy?"

"I expect we'll find out why in a few more minutes," said Luke. "Look, there's Chewbacca now. Hi, Chewie - Woops! Easy does it; you'll break my arm!"

After the Wookiee had released a somewhat breathless Leia, they saw Han Solo waving at them from an access doorway to a large hanger, into which he then disappeared. They walked over to join him, went through the door and blinked in the sudden darkness. Then a battery of floodlights flashed to life, and the two visitors stared at the sight before them in amazement.

It was, as they had guessed, a starship. But a starship completely unlike anything they had imagined. It was about twice the size of the *Millennium Falcon*. Gleaming white, its needle-nosed, cylindrical fuselage flattened out to the sides into two manta-like wings. Midway along each wing were two of the largest engine housings Luke had ever seen. From the tail protruded five additional exhaust nozzles, and at the front of the two wing-mounted housings Luke could see the dishes of two AMPs of the sort used on the Empire's probe ships. The smooth, white expanse of the main fuselage was interrupted only by a disproportionately large viewport near the nose.

"Like it?" said Han, rubbing his hands together. "Allow me to present the *Millennium Eagle*."

"It's - very nice," said Leia, rather at a loss for words. Luke began to walk slowly around the ship, his eyes shining. Then he came running back to Solo. "Han, it's **fantastic**! Those five IEs! I mean, won't they rip the thing apart? What are you going to do with it - attack neutron stars? And what are those things on the wings?"

"In the tail are five K-80s for sublite use," said Solo smugly. "Blast-synchronized and tuned, of course, and, uh, slightly modified by yours truly. No baffles and wave-screens, for example, so I suppose it'll be a little on the noisy side. But they would have burned out anyway. The heat-to-force ratio on these is about 14:1 as opposed to 6:1 for standard K-80's."

"But a single K-80 will take one of the big cargoships almost up to translite," said Leia. "Even a Death Star needs only three of them. Why **five** - to say nothing of your modifications? Does Palpatine want you to tow the Hub somewhere else or what?"

Han Solo laughed and chucked her under the chin. "No, but I suppose I could just about do it, all right. By the way, nice one-two you gave those Jedi this morning. Ought to keep them from tripping over their feet for awhile. Or over ours."

"No, the K-80s are just to allow me to stretch my legs at sublite the way I like to. But now the big ones - on the wings - those I'm **really** proud of. Those, Your Highness, are PEX-4Cs. The ones that were supposedly just on the drawing board for another decade or so. Too, uh, unstable by ISF standards, and there was a real row in getting the specs from the H-2 labs. But the Emperor made a VP-call about it, and then it was just a question of finding a few frustrated H-5 engineers with enough nerve to build them. With one or two modifications, of course."

"Han," said Luke. "This isn't all that funny. Are you aware that if just **one** of those PEX's should overload, you could kill about half the people on Hub Five from the fusion? I hardly think Father would give you permission to do that."

"Right you are," said Solo. "In fact he told me he'd have my hide all over again if I dared to even switch them on anywhere near a populated system. So I've had to go outside of the arm to test them. Look, let's go for a demonstration ride. Don't worry," he laughed, as they hesitated, "I won't even idle the PEXs. The K-80s will be quite sufficient

today.”

The four of them ascended the boarding ramp.

The interior of the *Eagle* was brightly-lit, simply appointed, and with none of the rather alarming masses of exposed wires and instruments that had overflowed the *Falcon*. There was a small but comfortable lounge area, compartmented living quarters and, as far as Luke could see, no external gun-mounts at all. He presumed that Han had placed all his faith in the AMP units and the vessel's obvious speed.

He went through the door into the cockpit and admired the wide sweep of vision made possible by the oversize viewport. Just behind the two command seats were two additional seats, evidently for passengers, and Chewbacca gestured for each of them to take one.

As they sat down, Luke and Leia noticed that the seating surfaces were like sponges that seemed almost to pull upon their bodies. “They do,” said Han. “Vacuum capillaries. If the seal were any tighter, the seats would start to eat up your clothes and then your skin. The whole point is to eliminate any space between the surfaces of your bodies that are taking the impact of acceleration. Believe it or not - well, you'll see in a few minutes - it will enable you to take about twice to three times the acceleration you're able to stand in non-vacuum seats. My own invention, of course.

“O.K., Chewie, let's go on just one of the 80s until we get free of the H-5 G-field, so that we don't mash these good people flat. On three: One, two, -”

If Leia had entertained the fleeting hope that Solo's use of just one K-80 would mean a gentle take-off, she forgot it the moment the Corellian said “three”. With a deafening roar the *Millennium Eagle* shot forward as though it had been fired from some great gun, and the two passengers were jammed back into their seats. Had it not been for the vacuum feature, Luke was sure, they would both have been severely injured, but Han was right about his invention; they didn't feel the least discomfort.

Then they forgot about the shock of the takeoff as they saw the surface of Hub Five streaming beneath them, then streaks of white that they recognized as clouds, and then the blackness of orbital space. Seconds later all sensation of weight was gone; they had passed beyond the planet's gravitational field.

“Now we can get going,” said Han Solo almost indifferently, and at his signal Chewbacca ignited the other four K-80 engines. There was no noise or even vibration, but the scene through the viewport suddenly changed from dots of stellar light to streaks of light, shooting past the ship in a spectacular river of light.

“This is just below lite,” said Han over his shoulder, “and the K-80s could get us nicely up into translite by themselves. But their efficiency ratio wouldn't be the best, and they'd start having friction problems over about TL-10 or so. What they are good for is this -” and he yanked the control-grips hard over, the river of light took a sharp dodge to the left, and then it resumed its steady streaming by the ship.

“We just turned around,” continued Han, matter-of-factly. “I like a ship to be able to maneuver.” His two passengers looked at each other in astonishment, then saw the streaks of light change back into stars as Chewbacca reversed the K-80 turbines. The great starship soared back into the Hub Five atmosphere, and a few minutes later it had coasted to a gentle halt in front of the module hanger.

A thought occurred to Luke as they disembarked. He said to Han, “The PEXs. You didn't use them at all.”

“Right again, kid,” said Solo. “For one thing, I promised your old man that I wouldn't risk your tail; you're too important a piece of property now. For another thing, there isn't a TL channel in the Empire that is long enough or clear enough for this ship when those things get warmed up. The *Eagle* can quite easily outrun the channel computers' ability to

verify the channels' freedom from obstructions. And of course you can't use an AMP in a channel, because of the danger that you'd waste other ships as well as chunks of rock."

"So," said Leia, "where **are** you going to use the PEXs?"

Han Solo turned towards her, and there was the strange expression in his eyes that she had last seen when she had asked him about the statue of Sith. "I'm going to look for Krel," he said.

3. ALTAIR-4

“Obi-wan, I’m afraid we have a problem,” said Krel Atlan.

The two Jedi had come to the salon of the Sith Ship at Krel’s insistence. For reasons that she could not quite explain to herself, she had not wanted to talk about this particular matter on the surface of the planet.

Kenobi leaned back against the red velvet cushions of the settee and regarded her quizzically. His expression’s too serious, she thought. He’s going to give me an Obi-wan answer.

He said, “What sort of trouble?” She looked at him irritably, certain that he was leading her through another maze. But there was nothing to do but continue. She began to pace back and forth in the salon, then turned toward him and said: “It may be nothing more than a feeling - It’s hard to pin down. But I have doubts about the wisdom of giving the Fire to these creatures. They’ve evolved, well, too quickly. I think that raw intelligence needs a - a certain ...”

“Seasoning?” said the old man. “Yes, I suppose that’s it,” she answered. “I’d never guessed that there could be such a thing as a ‘runaway intellect’ before. But these beings seem to have attained to a level of Self-realization where all achievement becomes meaningless to them. For one thing they’re naturally disincarnate; they have no substantive bodies to restrict their life-spans or movement or even health. If it weren’t for their being tied to the proximity of the machines here for their energy-to-matter transmutations, they’d be all over this galaxy by now, I’m sure.”

“That’s not all, of course ...” prodded Kenobi, leaning forward and peering at her sternly. “Go on.” Then, noting her expression, he added, “I’m not toying with you, Krel. I want your honest evaluation.”

Not convinced, she said haltingly, “In talking with them I have begun to get the impression that there’s a sort of ‘evil’ behind their ostensible goals. No, let me finish: More than once, when they could have been creating or enhancing a new phenomenon, they appear to have tolerated or even aggravated obvious defects in a quietly malign manner. I know that sounds odd; let me see if I can give you a good example.”

“The animal and the plant experiments,” said Kenobi. “Yes,” said Krel. “They produce new ones all the time, of course, and they’ve said before that they are testing various combinations to see what sort of evolutionary mixes they can design which are compatible and which show signs of future symbiosis as well. But the carnivores they design seem to be more vicious than necessary - blood-lust rather than mere hunger, if you follow me - and even some of the plants are positioned so close together that their fight for available light and nourishment eclipses everything else about their behavior.”

“So,” said Kenobi, “you think that these beings - these ‘Krel’, as they call themselves - are taking a sort of wanton pleasure in destructive interaction between material life-forms?”

Krel seated herself across from him, looked searchingly into his blue eyes for a moment, then turned to gaze out the large, faceted viewport. The orange-red glare from the desert outside was reflected in her crystalline eyes, which seemed to glow with a ruby-like fire.

“The trouble is that I can’t challenge the experiments logically,” she said. “Place two species together; one survives; therefore we learn more about the characteristics that enabled it to survive and caused the other one to perish. What other standard are we to use to ‘justify’ the continuation of a species? Beauty? Its friendliness towards humanity?”

No, the trouble is that the Krel may very well be motivated by a curiosity higher and more worthy than that of a gambler.”

“But you don’t think so, do you?” said Kenobi quietly. “No,” she answered, looking back at him, “I guess I don’t. There’s - well, there’s a little too much antagonism, too many artificially-created situations which could be bypassed according to the results of previous experiments. There is unnecessary conflict.” She felt she had made her point; now she waited to see if Kenobi would commit himself. [Privately she didn’t think he would.]

“I think,” he said, “that you might discuss the matter with Xronos.”

“I’d thought about that,” she mused. “The question is: Is there really an answer he could give me that would make a difference? And, if the issue is made explicit, could it not become worse - will the Krel then feel some sort of compulsion to ‘justify’ the practice by emphasizing it? Suppose that they are now indulging themselves in the pursuit without much thought to it. Would not an open challenge to it tend to goad them into rationalizing it? Consider the challenge and counter-challenge process that is at the heart of all of their evolutionary experiments. They might view this in much the same context - with themselves and myself as competing species, so to speak. That might sound odd, but ...”

“No, it doesn’t sound odd,” said the old Jedi. “Nevertheless I think you should discuss your sentiments with Xronos. He has never been devious with you, and it is the way of Jedi never to introduce a lesser degree of trust into a relationship.”

Krel Atlan looked at him wryly, then shook her head. “Obi-wan,” she said, “your ethics will dig your grave. And the graves of others, I’m afraid.”

“That may be so,” he said with sudden good humor, “but if we are not to determine and observe ethics, who will? Would you rather we behave as my dear friend General Terclis, to whom ethics are a farce and a delusion?”

Krel smiled. She said, affectionately, “Obi-wan, I will go to see Xronos. But please don’t dismiss the question too lightly. It makes little difference to a dead man whether or not he died ethically.”

Obi-wan Kenobi looked out the viewport. He said, as from a great distance, “There are far worse things than death, Krel Atlan. In one sense you might call me ‘dead’, of course; Darth Vader killed me on the Death Star. But in another sense I am very much alive. I am alive as you sense my presence, my guidance in the way that you make evaluations and decisions. You think that I am here, alive, talking with you. But if you did not think that - if you thought yourself alone in this starship, would you not still sense my presence and my guidance in your judgments? And then would it not be important to you that my life, my Self was ethical? I think so. And, had I failed to be so, then I would now be not merely dead, but a momentary phenomenon absorbed into complete oblivion.”

Krel Atlan felt a sudden shiver along her spine. What **was** this man seated opposite her, this apparition who could appear and disappear at will, who seemed at one moment to be a kindly old man and at the next to be some sort of abstract intelligence? Where did he come from, and why was he concerned with her - or humanity, or the Krel - at **all**?

Then Kenobi winked at her, breaking the tension, and pried himself up off the cushions of the settee with a grunt. He offered her his hand with mock gravity, and the two of them walked towards the suspension-field generator. “I know you’ll do just fine,” he said, as though she were a girl about to leave for her first date. “I’m anxious to know how it turns out.”

You **already** know how it’s going to turn out, you old krayt, she thought savagely, then found herself floating down through the hull towards the planet’s surface in the Sith Ship’s suspension beam.

Alighting, she paused and looked around her at the landscape. It was a harsh scene that she saw, with vast expanses of lusterless sand and clusters of jagged rocks tinted a dull red by the monstrous sun overhead. There seemed to be no sign of anything living, and the silence was not disturbed by even a whisper of wind. Only the black, diamondlike bulk of the great starship above her enabled Krel Atlan to wrench herself free from the depressing feeling of total isolation she had come to know so well. Maybe I really am alone, she thought, and I went insane during the trip, and Kenobi is a figment of my imagination. I suppose he's right about one thing: It probably doesn't make any real difference.

She walked a short distance from the Sith Ship, stumbling once or twice over hidden rocks in the sand. Reaching the top of a nearby dune, she stopped, looked around her, then drew her lightsaber from its sheath. She activated the blade, which crackled to life with the familiar electronic hiss. Then, with the tip of the shining blue blade, she burned into the sand a large pentagram about twenty feet in diameter. So great was the heat from the lightsaber that the lines cut into the sand continued to smolder after she had etched them, and a thin smoke rose slowly, evenly from the entire figure. Krel stepped into the center of the pentagram, deactivated the lightsaber, and raised her arms before her in the Sign of Xa. In a low, even voice she said:

“With the Fire which came forth from Sith, with the Xu of the Fire wherewith was opened the mouths of the Forms, I open the mouth of the Form Xronos. He has obtained the power of speech, his essence is before the Great Company of the Xabsu who are in the House from which I send forth my Will. Xronos, I have opened for you your mouth and I have unclosed for you your eyes with the Great Star and with the Ur-hekau that is the Great One of the Words of Power. A ua pest em Aah pert! Au-f aq-f em Xet pert em neter Xert ent Amentet nefert!”²⁸

Then she lowered her arms and waited. An hour passed, then a second and then a third, and still the Jedi remained motionless in the geometric figure.

Then, without warning, the outlines of the barren landscape before her began to become indistinct with a sort of rippling, pulsing motion; and as she watched there began to appear before her, slowly, wondrously, a lush, gardenlike paradise replete with meadows of softly waving grass, bushes and trees of every imaginable size and color, and brooks of cool water sparkling in a sunlight which had now become gentle and pleasing to the eye.

A light breeze swirled Krel's cape about her and tousled the locks of her hair, and a small, reptilian creature with scales of rainbow hues marched soberly up to her and rubbed its head against her leg. Smiling, she seated herself on the moss-covered stone which had appeared beside her, chucked the dragon under the chin, and watched as, a short distance away from her, a most singular materialization began to occur.

It was as though there were the sparkling of myriads of tiny lights in the air, combined with a whirling vortex of a blackish mist that seemed to have a sort of photonegative refraction to it, and finally there coalesced a crystalline, quartz-like solid which continued to float in the air before her. It was pyramidal in shape, about four feet in height, and it rotated slowly on a vertical axis, changing colors as it did so. Then Krel heard a rich, vibrant voice that seemed to come not so much from the crystalline thing as from a point directly above it.

²⁸ An Andromedan-language utterance, translatable most accurately into ancient Egyptian of the Milky Way Galaxy: “Hail One shining from the Moon! Cometh forth! You shall enter in after coming forth from the world of Amentet the beautiful!”

“How delightful it is to be with you again, Krel Atlan. Do you find the scene pleasant? Perhaps you will see some refinements since the last time; I have looked further into your memory than before. But of course many of the images are unfamiliar to me, so I was forced to attempt some approximations.”

Krel smiled at the pulsating apparition. “You’re very kind, Xronos, and it’s as beautiful as you knew it would be. But how do you expect us to talk seriously if you insist upon surrounding me with all of this?”

“Then there **is** something on your mind,” said Xronos. “I did not sense it.”

The Jedi rose lightly from her perch and began to stroll through a nearby grove of violet-hued, softly-perfumed trees. The small dragon scurried earnestly after her. Xronos faded from sight, then reappeared in a progressive series of images alongside her. Krel bit her lip, then said, “I’ve deliberately kept my thoughts vague because I don’t want you misunderstanding what could very well be baseless speculation. Xronos, I know that you and the others are involved with these evolutionary experiments, and I know why. But I wonder if, in your species contests, you aren’t being more - you aren’t promoting more - antagonism than necessary. What I’m trying to say is ...”

“What you’re trying to say,” took up the crystal smoothly, “is that you’re wondering whether we have been inducing values of our own pleasure and stimulation into the process. Am I correct?”

“Yes, that’s essentially it,” she answered, suspecting that a harsher phrasing had been sidestepped. When the crystal remained silent, she said, “Well, are you? And, if so, why?”

“Let me approach that question with another,” said Xronos. “Why evolution at all? Why should you or I or anything else - including non-conscious natural forces - initiate or sustain it? In the case of nature we are talking about a blind, random process which rarely sponsors extreme challenges between species. Incompatibilities tend to be resolved along less drastic parameters. But you, as a sentient being, are committed to the deliberate instigation of high intelligence - not in some pre-perfected form but rather as a gradual, evolving process. Consider your decision to inspire our race from a non-goal-oriented indulgence in our creative powers to a galactic-wide experiment in evolution. You did this because you wished to see sentient life at its most sublime.

“And so I would say that we have the same basic desire, but that we wish also to understand the most extreme contrasts between conceptual life-forms. Why? So we have some means for the measurement of excellence. One cannot create the good, judge the good without being intimately acquainted with evil and the forces of destruction.

“Yes, I will grant that there is a measure of indulgence, even of wantonness in what we do. But to argue that we should thus restrain ourselves on the basis of some self-imposed necessity is invalid. Nothing dynamic is ‘necessary’; rather it is impulsive and Willful. Should Will be lacking, evolution and change would give way - necessarily - to stasis or at least to an inertial, mathematical sequence of change. Am I not right?”

This is dangerous, thought Krel, then drove the idea from the forefront of her consciousness as soon as she had realized it. [Had Xronos already sensed it? Or had he or others of the Krel-race foreseen this encounter and estimated its outcome?] Aloud she said, “What of the last time we talked - what you said about the need for inter-species respect for intelligence. Have you come to discard that?”

The sonorous, yet oddly-artificial voice answered, “You still have not asked the question you want to ask. What you **really** want to know is: Is your race, your human race, safe from us? Will we allow it to continue its present existence unchallenged? And I will answer that by responding to the question you **did** ask: Yes, we have a reasoned ethic which guides our approach towards other races which we did not create.

“But it is a logical, not a compassionate one. It is our desire to test other advanced races’ ability to survive and to evolve, and we do this by the application of social pressure and physical danger. As races are more primitive, so the challenges we mount may be of lesser degree. As civilizations are more advanced, however, the challenges become more formidable. It is, of course, an experiment in the social dialectic. Should a civilization survive a threat, it will become stronger and more evolved. Left to rest without challenge, it would putrefy. So you tell **me**, Krel - Would we favor your race and its galactic empire by ignoring it or dealing gently with it?”

Krel halted and turned to face the shining pyramid. “Xronos,” she said, “are you going to attack the Empire?”

There was a long moment of silence, broken only by the faint sonic pulses of the pyramid and the impatient snorting of the little dragon. Then Xronos said, “No, not now. Our knowledge of it remains fragmentary; it is highly advanced, and therefore it is a difficult matter to formulate a challenge to it which would be neither too mild nor too severe.

“It is of course an intriguing prospect. The Empire has achieved the highest known level of intercultural symbiosis. But to destroy it outright would be to cause the incidental destruction of countless component civilizations. A judiciously designed threat to the whole would tend to unify and strengthen it; the integrity of the whole would thereby be tested. But an ill-conceived threat would simply disrupt the Empire internally, and then there would be no evaluation of the whole at all, nor would the outcome be an evolutionary synthesis. And in that case we **would** have failed; we would defeat our **own** purpose as much as we would ‘defeat’ the Empire.

“It is a mistake, Krel, to suppose that large states or empires are the more difficult to defeat because of their size and their control of resources, military or otherwise. Quite the contrary - They are vulnerable in thousands of different ways. They only seem impregnable because of their vast bulk. You yourself told me about the small revolt that was taking place at the time you left the galaxy. Would it succeed in its immediate objective? Of course not. But the waves of disruption that it set in motion, no matter how insignificant they might seem at first, could multiply long after the revolt itself had been crushed. **That** is the real threat that the Empire would have had to recognize. I wonder if it did so?”

“Obi-wan Kenobi has told me that it did,” said Krel.

“Obi-wan Kenobi,” said Xronos thoughtfully. “Now **there’s** an enigma. This strange fantasy of yours - that there’s an old man of your race with you here - I find quite out of place in your character. Haven’t I told you before that he doesn’t exist? That there are no human thought-emanations here save yours?”

“Are you so certain that you can sense all existence, Xronos? That, in effect, you are omniscient?”

For the first time there was a hint of uncertainty in the strange voice. “No, I am not. That would be a conceit. But our approach to knowledge is systematic. We view existence as a large, consistent whole, and we estimate all aspects of that whole by interpolating from what we know of the parts. The greater our knowledge of the parts, the more inevitable our calculations of the whole - and the remaining parts. Your Obi-wan Kenobi does not fit anywhere, Krel.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more,” she said somewhat dryly, “but nevertheless he **does** exist - I **think**. For that matter, what about Sith? You still don’t believe **he** exists either, do you?”

“No - again because there is no evident necessity for his existence - no part of the cosmos that cannot be recognized as part of the whole.”

“And our high intelligence - and yours? Is that not evidence?”

“Before I can judge that, I must understand the whole of the cosmic matrix. Only then can the question be answered as to whether this intelligence of ours is a component or something extraneous. By the laws of probability I am inclined to think that it too will be recognized as a component.

“What you call the ‘Fire of Sith’ may, like this Obi-wan Kenobi, be nothing more than a yearning of your imagination for external justification for its conscious existence. And, for that matter, an excuse for the fatalistic urge that led you to journey here to inspire us with what would ultimately manifest itself as a challenge to the survival of your own kind. Do you shy away from accepting **that** doom, Krel Atlan?”

The Jedi stared at the pyramid accusingly. “That’s rhetorical, Xronos, and you know it. When I left the Empire, I understood it to be mortally, if not immediately crippled. Were it fated to perish, then your civilization could take its place as a phenomenon of independent consciousness in the Universe.

“I did not think that the Empire could recover as it seems to have done. Nor did I suspect that your race - because of its freedom from the restrictions of natural bodies - would evolve so rapidly. And now I fear that I have condemned my kind to the threat of extinction. Worse than that: If they survive a threat from you, do you think they will allow you to survive to challenge them again? They will come after you, Xronos, and they will not rest until they have destroyed it or it has destroyed them.

“And there is still another thing you do not understand, you stupid pyramid. You and the other Krel - you are my offspring, probably the only ones I will ever have. Do you think that I would rejoice to see you hurt or destroyed? If you know so much about the fabric of existence, can you not see that?”

“Yes, I can - all of us can,” answered Xronos slowly. “But you see - We have no option to do other than exert the Will and the power which we have, Krel-mother, and so we are as much trapped in the system of the Universe as are those upon whom we experiment. Will we kill our ‘fathers’ and then our ‘mother’? And for this should we ordain our own destruction as penance, or should we turn our eyes in self-inflicted blindness from the tragedy? What you ask of me, Krel, is to create a solution where there is none.”

Krel Atlan’s lips quivered. She said, “I’m sorry, Xronos.”

“It needn’t be so terrible,” said the pyramid. “Obviously we have been looking at the most destructive possibilities. That in itself is ill-advised, because it inclines us to operate in that frame of reference. Consider this: When you Jedi were adjusting a situation in the Republic or the Empire away from catastrophe, how were your actions perceived by those directly involved?”

“You know the answer to that one. We were almost always misunderstood - hated. Finally massacred.” She shuddered slightly, remembering the terrible day of blood and death of which she had been the sole survivor.

“Then do not be so quick to trade ignorance for fear,” said Xronos. “Allow events to take their course a little longer. I am not asking you to trust me blindly - just to give yourself the opportunity to make a more thorough analysis. Isn’t that acceptable?”

“Yes, I suppose it is,” said the Jedi. “Come then,” said Xronos, “and let me show you the most recent developments in our conversion machinery. You ought to find them interesting.”

Around them the lush scenery began to fade, until there was only the little dragon still sitting patiently at Krel's side, thrashing his tail back and forth. Krel scratched him on the head and watched as a sleek-looking landspeeder-like vehicle materialized in the air before them. She hopped into one of the two seats, beckoning the dragon into the other one. There was a moment of delay as the little reptile floundered ungracefully into the other seat; then the craft accelerated smoothly over the desert and left the Sith Ship sitting alone - a black monolith amidst the arid wasteland.

A few moments later there was the hum of the suspension-field beam, and Obi-wan Kenobi descended to the sand, looked thoughtfully at the large pentagram still smoking in the sand, and smiled to himself.

4. HIJACK!

Daron Brumus ran his fingers through his hair and looked with some confusion at the TWSOG that had just been torn from the photocopier. It said:

Time-Warp Space-o-Gram Initialization:
Priority: FLASH / Auth Q9-782F-6G(F)
Address Date: TW Zero / 5089:1:1
Address Coordinates: SEC 274-L: Tatooine: Mos Eisley: HQ Garrison STF
To the attention of: Brumus, D., Major/STF, Commanding Officer
The following transmission is classified SECRET IAW Edict Twelve GEA. Downclassification by addressee NOT AUTH.
Commence Text: CI-13 #ISF-001975 arrives SIMULTAN with orders to assume custody LORIN XANPOL of Mos Eisley district. You will establish link with CDR CI-13 and conduct Subj to orbital transfer. CODE E-79 IS AUTHORIZED.
ORIG: Corlinas Legate 274-L
End of Time-Warp Space-o-Gram Transmission

“E-79?” said Brumus. “Code E-79? Jarl, keep the T-sog on, ’cause I’m going to have to go back on this one. What’s the matter with that fool Corlinas that he sends an E-79 on **Xanpol** - Doesn’t he know that he’s an old friend of the Crown Prince? ‘Dead or alive’! More likely **our** hides if we so much as dent him. Well, what’s the matter?”

“Sir,” said the Lieutenant, abandoning the transmitter and turning round to look at Brumus, “T-sog’s out. Blanketing wave. Scanner picks up a Class Thirteen at orbit. She’s probably transmitting the wave. We can’t talk to anyone except at normal radio trans.”

“A B-wave?” said Brumus, lurching out of his chair and coming over to the communications console. “Are you **sure**? What’s an ISF ship doing blanketing an STF channel? That’s -”

“It **is** authorized under joint authority of a Sector Legate, Sir,” said Jarl.

“I know that,” said Brumus angrily. “I **also** know that the joint authority is there to be invoked only in time of confirmed invasion, and this is **hardly** that. Terclis is going to hit the ceiling when -”

“Excuse me, Sir,” interrupted the other communications officer. “VP coming through from the Class 13. Do you want it in your office, or -?”

“I’ll take it right here,” said Brumus impatiently. He leaned over the Lieutenant’s shoulder and hit the activation buttons of the console viewplate. A moment later the visage of an Imperial Starforce officer appeared. “Major Brumus?” said the officer.

“Brumus here,” said the Garrison Commander. “Colonel, you’d better get that blanket wave off before the MindWarCen finds out about this, or General Terclis is going to have you for breakfast.”

“Major Brumus,” said the ISF Colonel coldly, “I know **quite** well what I’m doing and with what authority. So do you. And until this ship leaves 274-L or I release you from my command, you will follow my orders. Or I will have you for breakfast. Do we both understand that?”

The two STF Lieutenants suddenly wished they were somewhere else. Brumus’ face flushed and his knuckles turned white where he gripped the backs of their chairs. But to the viewplate he said, simply, “Yes - Sir.”

“Good,” said the Colonel. “Now this person Xanpol. I want him here within the hour. You have your orders, Major.” - and the screen went blank.

The STF Operations Center was suddenly quiet as the duty officers all looked in Brumus' direction. He turned and glared at them. "Well, don't just sit there like a bunch of droids!" he barked. "Get out of here and find Xanpol! And no," he continued, as one of them started to say something, "Don't use E-79. Just tell him from me that he's got to move right now. Any problem, just call me here. Now move!"

The call reached Brumus fifteen minutes later. "Major," said one of the detachment commanders, "He's in the middle of a concert in Stargate Park. There must be at least a couple of thousand, uh, citizens here, and they're all pretty worked up. I don't know what they'd do if I try to go up on the stage and haul him off."

"Wouldn't you know it?" said Brumus resignedly. "At the MindWarCen they say they prepare you to handle anything imaginable; then when you begin to believe them, they send you to somewhere like Mos Eisley. Oh, forget it. Just keep him in sight. I'll be down in a couple of minutes. We'll catch him between songs and get him out of there before anyone's the wiser. Tell the Park manager to go visit his relatives for a couple of weeks and then bill Corlinas for repairing whatever happens when the crowd catches on." And, seizing his helmet, he strode out towards the Garrison's main gate.

When Brumus finally reached the park, he paused and looked at the sight before him in exasperation. The crowd was large and obviously very much caught up in the concert. Creatures of all sizes, shapes, colors, and constitutions shrieked, bellowed, roared, whistled and barked their enthusiasm, and the lawn before the stage was seething with dancing, jumping, and whirling tentacles, fins, claws, and even feet.

The tone of Lorin Xanpol's concerts had changed considerably after his transmutation into the Pantehnikon. Among other things he had found that his electronic thought-fields could be connected directly to audio-frequency generators and amplifiers, thus enabling him to quite literally "think" music into existence. The tremendous harmonies now surging forth from the great mica towers on the stage would have done credit to an entire orchestra; in fact, since they were all the product of a single consciousness, they were precise to an almost unbelievable degree.

And Lorin Xanpol could sing to his music as well, his artificial voice producing all audible frequencies with exact pitch, volume, and timing. The overall effect was simply overwhelming - a breathtaking creation of musical magic that was unequalled throughout the Empire. He could have commanded even greater audiences in the major metropolitan centers, Brumus knew, but for some reason he preferred the relative isolation of Tatooine. Nevertheless his concerts were regularly attended by beings from all the planets in the Tatooine system - and indeed from nearby systems in the Sector.

Brumus listened for a moment. The music flowed forth from the stage as though it had some eerie, magical life of its own. For a moment ... But then, with an effort Brumus shook his attention back to more immediate matters, dodged his way around the side of the crowd, and beckoned to the singer from the back of the stage as the song ended. The Pantehnikon unhooked the set of wire-links from his black-metal body and jumped lightly down beside the Stormtrooper. "Hi, Daron," he said. "Thought for a moment you fellows had come for the concert, but you look too military. What's up?"

"Over here -" replied Brumus, and moments later the surprised Xanpol found himself en route to the spaceport in an STF landspeeder. As the vehicle wound through the alleys towards the government docks, Brumus told him about the TWSOG instructions and about his conversation with the ISF Colonel. "One more thing," he said as the landspeeder drew up to a dock holding an STF orbital patrol ship. "That T-sog authorized a Code E-79. That means shoot to kill if you don't cooperate. No, now don't get excited. As far as I'm concerned, it's crazy. But it does tell me that something's wrong here.

“Now listen: I’ve got to take you up to that Star Destroyer, but I and some other STs who just coincidentally happen to be my assault team are going along for the ride. When we get there, you’re going to see us acting nice and stupid. Don’t get shook. I don’t want that Colonel getting nervous and telling us to get off before we’re en route to wherever he’s going, got it? O.K., Captain, let’s get this thing fired up.”

The sleek white patrol ship began to glide forward on the launch tracks, moving out of the covered dock and down the runway. Moments later it thundered into the air, then rose sharply through the atmosphere until the pilot brought it out of its climb at orbit-level 5. “Ought to be seeing the ISF ship in about zero-five, Sir,” he remarked to Brumus.

Lorin Xanpol turned to gaze out the viewport to the left of his seat, in the direction indicated by the pilot. Yes, there it was - that gleaming white triangle that invariably identified the Empire’s most famous [and feared] warship. Silently it closed on the small patrol craft, looming larger and larger, and Lorin could see the landing bay doors sliding open to admit them. Their pilot eased the STF ship carefully up into the brightly-lit bay; then there was the slight jolt as the servo-magnetic field of the bay stabilized the small vessel and eased it over to the airlocks. A whine beneath their feet told them that the bay doors were closing as well.

Brumus looked sharply at the Pantechnikon, then muttered, “Remember what I said. Easy does it until we get a grip on what’s going on here.” Then he locked his helmet into place and walked over to the airlock. He signalled brusquely to the Stormtrooper standing at the lock controls, waited while the hatch hissed open, then proceeded through it to the entry passage beyond. All trace of informality was suddenly gone from his demeanor, Xanpol noted, thinking to himself that there was more to the STF than an outsider might suspect.

About ten minutes later one of the other Stormtroopers was signalled by radio to bring Xanpol on board the big starship. The Pantechnikon heard the call on his internal multi-frequency monitor and got to his feet before the surprised ST could say anything to him. The two of them walked into the brightly-lit passageway, where they were met by two Imperial Starforce soldiers and guided through a maze of corridors until they arrived at the command bridge. As they entered, they saw Major Brumus standing beside the ISF Colonel in command of the Star Destroyer. They went directly over to them, and the Colonel returned the Stormtrooper’s ringing salute with a nod of his head.

The Colonel looked curiously at the shining black-metal form before him. “So you are the famous Pantechnikon,” he said. Then to Brumus: “Take him to the holding cells on Level Two. Then see the HQ Detachment Commander about quarters for yourself and your men. You are assigned to this ship pending disposition of the prisoner.”

The two Stormtroopers escorted Xanpol to the elevator. After the door shut and it began to descend, Brumus said, “Before you ask, I still don’t know what’s going on. That Colonel’s got the proper Sector and ISF authorizations, all right, but he wouldn’t tell me why anyone wants your hide. Such as it is. Just said that some kind of invasion is underway near here, and you’re mixed up in it. Know anything about that?”

Xanpol was not misled by the STF Major’s casual tone. From Luke he had learned something about the ways in which Stormtroopers were trained to form quick estimates of situations, and one of the methods involved carefully contrived questioning. Flatly, without hesitation he said, “No, Daron, I don’t.”

The Stormtrooper looked at him for what seemed a very long moment, then said, “O.K. Didn’t think so. To the cells you go, but we won’t let anyone try any funny stuff with you. Not until we can get through to the Hub. The important thing is to keep cool; don’t give these people an excuse to turn the heat on you, right?”

Back on the bridge ISF Colonel Jarnes turned off the monitor that had enabled him to listen in on the conversation in the elevator. To an aide he said, "Get me the Level Two Guard Officer on VP." And when the face of the GO appeared on the viewplate, he said, "In about two minutes an STF Major and a black-metal humanoid will be arriving on L2 via the bridge lift. The humanoid can be expected to proceed to a cell without resistance. Unfortunately the Stormtrooper has elected to become his secret accomplice and thus must also be confined. When you have dealt with the humanoid, place the Major under arrest. Authentication five-one-nine."

Five minutes later the hydraulic door of a detention cell hissed closed after Lorin Xanpol, and Daron Brumus turned around to find himself staring into the muzzles of two laser rifles. In an instant he sized up the situation; knew that he had somehow been overheard. In a loud, furious voice he said, "You're going to lock me up too? What's got into you people, anyway?"

The ISF guards were indifferent to the outburst, but behind the nearby door the audiomikes that served Lorin Xanpol as ears carried the message to his central processing unit for analysis. The Pantechnikon selected the eighteenth of sixty-two options available to him, walked over to the steel door, ran his hands over it to the computed loci of maximum leverage, and applied somewhat more physical force than was generally known to be at his disposal. The massive door buckled, then was torn off its tracks and fell with a crash into the corridor beyond. Xanpol himself was only a split-second behind it; before the two ISF soldiers knew what was happening, their heads had been knocked gently but firmly together and they slumped to the deck.

Brumus didn't take the time to congratulate him. The moment the guards' weapons were diverted from him, he dashed back along the corridor to the cell block control console, studied the instruments for a moment, then rifled through a VP directory. He hit the code for the bridge and watched as the viewplate showed his assault team being disarmed on the orders of the starship commander.

He turned back to Xanpol, who had come up beside him, and said, "This is a bad situation. It's possible that some kind of mix-up could have resulted in a legitimate warrant for you, but no ISF commander in his right mind would appropriate and then arrest an STF detachment. Something's **wrong** here - something I'm not seeing. If I didn't know better, I'd say that that Colonel is **deliberately** provoking an incident between the ISF and the STF to stir up trouble. That kind of thing used to happen occasionally a few years ago, when the STF was new on the scene and the ISF didn't like it. But not since the Clone War."

Brumus switched off the VP and eased himself into one of the console chairs. "Our obvious options are either to surrender or to go up there and create enough of a row so that my people can get their hardware back and take over this bucket. Trouble is that we still have our incident, and I don't like that any way you cut it. Any suggestions?"

"Suppose you and your team make a break for it," said Xanpol. "Get back to your ship and leave for Tatooine before the ISF can stop you."

"No good," said the Stormtrooper. "Out in space our ship wouldn't stand a chance against a Class Thirteen. Even if we could get away from it somehow - do a job on this ship's engines or something like that - odds are we're now too far away from Tatooine to get back. And I can't leave this mess like it is. The ISF would paint it all the wrong colors, and -"

He was interrupted by a voice from the console. "GO-L2," it said, "Report and authenticate." Brumus smashed his armored fist down on the console in exasperation. "That tears it!" he said. "No more time. I don't have the A-codes that fellow's waiting to

hear. Well - when in doubt, charge, as General Dakkar says ...” He keyed the console microphone: “This is not ... the Guard Officer; this ... is Major Brumus, STF. That humanoid ... took out your people here, did a job on my arm - and is probably on L3 or L4 by now. I’m - I’m - uunh!”

Releasing the mike button, the Stormtrooper looked up sourly at the Pantechnikon. “Cheap stunt, but it ought to point the ISF away from here for a few more minutes. Now there’s no point in going anywhere except the bridge; much as I hate to do it, we’re going to have to jump that Colonel and take the ship. The lift. No one’s going to worry about a lift going towards the bridge at this moment. Let’s go -”

Brumus was almost right this time. When the lift door opened at the bridge, he and Xanpol caught the command group by surprise. His blaster levelled conspicuously at Colonel Jarnes, the STF Major barked: “A-Team - Take your arms back and disarm the ISF - Move it!” The team did, and a moment later the STF detachment appeared to control the situation - until Jarnes said, “Not good enough, Major. This ship is keyed to my voice-authentication, and you’ll have to kill me to override that. Do you understand?”

Brumus did. The Empire’s VA systems were designed, among other things, as safeguards to ensure that the weapons or the propulsion systems of military starships could not be activated against the will of the legitimate commander. VA could detect even the slight strain in the voice of a commander giving orders under duress, and no response would be forthcoming. If Brumus killed the commander, VA would register that fact and re-align itself to the voice patterns of the Exec, and so on.

Brumus contemplated the prospect of having to murder virtually every ISF officer on board; dismissed it. He said, “So we talk for awhile and try to make some sense of this. Because I’m not about to watch my team get killed either because you’re convinced that there’s some sort of conspiracy here. If I have to, I’ll shoot up the engines of this crate, kick out a couple of TL drones in the direction of the nearest STF Group HQ, and keep you people under wraps until help gets here. Your option is to summon enough enthusiasm into your voice to take us there under our own power.”

“No,” said Jarnes, “my option is -” - And a high-pitched sonic frequency shrieked through the bridge, causing everyone there except the Colonel and the Pantechnikon to scream in sudden agony. Weapons went clattering to the deck as STF and ISF alike clawed at their ears, trying to block out the mind-wrenching sound. Lorin Xanpol’s audio-filters quickly compensated for the frequency, but the Colonel had foreseen this. Before the Pantechnikon could move, he saw Jarnes’ blaster pointed directly at him.

“Fast you may be,” said the Colonel, “but perhaps not quite fast enough to dodge this. I suggest you don’t try. In fact -”

But what it was that Colonel Jarnes intended to say next was interrupted by his own scream as his body burst into flame. Just as suddenly the mind-paralyzing sonic tone ceased, and the dazed Stormtroopers and ISF crewmen stared in shock as the Colonel staggered horribly about the cabin, crashing into bulkheads and instrument panels in his delirium, until what was left of his body collapsed in a burning, boiling heap on the deck.

There was a sudden, frenzied scramble to get away from the corpse, and even Daron Brumus was completely at a loss over what to do next. He stood in the middle of the bridge, one hand still at his injured left ear.

“Should have known better than to leave you alone for a moment, Xanny!” said a female voice in a tone that, considering the circumstances, was surprisingly cheerful.

Brumus spun around towards the sound, only to stagger back as a burst of light, white-hot as though from a nuclear explosion, erupted with a hissing roar in the center of the bridge; when his eyes recovered, he saw, sitting in the Colonel’s command chair, the form

of a woman wrapped in reddish-yellow tongues of fire. Instinctively Brumus' hand went to the blaster at his side, whipping the weapon up towards the apparition. The strange being remained motionless, regarding him with obvious amusement.

"You know, there's something almost **likable** about you, Major - even if you **did** get Lorin into this mess. Fighting fire with fire, perhaps? You'd be closer to the mark with a bucket of water, though I'd advise you not to try it, 'cause then I'd **really** get annoyed and might be tempted to promote you to Colonel."

Her meaning was not lost on the Stormtrooper; he lowered the blaster self-consciously, noting that Lorin Xanpol didn't seem the slightest bit disturbed by this sudden turn of events. "Friend of yours?" he inquired.

The Pantechnikon nodded. "Hi, Wingrace," he said. "Please don't cook him just yet. He may be an ST, but beneath all that he's kind of a nice guy."

"Beneath all that?" said the fire-woman, looking back at Brumus more piercingly than before. "Um ... Yes, guess I'd go along with you there, Lorin. But a touch on the scrawny side for my taste." She smiled at the Major, and some of the STs across the bridge nudged one another gleefully. Brumus felt his face go scarlet.

"All right!" he said. "You - whoever you are - I suppose you think you've just done Xanpol a favor by killing the Colonel. If things were that simple, I could have shot him earlier. You don't know the -"

"Oh, yes I do," smiled Wingrace, "But - don't you see? - there was no solution short of this. **That's** why you were fumbling around and getting nowhere. **That's** why I decided to take a hand in the matter. Keep you from wasting further time.

"You were quite right in thinking that the situation's weird. I'll go you one further - It's **deliberately** weird; someone or something has acted to create an incident that could destabilize a great deal of equilibrium in this sector and elsewhere. Don't know why yet, but I can't just sit around waiting for you and Xanny to meditate on it. We're going to head for the Hub and find out just what's going on."

"But you can't just change the vector-paths of a Star Destroyer like that," said the Major. "The Sector Controls -"

"Dear Brumus," said Wingrace, "the ship'll be ours and you got to roll with it - and though your master's head's blown off you got to go with it.²⁹ I've **already** switched the vectors, and I'll take care of the Sector monitor systems as well when we pass them. What I want **you** to do now is to take command - you **are** the senior in rank now, I believe - and calm everyone down. You can begin with **yourself**. Remember, **you** didn't kill the Colonel - **I** did. For what it's worth, I didn't do it **just** because of this business; he had it coming for other reasons. Enough time wasted ... Unless you're going to spend the next hour or so just standing there gawking at me, let's get this bucket headed for the Hub."

²⁹ Later quoted in "Starship", *Blows Against the Empire*, by Paul Kantner (Milky Way Galaxy reincarnation of Lorin Xanpol).

... CONTINUING SYNOPSIS

Arriving in the Milky Way Galaxy, Krel Atlan and Obi-wan Kenobi have landed on the fourth planet of the Altair star system, and through the Gift of Sith effect a massive mental mutation in the geometric-based beings there, who in gratitude rename their civilization the “Krel”.

The mutation has unexpected results, however, as Xronos, now revealed as the “central” Krel, acknowledges an intention to “adjust” sentient civilization in the Andromeda Galaxy. The Krel interest extends from the following thesis:

What is behind efforts to civilize? To civilize is to create the artificial from the natural, which means to exercise will in order to be sure of its presence and keep it alive. Hence there is no actual other justification for civilization than the simple willing of conscious existence.

However the drive for civilization is also based upon instinctive, animalistic drives - specifically the instincts for self-preservation and the avoidance of pain and the cultivation of pleasure. These force the continuation of civilization along certain lines. They are much more powerful in the mundane sense than the factor of conscious will.

Continuing to discuss this subject with Krel, Xronos touches upon his opinion of why Darth Vader acts and exists as he does:

Darth Vader personifies the conviction that the will for conscious existence is superior to the other two drives. He has this conviction via his exposure to the Dark Side of the Force, which one might also call the Fire of Sith [or also Platonic intuition of the Forms].

Darth Vader also thinks that, while civilization does not in itself ensure mass progress of all included beings toward actualization of the conscious will, it does provide the most fertile environment for this quality to be present and grow in the few.

Finally Darth Vader considers civilization an artificial situation. Left alone, people would tend to use it as an expedient to help them fulfill basically natural desires. In order to effect expansion of will, civilization must be forced **beyond** the level of mere gratification.

Emperor Palpatine understands this concept intellectually but not in the magical/intuitive sense. He himself is driven by the Nietzschean Will to Power, being the desire to see the civilization preeminent as a thing in itself

Xronos says that his own inspiration as a consequence of his exposure to the Fire of Sith is that Andromeda be given a massive stress-trial to offer it the chance to change direction from Palpatine’s point of view to Darth Vader’s - so that the entire civilization may be oriented along the quest for higher consciousness instead of that being merely a struggling, insignificant, incidental phenomenon.

To accomplish this Xronos proposes to apply a certain pressure such that use of the Will to Power will prove insufficient to deal with it. The Andromedan civilization must then seek a solution through consciousness.

Xronos intends to destroy the power of merely rational response by tampering with the sensory communications of Andromedeans. This will force a need to recognize reality by mental order. If the test is failed, there will be outbreaks of madness and a general regression to instinctive, natural life. This will be the “make or break” opportunity for higher consciousness in Andromeda.

The Empire, says Xronos, has reached a critical point. Left to itself, it will now decline because of lack of creative challenges. The Rebellion was thus a single symptom of a more general tendency.

Darth Vader (at the beginning of *The Secret of Sith*) correctly perceived that, but he thought that countering the rebellion and stabilization of the Empire would solve the problem. It will not. The paradox of the situation is that **both** mundane challenge **and** the lack of challenge act to deteriorate the Empire. What is needed is a special sort of challenge whose resolution **will** lead upward.

The Empire, observes Xronos, has finally trained a leader who combines expertise in the three essential qualities: (Platonic) politics, MindWar, and Jedi initiation. This is Luke.

Krel Atlan protests, and Xronos - curiously - offers her the opportunity to annul his decision. She agonizes over this opportunity to preserve the Empire’s current peace, but ultimately - as Xronos well knew - she cannot stand in the way of the operation.

The Krel begin by a gradually-spreading confusion of sensory reliability in the Empire in individuals in key positions. [The ISF arrest of Lorin Xanpol is one such incident.] This gradually becomes manifest by a rise in instability in the Empire as a whole, evidenced by random but widespread brushfire-type conflicts and disturbances. Unaware of the Krel influence, the Imperial government reacts to the situation through its established administrative and control systems:

- Palpatine deals with it politically and via selected applications of the ISF.
- Terclis and the MindWar Center deal with it by augmenting the efforts of the ISF operationally, but also by beginning research towards an identifiable pattern, motive, common source.
- Darth Vader deals with it by attempting to conceptualize it existentially. Why is it there at all? Suspicious of the timing and irrationality of the incidents, he suspects that they may have something to do with Krel’s trip and whatever she did. He decides to send Han Solo after her, and also Lorin Xanpol because of the special integral-thought-ordering qualities of the Pantehnikonic body. He orders a Star Destroyer to bring Xanpol to the Hub, while he himself re-dons his protective armor and makes a sudden departure for the Planet of Sith.

The Krel-disruption affects the commander of the Star Destroyer, however, and instead of being welcomed courteously, Xanpol is brought on board forceably and nearly killed along with STF [RANK] Brumus. At the last moment Wingrace intervenes to save them, seizing control of the starship, and it sets course for the Hub without further incident.

Arriving at the Hub, Xanpol and Han Solo leave for the Milky Way Galaxy in the Millennium Eagle. Suddenly aware of Darth Vader’s return to the Planet of Sith, Wingrace vanishes from the Hub and reappears there.

On Hub Three Palpatine confers with his senior Councillors, including Luke, Leia, and Terclis. The destabilizing incidents have continued to multiply, and to increase in seriousness, approaching a climate of widespread anarchy. Nor is the Imperial Starforce immune, as evidenced by the Pantehnikon incident. The STF has so far held together, presumably because of the significantly greater mental coherence training at the MindWar Center.

It is clear to the Council that the Hub itself is in danger, because its symbolism of order seems to act like a psychological magnet to the anarchist elements; its destruction is gradually becoming their fixation and passion.

On the Planet of Sith, Darth Vader returns to the Chamber of Sith and seeks an answer to the problem through Black Magic. At the culmination of a fearsome working, which is accompanied by Elemental Unleashing so extensive as to finally destroy the Chamber and its statue, Darth Vader is made fully aware of his function as the fulcrum for a critical rebalancing of sentient intelligence throughout Andromeda. He also learns - though upon later reflection he is not altogether surprised - that the person of "Obi-wan Kenobi" is actually a manifestation of Sith himself.

Wingrace arrives just in time to help Darth Vader escape alive from the collapsing Chamber. Racing for his probe ship, he sees the surface of the planet beginning to crack and decompose around him. He barely escapes the Planet of Sith before it explodes into a silvery electrical firestorm behind him, then vanishes into utter nothingness. Concerned for Wingrace, who he knew was somehow tied to the Planet, and remained behind on its surface, he attempts to evoke her - but is answered only with silence.

On the Hub, still confronting the growing crisis, Luke searches for a synthetic solution that will incorporate elements of conventional political, MindWar, and Jedi wisdom. He proposes various ideas to Leia, who sees in all of them the common thread of the use of force, and rejects them accordingly. Angered and frustrated at first, Luke suddenly remembers her words of Admonition to the Jedi and apprehends the greatness of her spirit of compassion.

Torn between Leia's idealism and the growing crisis facing the Empire, Luke finally tells her that he has no alternative but the combined-force solution he has fashioned, and leaves to implement it. Her last appeal to him, most shockingly, is that if he pursues this course he will but become another Darth Vader.

Distraught by the encounter and her realization, Leia considers suicide, but realizes that if there is any hope for Luke, it must be through her. She is still haunted by what she feels was her failure to protect Alderaan, and the suspicion that Darth Vader allowed its destruction to happen because of the terrible doom that it had decreed for her as its Princess. And then she had killed that same Darth Vader who had made such a judgment. That he had returned as an earlier reconstitution of himself, through Wingrace's use of the Clones' machinery, in some ways makes it worse, because now she is regularly in the living company of the very individual she killed.

Luke returns. When the final moment of decision came for him, he found that he could not disregard Leia's words, could not give the orders that would set in motion yet more pain and death. There **must** be another, better solution, and they **must** discover, or formulate it.

Arriving on Altair-4, Han Solo and Lorin Xanpol confront what seems to be a deserted planet. Exploring with the aid of the Millennium Eagle's sensors, however, they find that below the surface is a vast network of machinery, whose output, while unlike any transmission media with which they are familiar, is nonetheless directed towards the Andromeda Galaxy. Solo decides to take the Eagle to a safe distance from the planet, then use its bow-AMP to destroy the entire complex, even if it means the planet in its entirety.

But before he can board the starship, he finds standing before it - Krel Atlan. After an oddly-distant, almost cold greeting, she agrees with his plan and the two of them take the Eagle out into high-orbital space. Xanpol stays behind to attempt to measure the effect of the AMP on the Krel-machines.

About to activate the AMP, Solo is suddenly attacked by Krel Atlan, who is possessed by the primitive, nihilistic rages of the soul unleashed by the Krel-machines. Before his eyes her molecular structure alters into that of a gigantic bipedal monster, visible only in, but not in the least harmed by the laserfire from his blaster.

Yet, oddly, the monster does not kill Solo, but simply remains between him and the AMP-controls, although it is apparently convulsed in waves of alternating emotions.

Down on the surface of Altair-4, Lorin Xanpol realizes that something has gone wrong when the AMP does not fire. Aware that only he can now act, he steps into the primary coherence field of the machinery complex and begins to remold his own electrochemical identity into a matrix that can seize control of the processes at their most basic level. As he slowly feels his consciousness slipping away into this vast impersonality, he knows that he has succeeded; the machines are fading to a mere sustaining cycle, and the streams flowing towards Andromeda simultaneously cease. As the entity who was once a mere cantina entertainer in the back alleys of Mos Eisley now finally dies to his consciousness, his last thought is of Wingrace the Valkyrie.

Aboard the Millennium Eagle, the monster that had taken control of Krel Atlan's form disappears with the Krel-machines' cycledown, and with all of the depth of a love that had spanned galaxies they embrace. Their attention is suddenly distracted by a violent explosion on Altair-4's surface: The Sith Ship has mysteriously destroyed itself. [Many years later they will learn that it did so at the exact moment of the disintegration of the Chamber of Sith on that planet.]

There is not enough fuel in the Eagle to return to Andromeda, but there is enough to reach a planet within the Milky Way Galaxy that nurtures beings evolutionarily similar to the Andromedan humans. So Han Solo and Krel Atlan set their final course for Earth.

And the Eagle only just barely completes that trip, its exhausted engines falling silent when it enters the atmosphere. The great ship glides down into a lake adjacent to a large river, sinking to the bottom so that only a small part of its hull remains above-water, like a glistening, smooth, metallic islet. [Years later, Atlantean colonists to this desert region will enshrine the sunken ship and its surrounding lake beneath a gigantic stone pyramidal memorial.]

In the Andromeda Galaxy, war had been raging so furiously around the Hub that it seemed that it was only a question of time before the last STF deployments were overwhelmed by the sheer mass of the anarchists. Directing the defense from the MindWar Center on Hub Four, Tharrud Terclis is finally himself trapped amidst a multitude of haphazardly-landing space-vessels that crash to the ground around the Center. He faces imminent death, when -

As suddenly and inexplicably as it had begun, the Third Star War is over. The combatants, at a sudden moment bewildered to discover what they had been doing, and indeed horrified to realize the extent of it, drop their weapons where they are, bring their careening ships back into as much order as possible, and then gradually, painfully, and with a shared shame to which they will never be able to put a name, head homeward.

There is, however, one final, tragic casualty. Racing to the Imperial Center on Hub Three to bring the news to his father, Luke bursts into the palace to find Aureon Palpatine dead by his own hand. Never to know of the existence or influence of the Krel-machines a galaxy away, the Emperor could conclude only that in the last analysis, he had failed in his consuming ambition to bring stability and peace to the once-ravaged Galactic Republic.

EPILOGUE

Many years later the citizens of the island-nation of Atlantis, which they have named for the queen who came to them, with her consort, from out of an eastern desert and taught them wondrous arts of civilization, are startled to see a gleaming starship appear in the skies above their ocean.

Their king and queen, however, do not seem in the least intimidated by the vessel, but indeed run to greet its four passengers - a slight, weathered man with greying-blond hair, a regal-looking woman with her hair done up in odd-looking buns on either side of her head, a large orange-brown creature completely covered with hair, and an old man with flowing white hair, clad completely in black.

The visitors stayed for a few days, then departed as suddenly and quietly as they had come.

APPENDICES

1977-2002

MUSIC

In order to help me catch the mood, not just the action and dialogue of a particular episode, I often choose an appropriate background of music - often but not always from film soundtracks. In case you're curious, here are some of those I used for *The Dark Side*.

Unfortunately many of these are from a now-ancient form of recording: vinyl phonograph records, requiring a similarly-antique playing device: a phonograph turntable. It is possible that a check against the serial numbers below may turn up some current reissues in compact disk format.

John Williams' original soundtrack score for *Star Wars* was nothing short of Wagnerian in its Romantic elegance, certainly accounting for much of the film's remarkable popularity. What many today may not know or recall is that, following the release of the original soundtrack album, numerous independent artists and orchestras issued their own recordings of the music. Some of these interpretations soared beyond the original soundtrack in their power and presence. The best renditions of some principal selections, in my opinion, are:

Star Wars (main theme/title)

“*Star Wars: Title Theme & Princess Leia's Theme*”, Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra, *Orchestrations Astromantic*, RCA record #RDCE-6.

As would later be demonstrated by the *anime* phenomenon, the Japanese have a unique attraction to science fiction and an equally unique ability to extract the utmost in drama from it. The Tokyo Philharmonic's “Title Theme” is played more slowly and deliberately than the original, with massive use of instruments against an evident auditorium depth. Delicate bridges between themes alternate with deliciously-extended drum rolls and thrilling brass fanfares. This is “stand-alone” *Star Wars* concert music at its greatest.

Darth Vader

“The Imperial March”, National Philharmonic Orchestra, *The Empire Strikes Back*, Chalfont Records, record #SDG-313.

This sinister march appeared almost incidentally in the *TESB* original soundtrack. A short time later Charles Gerhardt and the National Philharmonic did a much more concert-oriented version of the soundtrack, in which “The Imperial March”/aka “Darth Vader's Theme” gets its proper measure of sinister inevitability.

The attack on Leia's Alderaan courier ship

“Imperial Attack”, London Philharmonic Orchestra, *Star Wars and a Stereo Space Odyssey*, Stereo Gold Award, record #SGA-1000.

Also at a slower, concert pace, this version allows the listener to enjoy the many interweaving and interlocking themes of this mood-setting sequence. You will be surprised at all of the nuances you missed in the original!

Princess Leia

“Second Movement: Princess Leia’s Theme”, Zubin Mehta, Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra, *Zubin Mehta Conducts Suites from Star Wars and Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, London, record #MFSL-1-008.

Beginning and ending with the utmost delicacy, this rendition climbs to a crescendo of beauty and dignity unmatched by any other performance.

Luke meets Ben Kenobi

“Land of the Sandpeople”, London Philharmonic Orchestra, *Star Wars and a Stereo Space Odyssey*, Stereo Gold Award, record #SGA-1000.

This version stands out because of the attention it gives to the pause in the music upon the first appearance of Kenobi, and the metaphysical eeriness of the following theme identifying him.

Escape from the Death Star/Destruction of the Death Star

“The Battle”, NHK Symphony Orchestra, “*Star Wars*” *Suite*, Toshiba Records, record #LF-91045.

Again Japanese orchestral firepower at its most energized. The Death Star battle on maximum overdrive!

The Awards Ceremony

“The Throne Room and End Title”, “*Star Wars*” *Suite*, Toshiba Records, record #LF-91045.

At a magnificently slow concert pace, the NHK Symphony allows itself plenty of time for every juicy morsel of fireworks, from cymbals to brass to drums. Instead of rushing between themes, as does the original, it comes to a full halt, takes a breath, then re-stuns you with fresh sonic thunder - and a delicately-contrasting “Leia’s Theme” interlude. The finale then greets you with a relentless, solid drumbeat that gives way to glorious brass-and strings fireworks. It ends with a glorious explosion that just keeps on exploding. You can listen to just this one selection and get the very best of all of the *Star Wars* music.

We now come to plot divergence between the Lucasfilm series and *The Dark Side*. Here, for inspiration, I sought out thematic musical selections from other sources. Many, it will be evident, came from film composer/conductor Miklos Rozsa, whose spectacular and grandiose creations come close to overwhelming the movies for which they were originally fashioned.

The Dark Side

“Prelude”, John Barry, *Raise the Titanic*, Silva Screen Records, compact disk #SSD-1102.

Unlike the Lucasfilm *Star Wars*, which tends towards “lightweight action”, *The Dark Side* is deeper, darker, more reflective, more melancholy, and more tragic. There is adventure and happiness, but also loneliness, sadness, mystery, and even an undercurrent of nostalgia for a kinder, gentler universe. While *Raise the Titanic* was a little-known, quickly forgotten film, John Barry’s central theme for it perfectly catches the vision and grandeur of *The Dark Side*.

Thanos Kon

“Glacken’s Quest”, The Fantasy Merchants, *The Keep: The Film Music of Tangerine Dream*, Tsunami, compact disk #TCI-0616.

In the dim prehistory of Andromeda, so it was said in legend, a semi-mythical figure known as Thanos Kon brought a great gift [or terrible curse] from what we know as the Crab Nebula (M1/NGC-1952) to Andromeda. We know and see very little of Thanos Kon in *The Dark Side*, yet he is that presence who set so much of its forces in motion throughout the Andromeda Galaxy. This dangerous yet thoughtfully-alien theme gives us the briefest hint of him.

The Creation of Wingrace

This is easy: Richard Wagner’s “The Ride of the Valkyries”, of course! My favorite rendition is that of Sir Georg Solti and the Vienna Philharmonic, on *Wagner•Solti, Der Ring des Nibelungen, Excerpts*, London compact disk #410-137-2.

From what we later learn of Wingrace, she certainly had to come into being with a suitably pyrotechnic extravaganza!

Darth Vader on Alderaan

“The Monument”, Jerry Goldsmith, *Logan’s Run*, MGM Records record #MG-1-5002.

A lilting, innocent melody reflecting the carefree first meeting of Darth Vader and Leia Organa, trailing off into the ominous tragedy of their parting and its sinister secret aftermath.

The Chamber of Sith

“III: Landscape: Lento”, Ralph Vaughn Williams, Sinfonia Antarctica (Symphony No. 7), Sir Adrian Boult, *Vaughan Williams*, EMI compact disk set #5-73924-2.

Towards the end of his life Thanos Kon enshrined his “gift” in a subterranean chamber on what later became known as the Planet of Sith - a poisonous, lightning-

lashed world at the edge of the next inner spiral arm from that of Andromeda's humanoid civilization. The planet and its secret lay forgotten for long ages of time, until the Jedi Darth Vader rediscovered the chamber and entered it to become the Dark Lord of Sith. After his first death, the chamber was re-entered by Han Solo and Krel Atlan, who also received the Fire of Sith from the silvery statue of that entity, seated amidst geometric symbols in the center of the domed, glasslike cave. The statue and the cave were then destroyed; the time of assistance was at an end, and Andromeda's fate would now lie with the beings then existing. This music suggests the vast, deserted expanses of the planet, culminating in a sonic confrontation with the pre-æonic mystery and majesty of Sith, the Being from Beyond All Time and Space.

The Clone Genos

“Flameout”, Jerry Goldsmith, *Logan's Run*, MGM Records record #MG-1-5002.

While the Clone Genos and its Procreators are before the time of this story, what we know about that time makes us glad we did **not** meet them. A relentlessly consuming, obliterating, technoplague - at least as shuddersome as *Dr. Who's* Daleks or *Battlestar Galactica's* Cylons.

The Imperial Anthem

“Parade of the Charioteers” from *Ben-Hur*, Miklos Rozsa, *Miklos Rozsa Conducts His Great Film Music*. Angel record #S36063.

5080 years after the arrival of Thanos Kon from M1, the Republic of Andromeda was overthrown by the Kemset Senator Aureon Palpatine, who established in its place an aristocracy-based Empire. This Empire remains the single largest unified civilization known to universal history. Two years after Emperor Palpatine's ascent to power, this music was adopted as the official anthem of the Empire. It may be heard whenever the Galactic Hub, the five-planet capital, is seen from space; when Palpatine himself appears; and when his successor is acclaimed. [While in the Lucasfilm series the “Darth Vader” theme is entitled “The Imperial March”, that brooding music in no way supports the glory of Andromeda. **This** does!]

Obi-wan Kenobi

“Overture” from *Julius Cæsar*, Miklos Rozsa, *Rozsa Conducts Rozsa, Volume 2*. Deutsche Grammophon record 2584-021.

On Tatooine Luke Skywalker meets an old hermit known to him as “Ben” Kenobi. He learns that “Ben” is a Jedi Initiate named Obi-wan Kenobi and discovers that the old man was an Imperial General of the Empire and Sophrex of the entire Order of Jedi. In the Citadel of the Jedi on Hub-3, Darth Vader learns that Kenobi also broke the Seal of Thanos Kon on the forbidden *Yellow Text*, thereby attaining to a level of Initiation previously unknown to the Jedi. No longer an evident controller of events in the history of Andromeda, Kenobi appears to be motivated by purposes beyond all arbitrary values. In those whom he meets, he arouses feelings of a decidedly

mixed nature; this music describes this kindly, terrifying, amusing, and enigmatic Ipsissimus.

The Sith Starship

“Prelude: The Robe”, Alfred Newman, *The Robe*, MCA record MCA-2052.

After Darth Vader returned from the Planet of Sith, he ordered a special starship constructed for him by the Empire’s facilities on Hub-5. This curious vessel, a product of experimental Imperial technology and thaumaturgical arts acquired by Vader during his exile, was the first in Andromeda to be powered by photonic engines. Its exterior, constructed entirely of the diamond-like, black Sith metal, was an exotic combination of the practical and the ornate - a sort of space-going *Nautilus* from the most profound visions of Jules Verne. Here is its theme, heard for the first time as Vader and Han Solo arrive at its Hub-3 dock after their meeting with Palpatine.

Krel Atlan

“Main Title”, Alex North, *Cleopatra*, Varese Saraband, compact disk #302-066-224-2.

After a normal childhood on the planet Diur, Krel Atlan entered the Citadel on Hub-3 to become a Jedi. She completed her training shortly before Palpatine’s coup, and she was the only survivor of the Jedi Massacre two years later. Later, as Darth Vader’s pilot and fellow-Initiate of the Dark Side of the Force, she would be chosen to bring the Fire of Sith to our own Milky Way Galaxy. Despite her association with Darth Vader and her love for Han Solo, Krel was doomed by her high initiation to be a tragic figure, ever conscious of her isolation from others of her race of beings. At once beautiful and terrible, her eyes replaced by two electronic crystals, she was a Sorceress of the Black Arts in the great tradition of Queen Nitokris and Maleficent. This is her music - romantic, passionate, yet tinged with chilling, dæmonic shadows.

Lightsaber fight: Krel and Obi-wan

“You’re Renewed”, Jerry Goldsmith, *Logan’s Run*, MGM Records record #MG-1-5002.

The brief, ferocious, and lethal lightsaber duel between Krel Atlan and Obi-wan Kenobi, resulting in his [second] death.

Mos Eisley/Arrival of the STF

“The Slave Market - Entrance of Caligula”, Alfred Newman, *The Robe*, MCA record MCA-2052.

Han Solo, disguised as Darth Vader, arrives at the Tatooine STF garrison and is escorted to a waiting starship in Mos Eisley by Captain Daron Brumus and a guard

of his Stormtroopers. In this selection the semi-civilized, uncouth atmosphere of Mos Eisley is suddenly disrupted by the arrival of the Stormtroopers and the fearsome figure they are escorting.

Return to the Cantina

“Cantina Band”, John Rose (Playing the Great Pipe Organ), *Star Wars*, Delos, record #DEL/F-25450.

After the slaying of Darth Vader by Leia Organa, Luke Skywalker returns to Tatooine to seek further knowledge of the Force. He pauses first in the nearly deserted cantina in Mos Eisley where his adventures began, remembering his meeting with Ben, Han Solo, and Chewbacca. His nostalgic musings - and the ghostly echo of the cantina band song - end when he looks up and recognizes his old friend Lorin Xanpol.

Pantehnikon

“Synergy”, *Synergy*, Passport Records record #PPSD-98009.

After crash-landing the *Millennium Falcon* on the Planet of Sith, the minstrel Lorin Xanpol regains consciousness to discover that “he” now exists as an intelligence pattern in a Sith-metal cyborg body - a sleek, gleaming symphony of technology whose sculptured face, thinks Xanpol, seems like that of the Force itself. Nevertheless Xanpol’s *psyche* gradually achieves harmony with his new form, and by the beginning of the Xronos events he has become renowned throughout the Empire for his artistic synthesis of organic musical concepts with mechanical and mathematic principles of balance and precision. Underlying the entire theme is the cheerful, naive idealism of Luke Skywalker’s quiet and introspective friend from Tatooine.

The Conjunction of Wingrace

“The Burning of Rome”, Miklos Rozsa, *Quo Vadis*, London record #SPC21180.

Ancient Scandinavian mythology includes the legend of the Valkyries, the warrior-maidens who carried the souls of heroes to Walhalla upon their death. This is one of those curious indications that Earth-humanity possesses fragmentary memory of its own contact with the Xronos crisis of Andromeda, because a central figure in *The Dark Side* is that of Wingrace, Valkyrie of Sith - a beautiful, mercurial, and mischievous fiend with a form of pure fire. This foreboding, ominous music begins as Lorin Xanpol utters the Formula of Other Hearing in the Hall of the Pit of Leng on the Planet of Sith. The music builds in force and fury as the Outer and Inner Gates are opened and the Column of Purification arises from the Pit, attended by the Mutation of the Stones. Only Xanpol’s Pantehnikonic body saves him from being incinerated alive as the entire Hall becomes a raging furnace. Then the Column recedes, revealing Wingrace seated arrogantly - and impatiently - on the Throne of Pharos.

The Return of Darth Vader

“Dance of Job’s Comforters - Scene VII”, Ralph Vaughan Williams, *Job, A Masque for Dancing*, Sir Adrian Boult, *Vaughan Williams*, EMI compact disk set #5-73924-2.

This passage begins on a subdued, almost mournful note as Xanpol, bewildered by his initial encounter with Wingrace, walks apprehensively down a corridor of the subterranean Clone complex to join her in the genefusion laboratory. There is a sudden burst of sound as the Valkyrie activates the Clone genefusor, building to a crescendo as the energy rings of ionized plasma burn out to create an increasingly detailed figure atop the neutronic pedestal. Then, with a dæmonic fanfare, there stands revealed the figure of Darth Vader, Lord of Sith and Magus of the Dark Side of the Force, whose very name sends a thrill of awe and terror across the Galaxy of Andromeda. His body still shimmering redly from the plasma-fusion, Darth Vader raises his arms in the Sign of *Xa* before the Pentagram of Sith, uttering the Oath with which he Came Into Being as the Dark Lord, receives his *t’a* from the Powers of Darkness - then steps off the pedestal into his second life.

The Stormtrooper Force March

“Hail Galba”, Miklos Rozsa, *Quo Vadis*, London record #SPC21180.

This is the official march of the Imperial Stormtrooper Force (STF) and the theme of its founder and Commander, Imperial General Tharrud Terclis. This particular version is heard as Han Solo, disguised as Darth Vader, sees the legendary warrior arrive to meet with him and Palpatine on Hub-4. The march ends quietly as Solo reflects on the desperate events during the Clone Wars that led to the institution of the MindWar Center and the creation of the STF in the declining days of the Galactic Republic.

The Vision and The Voice

“Young Bess”, Miklos Rozsa, *Miklos Rozsa Conducts His Great Film Music*, Deutsche Grammophon record #2584013.

The occasion of Luke Skywalker’s initiation to the Order of Jedi. Following the initial theme of initiation, there is a brief, playful interlude as the surprised Luke encounters the ghostly image of Leia, then a more subdued passage as he envisions other images and his human life fades, and finally a restatement of the main theme as the new Jedi stands alone under the starlit sky, his lightsaber aloft and blazing forth with the scarlet fire of his Recognition.

The STF Strike Command Departs

“Five Graves to Cairo”, Miklos Rozsa, *Rozsa Conducts Rozsa, Volume 2*. Deutsche Grammophon record 2584-021.

Palpatine has ordered Terclis to attack and annihilate the Alderaan Rebellion with the STF fleet of over four thousand Star Destroyers. A martial theme is heard as Han Solo and Terclis watch the awesome fleet spiral out of orbit around Hub-4 and accelerate to translight en route to the Spur of Varpel. Then a more deliberate theme is heard as the Imperial General explains his attack concept to the STF Wing Commanders, while a disconsolate Solo walks toward his quarters aboard Terclis’ Death Star command post.

Have You Seen the Stars Tonite?

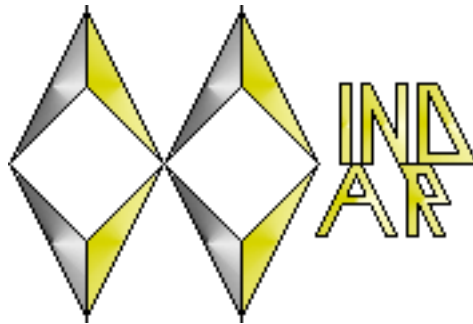
“Have You Seen the Stars Tonite?”, Paul Kantner/Jefferson Starship, *Blows Against the Empire*, RCA compact disk #7863-67440-2.

The dying Leia Organa flees with Lorin Xanpol to the Planet of Sith, narrowly escaping interception by ships from Terclis’ fleet. The princess suffers another neural seizure as a consequence of her surgically-damaged brain cells. When she recovers, she bitterly contemplates the seeming hopelessness of her future. The Pantehnikon asks her to come with him to the glass-domed observation deck of the probe ship, and there he sings to her of the beauty and benevolence of the cosmos.

End of the Rebellion/The Dark Side

“Russian Threat/The *Titanic* Enters New York Harbor”, John Barry, *Raise the Titanic*, Silva Screen Records, compact disk #SSD-1102.

Following the massive starship engagements, near-fatal disasters, and then the startling revelations on the second Death Star, the protagonists are finally able to rest and recover from their adventures, and this triumphant reprise of the main theme from *The Dark Side* casts their thoughts back through all of its heroic yet bittersweet memories.



Imperial Stormtrooper Force
MindWar Center - Hub Four
Office of the Commanding General

TSGD197908250940

Dear General Dakkar:

Enclosed with this is a copy of the text of my final instructions to our last graduating class. When you requested this document, you did not make clear how you intended to use it. I trust you remembered that the words alone will be of little use to any reader. The conditions under which they are spoken and the special preparation of the candidates for whom they are intended give the words a significance which cannot be comprehended by outsiders. Still there are things in the paper which may generate disquiet, so please limit circulation to those who may be trusted.

On a related matter, I am concerned about this fellow Aquino. The summary profile I ran on him was disturbing to say the least. I am having the Security Section do a more detailed study. They expect to have him ID'd soon. In the meantime I want him watched. I am at present sufficiently amused, however, to continue reading and commenting upon his manuscripts. It is, after all, a rare thing to participate in the writing of one's own history. In any case, if he gets to be an annoyance, you know what to do ...

Contrary to the opinion of my System Commanders, I do not enjoy these long stints away from Hub Four doing inspection visits to our outposts. I miss greatly the Senior Staff Mess in the Great Hall and, of course, your own good company. I sometimes wonder what will become of all that we have built when we are gone. The answer, I am confident, is that it shall endure. I can see its perpetuation in the corps of fine young MW officers now posted throughout the Empire. To have created this Force is a source of great personal satisfaction. To see it placed in its true relation to the Empire is now my single remaining purpose.

Tharrud Terclis
THARRUD TERCLIS
Imperial General, STF
Commanding