

Assault on Glass Mountain

The warships came without warning.

Alliance technical engineer Kell Nones, who had arrived the night before from Tatooine, was scheduled to begin his duty tour in twenty minutes.

Nones stood precariously on the knotted vines, thick as a man's body, that coiled over the blue crystalline face of Glass Mountain, on the fourth moon of Nuhatu, deep inside the Galactic Core.

Glass Mountain was hollow and crammed with communications gear. One hundred twenty-five Rebel technicians lived inside the Mountain, monitoring Imperial transmissions around the clock.

Somehow the Alliance had managed to move in the equipment. Somehow they had managed to keep the listening devices running, undetected, for six months.

It was a daring operation, in the heart of an important Imperial system. The listeners had learned a lot. They had learned that the Rebel Alliance was in deep trouble.

"Mornin', Spec Three. I'm Nones. Got here last night."

"Kck nlchkll. Greetings, Nones. Tlus Skub. You'll like this tour. It's peaceful. Nuthin' ever happens. Nchgl!!"

Tlus Skub was a Yaka defense specialist, one of twenty Yakas assigned to protect the listening mountain against unwanted intruders. Like all Yakas, he had a brutish countenance, full of violent intensity. Like most Yakas he possessed near-genius intelligence, thanks to devices implanted in his brain by the patriarchal Arkanians who had invaded and socialized his homeworld a century before.

When the Glass Mountain operation began, the Yakas were given the job of constructing defense bunkers. These gunposts, hidden in the vines, were masked with cloaking devices that projected a false image to Imperial probe droids and orbiting scanners.

The bunkers were armed with brand new Modon Lasma ion cannons. Like everything else in the installation, the bulky cannons were packed across the rugged valleys of the Nuhatuan moon in pieces, using native Bantha herders.

Once the bunkers were built, and the Modon Lasmas installed, life became pleasantly boring for the defense specialists—while the communications engineers worked like hivehornets.

In the year since the operation began, the big mountain guns had never been fired—not even once. It was the sincere hope of the Alliance that the Yakas' year of boredom would stretch

on until it became absolutely necessary to move the operation. When that might be, no one knew.

Nones gazed out across the serene mountain ranges of the Nuhatu moon. "What's the chance the Imps will decide to build a cargo port or somethin' worse around here, Skub?"

"We checked it out. Sure, the Empire scans it twice a day... probes make their weekly runs. But the moon's magnetic core makes this place useless to the Imps. It's a communications sink."

"Yeah, I was briefed on that. That's why every passing comm-wave is sucked into our antennas. An' nuthin' leaves except in a hardware package. But still... I can think of thirty different military uses for a world like this."

Nones filled his lungs with the bright oxygen-rich air. "Beautiful place. I hope the Imps don't think of those thirty applications."

"If peace and quiet is what you like, this is the post for you, Nones. Nuthin' *ever* happens."

The warships came without warning.

Sedriss QL charged the energy weapons of his Incom I-10 Howlrunner and beamed a coded hyperspace query to the six I-7's behind him. Each of his fellow Dark Side Warriors responded in the affirmative.

Black, and sleek as glass, the seven tactical fighters came out of hyperspace and hit the planet's atmosphere with a thunderclap that reverberated across the remote canyons and mountains.

Sedriss QL cursed aloud. The sonic wave was the result of a miscalculation by the Imperial navigator assigned to chart the mission. Surely the navigator would die for this error. Fortunately it was a miscalculation of no consequence. The fast black warships arrived at Glass Mountain ahead of the sound.

Snapping rapid phrases to his targeting computer, Sedriss QL, overflowed with dark and violent thoughts. He let his anger churn and expand, as his Master had taught. The I-10 vibrated again and again as its turbolasers unleashed staccato blasts.

The Rebel defense bunkers ruptured in bright heat, dissolving their living contents.

Technical engineer Kell Nones was in mid-sentence when the air tilted with white fire and before his startled eyes Talus Skub was vaporized into boiling red steam.

Nones dived for cover and the crystal mountain exploded all around him. Grasping desperately for the blaster on his belt, Nones found himself falling with the bodies of screaming Yakas into a chaos of frying electronics and machinery. Something slammed hard against his head-then there was silence... and darkness.

Sedriss QL let his eyes scan the target area. The smaller I-7 attack ships were ruthlessly carrying out their work all over the mountain. The pitiful defenders were being obliterated, their mountain guns transformed to melted scrap.

Following the battle-plan, Captain Vill Goir, piloting *Eliminator-1*, was scorching away vines and fusing a landing pad on the crystalline peak. In the cargo-holds of each of the seven attack ships elite teams of black-armored stormtroopers were ready. Time to touch down and bring death to the mountain's secret Rebel heart.

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The seven warships were resting on their landing skids, their gleaming hulls alive with dark reflections of the burning bunkers. Hatchways unlocked with a malign hiss of escaping gasses.

The seven attack vessels opened like exotic insects and the boots of black-armored stormtroopers resounded.

As Sedriss QL strode down the access ramp of *Eliminator-1*, he felt a rush of bliss, a fire from head to toe, like murderous black lightning.

Technical engineer Kell Nones found his awareness surfacing in a confusion of light and noise and the blurred images of seven Dark Side Warriors and their elite stormtrooper teams blasting their way into Glass Mountain's interior.

Rebel technicians and defense specialists rained laser fire on the intruders from protected positions in the cavernous mountain hall. Other techs desperately loaded the latest trove of Imperial transmissions into Xanto Projectile Droids and shouldered the cylindrical droids into their launch tubes.

Because of the clandestine nature of the Glass Mountain operation, it was, of necessity, under-defended. Even so, the Rebels outnumbered their stormtrooper attackers, two-to-one. The odds would seem to be in the Rebels' favor.

Nones, as expert with a hand weapon as he was with a computer-glove, staggered to his feet, took aim, and gritted his teeth. His blaster unleashed a bolt of fire and a black-armored stormtrooper fell to the deck. With grim satisfaction, Nones took aim at another intruder.

Suddenly his satisfaction turned to bewilderment as an invisible hand seemed to grip him around the neck. Bewilderment turned to fear as he felt muscle and cartilage compress and snap under an inexorable force.

Six yards away burning eyes were watching him from the center of the mounting chaos... He could make out unmoving figures robed in black. There were seven of them, standing as if protected by invisible armor, while laser blasts and thrashing bodies stormed around them.

The one with the burning eyes moved toward Nones. Still gripped by an invisible hand, Nones was held helplessly as the dark figure extended an arm toward him and pressed a lightsaber hilt against Nones' chest.

The blade ignited.

A flare of pain shot through his heart and across his spine. Nones opened his mouth but could not scream. A malevolent grin appeared under the burning eyes. Nones' suffocated scream exploded in his brain.

Kell Nones was not alone in death. One hundred twenty techs and all thirty Yaka defense specialists died. Many were brought down by stormtrooper weapons. Others bore no marks of violence, except for purplish swollen throats. A few of the bravest lay horribly dismembered, their terrible wounds cauterized black, slaughtered by the lightsabers of the Dark Side.

A Lone Jedi

He had been away far too long... thirty-five years.

He was only thirty when Vader murdered his family. A loving wife and two sons were brutally taken from him, and his own father, Ranik Solusar, the great Jedi Master. All had died at the command of the Sith Lord.

Kam Solusar kicked the *Starfield Roamer* out of lightspeed. The old ion engines responded with a cough and the ship shuddered ominously as the lightdrive whined down. Kam turned to EV-9T9, sitting immobile, its chest socketed to the Roamer's navigation controls. "Eevee! Wake up, fella. We're here."

The tarnished droid showed no sign of hearing its Master's command. Six green diodes flickered next to its darkened visual sensors. From somewhere in its mechanical entrails a soft humming emerged, like the singing of a mace fly on a hot summer evening on Dantooine.

"Eevee! Trip's over! We're comin' in on the rim systems!"

"Yes, Master Kam. I am aware of that. I was just doing diagnostics on the lightdrive. The entire drive will have to be replaced, sir. It's not up to another jump."

"Yeah, I kinda figured that, from the sound of her. Still, two months in hyperspace is ten times the MK-I's operating limits. We're lucky she didn't decide to peg it in deep space."

"You're lucky, sir. As for myself, were I to find myself stranded half-way between two galaxies, I'd simply shut down my intelligence and set my power consumption for millennial hibernation."

The angular droid finally rotated its head toward Kam and switched on its visual sensors. The weary Jedi thought he saw the flicker of a smile on its inflexible mouth.

"Yeah. And I'd do the same, Eevee. Now let's get to work. What does the navicomp say? Is there a spaceport around here where a thirsty Jedi can buy a beer?"

"Yes, sir, The Roamer tells me that we are three days, at sub-light speed, from Shabook, a technologically advanced system. The Roamer says there is a great deal of military traffic in the area. Shabook advises all space traffic that it is an Imperial outpost, sir."

Kam's heart sank. *Imperials.*

When he had abandoned the Galaxy, thirty-five years before, its ancient democratic government had been supplanted by a New Order, under the single-minded control of Supreme Chancellor Palpatine, who had risen to power on the tide of corruption that had infected the Old Republic like a fatal disease.

In the name of '*Law and Order*,' Palpatine made himself Emperor, and applied the word '*Imperial*' to every organization and agency of the Republic, including the democratically elected

Galactic Senate. The name of benign institutions like the Galactic Academy—now the Imperial Academy took on intimations of despotism and oppression.

With the fanatical assistance of the Imperial Navy and corrupted Jedi Knights like Darth Vader, Palpatine began the systematic transformation of the Galaxy into a realm of tyranny. Evil alliances were formed with the governors of thousands of formerly democratic star systems. Crude but effective transactions were undertaken with criminal elements that infested the decaying Republic and thrived along its lawless frontiers.

And last but not least, Emperor Palpatine launched a campaign to destroy the great company of Jedi Knights, the last bastion of justice in a Galaxy that was rapidly submitting to the power of greed, violence and fear.

As darkness advanced, the light of the Jedi seemed to sputter and fade. Many died, many tried to hide, and many fell to the power of the Dark Side.

Kam Solusar was one of those who chose to stand and fight the bitter fight, one day at a time, clinging to the spark of freedom. He hid his family and his aging Jedi father on Anoth, an uncharted world he thought the Emperor would never find. Then he went away to the war.

One fateful day, in the midst of a great battle, he had an unexpected vision, brought to him through the power of the Force:

He saw the death of his wife, F'heela.

He saw the death of his two sons, Jaxor and Tev, both wise in the Force.

He saw the death of his Master, his own father, Ranik.

They died by torture. They died by lightsaber. They died by the hand of Darth Vader himself.

The vision had ended strangely:

Vader turned and faced him, as if seeing Kam Solusar across those twenty thousand light years. He felt a disturbance in the Force, like a shaft of blackest night reaching out and penetrating his heart, filling him with terrible dread.

Without explanation to his companions, Kam Solusar abandoned the battlefield, boarded his ship and fled.

First he went to Anoth. He didn't need to go—he knew his vision was a true one. He buried the remains of his family, and then, with his faithful droid servant EV-9T9, he took the *Starfield Roamer* out into uncharted hyperspace, and left the Galaxy behind.

That was thirty-five years ago. Now he was coming home, returning from a distant Galaxy, with his mechanical companion still at his side.

During that thirty-five year adventure he had come to terms with his failure and his cowardice. He had matured. He had listened to the Force, which had continued to touch him, across the far reaches of space.

Finally, after thirty-five years, the Force had moved toward him with great power.

"Come home, Kam," it seemed to say. "There is work to do. There are others, who have stood fast against the Darkness. They need you. You must come home."

EV-9T9 tapped a metal index finger against a whirring sensor-gauge. "We're being scanned, sir. A high-energy surveillance beam. Should I attempt to return to hyperspace? The lightdrive might hold up to a short hop to another system."

The Dark Side. He could feel it. With a sinking heart Solusar understood. He had run away from death. Now, thirty-five years later, he had come sneaking back. And death was waiting for him.

"Whatever happens now is destiny, Eevee. Stay on course. Let's see what happens."

They didn't have long to wait.

The void opened in a stuttering flash and an Imperial Star Destroyer, Victory-class, emerged about twenty kilometers to their left.

Solusar kept a firm hand on the helm. The *Starfield Roamer* continued on her course toward the beckoning Shabook star.

Then the *Roamer* shuddered and groaned and her engines protested as they cycled up, attempting to maintain speed against an invisible resistance.

The attempt was useless. The *Starfield Roamer* was caught in the grip of a powerful tractor beam.

Sanctum of the Dark Side

Sedriss QL stood on the balcony of Bast Castle, Lord Vader's ridge-top stronghold, watching somber clouds laced with red light race across the sky.

Above the wind he could hear the whine of an Imperial shuttle descending through the storm with its precious human cargo.

The Emperor will be pleased, he thought. A Jedi, captured alive. And I have him.

The Emperor will be pleased. This will confirm his decision to trust his military power to my hands, before he departed with Skywalker to recapture the Jedi princess and the precious Holocron.

The Emperor has died once more, betrayed by a Skywalker. And I hold the reins of the military, until his inevitable return. When the Emperor takes a fresh clone body and stands forth in undying strength, he will reward me well, for I have maintained the rule of war in his absence.

The shuttle dropped out of the churning red-veined sky and settled slowly toward the raised landing pad where *Eliminator-1* and three other sleek Howlrunner warships sat in a row.

Sedriss QL smiled to himself and looked out over the rugged lifeless mountain ranges that stretched a thousand kilometers in every direction. The entire Vjun planet belonged to him, a refuge and a headquarters for his six elite warriors, each empowered with the Force, each trained in the ways of the Dark Side.

Dark Jedi. That's what Emperor Palpatine called them—when they completed their training. On that great day Palpatine awarded them this world, which had once belonged to Darth Vader himself. And Palpatine made Sedriss QL their unquestioned leader, his Dark Side Executor.

The name "Sedriss" was a title, meaning '*Sublime Malevolence*,' handed down from the Sith, in the tongue of an extinct civilization that worshiped the Dark Side. Sedriss himself had reduced his birth-name, Qaga Lok, to its initial letters, as a sign he had left behind the world of his fathers. (But not the world of his greatest ancestors: Sedriss QL claimed to be descended from the lineage of Ulic Qel-Droma, a great Jedi who turned to the Dark Side 4,000 years ago.)

I shall be as feared as Vader was.

There was no doubt in his mind that such would come to pass. Indeed, the reputes of Sedriss and his six fellow Dark Side Warriors was already resonating through the ranks of the Imperial fleet. Soon the common citizens of the most distant systems would tremble at the sight of their sleek black *Eliminator*-series warships, knowing they were piloted by the deadly instruments of the Emperor's will... *Dark Jedi.*

As the shuttle *Pluton* settled, bird-like, on the raised landing platform, Sedriss QL felt a spattering of chill rain against his scarred face. Deadly rain that killed every seed that ever tried to take root on the soil of Vjun.

Sedriss QL turned and reentered his citadel. He crossed the gallery under the tower keep, stopping to confer briefly with a technician operating a communications panel fused into the ancient stone.

Then he descended the long stone staircase to the meditation hall.

Another Dark Side genius had tread these very stones, many times. Darth Vader owned many worlds, but Vjun was his favorite. And Bast Castle, utterly alone on its ragged prominence, was his favored place to meditate on the Dark Side of the Force.

To commune with Darkness... to feel its black fire swell within you, until you were utterly imbued with the Force, until your consciousness was absolutely immersed in its infinity. That was the path to greatness... Dark Jedi.

Jedi in Shadow

The scarab droids ate into his flesh as Kam Solusar screamed.

Tiny incisions, cut by metal beaks honed razor thin, broke open the nerve endings.

The blood-bright chrome beaks glistened wet and held fast. A thousand microscopic needles advanced, working their way into the bone. Paralyzing psychoactive fluids spurted into the lymph system. Kam's howl of pain became the sickening cry of a soul in hell, as a mountain of despair rose up and overshadowed his mind.

Dark Warriors KrDys Mordi and Vill Goir hovered over the prisoner, while a third, Zasm Katth, finished dismembering EV-9T9. The three Force-users all wore the same close-cropped hair and ribbed leather uniforms—but each possessed unique human characteristics.

KrDys Mordi had large all-consuming eyes over a beak-like nose. His mind seemed to be devouring Solusar's thoughts as he supervised the work of the scarabs.

Vill Goir had a pronounced cleft running vertically from his nose to his hairline. His eyes were small, deepset, intensely suspicious. His cheeks were heavily lined, his mouth never lost its sneer.

Zasm Katth possessed a totally innocuous countenance, mask-like, interchangeable with a thousand ordinary men. What set him apart was the murderous intensity of his eyes—and of course, the deathlike pallor, which was displayed equally by all six of Sedriss QL's Dark Jedi.

Eevee's arms and legs were on the floor, melted and fused. The stink of burning insulation singed Katth's nostrils. Eevee's head, cold and lightless, sat on a tool bench, waiting for the arrival of DIS-M12, the Interrogator Droid.

Momentarily the hulking headless, DIS-M12 rolled into the room and approached the toolbench. "You called for me, sir?" It addressed Zasm Katth in metallic tones.

"Yes—here, I want this EV-9 model probed. Download everything you find useful." Katth handed the dented silver head to the Interrogator.

All the DIS-M12's external sensors were in its chest. Where the head of an ordinary anthropomorphic robot should be, there was a flexible socket and all-purpose neck adapter.

Taking the silver head in its tensile-jointed talons, the Interrogator set it carefully onto its own shoulders, adjusted the neck adapter, and pulsed power into Eevee's cranial circuits.

EV-9T9's visual sensors flashed briefly and then remained dark. But everything in its memory including every experience of the long voyage home and the thirty-five years in a distant Galaxy—was rapidly searched for useful information.

In ten minutes, the DIS-M12 was finished, and it handed Katth a small green data-cube. "Here you are, sir. There's 170,000 hours of pertinent information... fully indexed, of course."

"Thank you, DIS-M12. Toss everything into the furnace on your way out, will you?" He handed the Interrogator Droid a container filled with droid parts.

"The head too, sir?"

"Of course the head too."

"Very good, sir."

Sedriss scanned Kam's blood-soaked form and addressed his men with an angry snarl. "Where's Leth? This isn't working. The Jedi will die on us. I want him for the Dark Side."

"The scarabs are working, Sedriss. I feel it. He has no courage, none at all. He will surrender to the Dark Side."

"So say you, Mordi. And I say you're wrong. Direct the scarabs to withdraw. Give the Jedi something to drink. Wash him. Leth will be here soon. Leth has promised me the ultimate."

"Yes sir." Vill Goir's fingers played over the remote signaller, and the scarab droids suddenly whirled and backed out of the wounds they had made. A hundred clicking thumb-sized automatons dropped to the stone floor and scuttled away to their keeper.

Kam sat unseeing, his head draped back over the chair, his mouth hanging open. KrDys Mordi washed the wounds and applied ointment. Vill Goir brought water. Then they gave Kam an injection of molecular-mender. In seconds his wounds began to heal. In minutes he opened his eyes and looked into the exceedingly cruel countenance of Sedriss QL.

Sedriss smiled. "Welcome, Jedi. Welcome to the Dark Side."

Holocron

Luke Skywalker's face was bathed in light from the strange object in his hand.

Fragile lattices of hologram imagery danced in the air before his eyes.

For six hours a day, every day for the last month, he had been in dialogue with the distant past. Great histories had unfolded, in all their complex grandeur, before his hungry eyes. He had spoken with ancient Jedi warriors, and they had answered his probing questions as if they were standing before him, alive.

These long-dead adepts had revealed glimpses of the vast Galactic spectacle. Luke saw stars giving birth to new worlds, worlds giving birth to human and alien civilizations. He saw cosmic disasters that brought about mass extinctions. He witnessed whole populations move in mighty migrations from world to world, system to system... and across the uncharted deeps of hyperspace. Local wars were fought and won, and titanic fleets of warships raged across dozens of star systems, consumed millions of lives, and altered the destinies of entire generations.

Out of the epicenter of these chaotic events, a great river flowed, its waters clear, calm, and luminous. This tranquil river brought peace to every land it touched. It nourished suffering worlds with a gentle light that, when it was known and understood, seemed to order events from within, by a strange and awesome power that could be neither seen nor touched—the Force.

The Jedi Knights were a great company of warriors who learned the ways of the Force, lived in closeness with the Force, and let it permeate their thoughts and actions. Over many centuries they developed powers and abilities beyond the experience of ordinary men: physical powers, mental powers, healing powers, even the ability to meditate on the outcomes of battles. The meditation of the Jedi.

The Jedi were both warriors and guides, dispensing justice and showing others the path to peace. Through the ancient Jedi, the invisible Force was made real to others, as helper, healer, and harmonizer of their lives.

Luke saw all this, in great detail, and he marveled.

On the 29th day of his investigations, the Holocron, mysteriously, recognized Luke as one foretold in its prophecies. Unexpectedly a secret recess of Jedi lore, hidden deep in the Holocron's crystalline complexity, was opened.

The hologram of a new Gatekeeper appeared, a being unlike anyone Luke had seen or met—a royal personage of a race of aliens descended from trees, who called themselves the Neti. The gnarled, root-like being with mournful eyes introduced himself. He was Ood Bnar, born

deep in the forests of Myrkr, an historian and scholar of the royal house of Oronos. Every member of the house of Oronos (according to Ood) is (or was) a Jedi Master.

"Very unusual, my friend, that a ruling family consisted entirely of Jedi... In your time it will seem even more strange, for, if the terrible prophecies come true, then you are of the Dark Time, and you are among the few Jedi that remain."

Luke knitted his brows. "The prophecies were right," he said. "We are almost gone."

"It brings dread and sadness to my heart to see your time, to hear these thoughts. But I am hidden in the Holocron for a purpose: if the prophecies come to pass, there is a message reserved for you, the one who hears me now. No one else will ever hear these words."

"Last of the Jedi Masters, the Force was with you when you were born, the Force is with you now. And the Force will guide you in the work that lies ahead—the reawakening of the Jedi Knights."

"And now the Force will speak great truths to you, through Ood Bnar."

The image shimmered and oscillated. The ancient Jedi Master seemed to be concentrating intently on something unseen by Luke. Luke waited. Anxious minutes passed, and the holocron of Master Ood remained frozen.

"What's going on?" Luke asked, out loud. "Is the Holocron still working?"

The image suddenly shifted. "Just a moment... the information we want is deeply hidden... there are many levels... many ciphers to unlock... this seeing is very difficult for Ood... Ah, yes... there it is. Look... Here is a system, a very old system, in the Cron Node, near the core of the Galaxy, in a region called the Auril Sector!"

Luke marveled as the hologram figure of Master Ood conjured up spinning twin blue suns in his hand and a dozen worlds orbiting around him.

"Mark it well. They call it the Adega System in my time. I know not what they call it in yours... There were nine systems in the Cron Node... But three stars were destroyed and all their planets, in the time of the Sith War... Six systems remain, ruined and desolate... Adega is one, I know it well."

In my time, before the Sith War, the Adega System was a great center of Jedi learning. A great Jedi world called Ossus... found there... Master Ood, who speaks to you now, lives on Ossus, and he has outlasted the time of desolation and abandonment..."

"The Adega system. I've heard of it, Master Ood. Leia spoke of it just the other day."

"Good. Then look carefully.... Here is a city in space, Nespis VIII, floating between Entarr and Adega... A way station, constructed thousands of years ago, in the early days of hyperspace travel, when jump gates were established in the empty regions between stars..."

"The network of tested and established jump-points led to the creation of space stations, where freight travel and passenger ships would enter and leave hyperspace under the guidance of Hyperspace Traffic Control."

Luke nodded impatiently. "You're not telling me anything I don't already know, Master Ood."

But the ancient Jedi ignored Luke's protest and went on with his lecture, his stream of words unbroken now, as he spoke from his store of knowledge. He had been, after all, a Jedi scholar.

"At first rather primitive, these hyperspace terminals grew and expanded as they became gathering places for all the races of the Galaxy, law-abiding as well as outlaws. The largest

evolved into thriving cities in space, where many thousands would spend their whole lives, serving those who were passing through on their way to other systems.

"You see before you one such City, Nespis VIII, floating near the Adega System. The Prophecies say the Jedi Knights will reawaken there."

The hologram seemed to freeze again, as if new data were being accessed. Luke was about to raise a question, when Ood abruptly began speaking again in broken phrases.

"It's quite simple, then, my son. If you wish to reclaim the past... if you want the Jedi Knights to live again... you must go to the Adega System, and you must find Nespis VIII, this old city in space... if it still exists in your time. If.. it.. still... exists..."

"Will I find my Jedi Knights there?" asked Luke, forcefully. "

"Wait... give me another moment... yes, it's coming to me now... the promise... you will find Jedi there... and more will you find in that place, things that will help you.

"Now, my son. Let me tell you a riddle, full of meaning: The lightside game is lost but found. The Jedi who is lost loses it yet again. But in losing, he is found by the lightsider who finds the game... Memorize my riddle. It's important. It's a key."

Luke nodded his head. He carefully committed the riddle to memory, although he felt frustrated and confused. Through all of Master Ood's discourse, Luke was trying to think of a question that would give him the exact information he needed to proceed: "Master Ood, I can't find lost Jedi with prophecies or riddles... I can't save lives with half-forgotten poems muttered by Jedi Masters who died four thousand years ago! I need information. Can you really help me?"

"What makes you think I am dead, oh Jedi? My race is not like yours, that survives only a flicker of time... flick... r... o...time..."

The hologram of Master Ood seemed to look at Luke with its great mournful eyes for the longest time. Finally it spoke, "Bend closer to the Holocron. It is time for Ood to show you another wonderful secret."

Obediently, perhaps a little tearfully, Luke raised the Holocron until the image of the ancient Jedi was next to his face.

"Very good, young Jedi. Bend closer."

Luke moved the Holocron closer. As the light of the Holocron began to oscillate rhythmically, the words of Master Yoda came back to Luke, "*Through the Force things you will see: other places, other thoughts, the future, the past old friends long gone...*"

With the suddenness of a hyperspace jump Luke's mind leapt out into the universe...

He was seeing far and farther than he'd ever seen before, and the stars were rushing past in a breathless flight of fire-sparks.

Suddenly he understood that seeing, in the Force, was a relative thing. There was seeing... and there was seeing.

He seemed to soar over an immense cloud of colorful gas, many light-years wide, the remnants of an ancient supernova... and then through a great system, a brilliant symmetry of worlds and moons and twin blue suns arrayed around him...

The Adega system.

Then he was moving beyond, across the wide open void, toward a distant speck of greenish light. The light grew less distant, and larger, and revealed itself as a vast decayed edifice of girders and spires of corroded durasteel, a city constructed over black nothingness...

Ancient starships sat lifeless in exterior docking bays. A dead city in space, near the Adegan System. This must be Nespis VIII. I am seeing it exactly as it looks today.

He wasn't really there, but suddenly he was walking in that dead city, seeing it, truly, as it must be now.

He walked through a cavernous hangar and through an airlock and into a tower terminal, wrecked and looted, empty of any living thing. He turned a corner and saw a man standing on a balcony, looking out through a great viewport at the Adegan suns, distant and blue. Luke went towards the man, and the man turned.

The man was in his late fifties, with rugged features, close-cropped hair, and an unhappy and wary look in his eyes. Luke knew at once he was a Jedi.

They looked at each other. The man said something Luke couldn't quite make out. The man seemed deeply troubled...

Then the vision vanished, and Luke was beholding the shimmering image of Master Ood Bnar suspended above the Holocron in his hand.

"Thank you, Master Ood."

"Fine. It is one thing to listen to prophetic utterance and conundrums and the tree-thoughts of an old philosopher like myself... It is another entirely to see the very things that I see, as I speak my portents. Now you know. The Force has spoken directly: You have seen him. Your first Jedi. The Jedi Knights will rise again."

Luke did not know it then, but the Jedi he saw on the distant space station was Kam Solusar. And at that very moment, on a distant world called Vjun, Kam Solusar was about to lose his soul.

Mind Splitter

The mind is everything. Destroy the mind and you destroy the will. Destroy the will and you destroy the Jedi.

— From Emperor Palpatine's *Book of Anger*

"Ah, Leth, I wondered where you were. What have you got for me this time?"

"A weapon to scramble a man's brains, Sedriss." The overweight inventor laughed wickedly and held up a small cylinder, slightly larger than a comlink. One end had a faceted lens. Three bands of gleaming diodes were arrayed along the shaft, separated by tiny switches.

"Hmmm. Doesn't look very impressive," said Sedriss. "Besides, I need his brain intact, old friend. I want this man for the Dark Side."

"Ah, well. What a pity. Then I'll have to set the controls for '*simmer*'." Leth shook with a raw guttural laugh that seemed to chum around and around in his gullet, never quite reaching his lips.

Umak Leth and Sedriss were friends. Overweight Umak, Imperial Engineer, designer of weapons of death, tended to give himself to coarse humor, even in situations that required strict formality.

"Show me how it works." Sedriss was curious and secretly excited. Leth had yet to disappoint him.

"Of course, Sedriss, old friend. Here it is. Take it. It's yours. I'm done with it. Finished. I'm bored with its beautiful perfection. This exquisite instrument of torture only makes me yawn. I've already moved on to my next wonderful invention... a rancor trap that skins the monster and slices him into bite-sized pieces... Hawr har." Leth choked on his own amusement as he handed Sedriss the Splitter.

Sedriss took the glittering device in his hands. It was lightweight, compact—a warrior could carry one in a belt pocket.

"Aim the lens at the... uh... patient, Sedriss. Touch the red switch."

Sedriss pointed the Splitter at Kam Solusar. He hesitated. "I don't want to hurt him. What will it do to him? How does it work?"

"In layman's terms, it sets up an oscillation loop between itself and the subject's neural-synapses. The loop can drive brain waves to resonance, at six different frequencies. Very simple. The beauty is, that at three of those frequencies the mind of the subject begins to fragment and re-associate in attunement with the Dark Side of the Force:"

"Hmm. Interesting. Why does that happen?"

"Don't ask why. It's a physical law I discovered by accident. It works. That's all we need to know."

"Does it work as well as your World Devastators did on Calamari?" Sedriss gave his old friend an eloquent look.

"That wasn't my fault, Sedriss. Skywalker interfered with the Master Control Signal."

"Yes, well, sabotage was something the designer didn't anticipate, did he?"

"Sedriss, if you have doubts about my Mind Splitter, why don't you try it on yourself? Uh sorry, I forgot that your mind was split and scattered long ago, by the power of the Dark Side... unhar hwr."

Sedriss absorbed his friend's wicked grin and snapped back viciously, "The Jedi is ready. You may proceed." He thrust the Mind Splitter at Leth.

Umak Leth casually took the small device and aimed it at Kam Solusar. The diodes began to dance madly.

"It is done."

They waited long seconds for the scream. Sedriss looked doubtful. Umak smiled nervously.

But of course, the scream came.

* * *

Like Sedriss, Umak Leth, Imperial Engineer, had been singled out by the Emperor for an extraordinary honor: Dark Side Enhancement.

Dark Side Enhancement was a form of initiation that only a great Dark Side magus like Palpatine could perform. And Palpatine gave it to very few.

Emperor Palpatine had recognized the hidden potential in the young technician the day Leth's superior officer unveiled the Empire's upgraded assassin droids.

Some lovely touches had been added to the already proficient automatons: invisible blast rays, twelve kinds of silent explosives, on-board genetic lab-pack with victim-specific poison synthesis, and full-spectrum oscillators that used synchronous mimicry of the target's brain-waves to paralyze metabolic systems prior to execution. (This last technology was also the basis of the Splitter).

Palpatine marveled. Then Leth's supervisor foolishly tried to claim credit for Leth's work. In his greed for recognition, the poor man forgot the Emperor's ability to know exactly everything an underling intended to hide.

Of course Leth's superior was executed. Or rather, first he was demoted, and transferred to a remote outpost on the frontier. Then he was executed by one of Leth's upgraded assassin droids.

And Umak Leth became Chief Imperial Engineer.

Then Umak Leth received the Emperor's greatest blessing: Dark Side Enhancement.

His genius purged and intensified by the Dark Side of the Force, Umak entered a period of great productivity, culminating in the designing of the infamous World Devastators.

Despite the failure, in the Battle of Calamari of his crowning achievement, Leth's demonic intelligence continued to churn out diabolic marvels. Weapons far more destructive than either the Death Star or the World Devastators were now in development on Leth's design computers.

The Mind Splitter had been created as a kind of diversion... and as a gift to Sedriss QL, in honor of his elevation to the rank of Dark Side Executor.

* * *

Kam Solusar screamed.

When the Splitter's invisible wavelength merged with Kam's central nervous system the Jedi felt, in an instant, as if his entire being was being ground to pieces in a metal shredder. Then, in the murky depths of Kam's heart, a red monster awoke the monster was possessed of only one emotion: rage.

A vision of Vader was suddenly before him, as real as the figures of his interrogators. As real as the evil grin of the obese Umak Leth. Vader, directing the slaughter of children... the murder of a wife... the death of a father who was also a Jedi.

How could any sane man forgive such heinous acts? How could any sane man ever be healed of the deep psychic wound caused by this ruthless butchering of those closest to him, the good and innocent ones whom he loved?

Even a Jedi cannot forgive, or remain peaceful in the face of such crimes. Even a Jedi. Exactly.

Revenge, sweet innocent revenge, fired by an anger that burned with molten fury. It was there, it was filling him, and it was all too real.

The Splitter was doing something to his mind, breaking down his resistance to these feelings. And it was doing something else... something he was utterly unaware of, but very real. It was preparing him to receive an influx of the Dark Side of the Force.

Kam Solusar screamed.

Umak Leth laughed. "Now, Sedriss. He's ready. Do what you have to do." The Engineer stepped back, as if he expected to be burned by what was to follow.

"He's ready?" Sedriss leaned forward, staring intently at the Jedi's closed eyes, wet with tears of rage.

"Yes, can't you see it? His mind is a seething chaos. Anger is possessing him absolutely."

The Jedi's eyes snapped open and his lips curled in a snarl of hatred. With unexpected strength he lunged against the restraining clamps, breaking the two that held his right arm. His hand came up in a swift arc and fastened around Sedriss' throat.

"Die, Vader—Die for what you did!"

Mordi and Goir moved forward and slammed the Jedi back into the chair. Goir slapped an impervium strap around the Jedi's free arm. "I told you we should have kept at him with the scarabs, Sedriss."

"Nonsense," said Sedriss, rubbing his reddened throat. "Umak is right. He's ready... quite ready. Hold him, as tight as you can. Let him scream all he wants. Let the tide of anger swell and explode in him."

Sedriss reached out with both hands and placed the palms gently against the Jedi's temples. He felt the pulse of the blood under the damp skin. "Yess... he's quite ready."

A taint blue glow appeared around Sedriss' hands. The glow rippled and expanded. Tiny white sparks ignited the air. Dark Side energies.

Gently, Sedriss. Be gentle. Don't want to hurt my lovely Jedi. Emperor Palpatine will be proud of me...

Kam Solusar stopped screaming. Mountainous black clouds swept through his mind. In a dying moment of perception, he felt the universe grant him his darkest wish... Revenge... There would be revenge. All he had to do was surrender to the Force. Give in to it, let it guide us, control us, let it live us. Isn't that the Jedi way? Isn't that the ancient path?

Surrender to the Force! Give in to the Force! And you will be filled with a power to take vengeance on your enemies! A power of the mind. A power of the spirit. The Force. The Dark Side of the Force.

The Last Jedi Master

"I have bad news." Mon Mothma's eyes moved over the select gathering, making contact with each of her brave friends: Generals Rieekan, Madine and Dodonna... Princess Leia Organa Solo and her husband Han Solo along with Generals Calrissian and Antilles, sitting next to the protocol droid See-Threepio... and Luke Skywalker, the last remaining Jedi Master.

"I want all of you to be the first to know," she said sadly. "We were betrayed at Glass Mountain. One hundred and twenty intelligence technicians and thirty Yaka defense specialists died this morning. Only five technicians got out alive."

General Rieekan shifted uneasily in his chair and placed his heavily wrinkled hands flat on the conference table. "So that effectively ends our surveillance of the Deep Core systems?"

"Yes," said Mon Mothma. "The Emperor's activities in the Deep Core are once again hidden behind a veil of secrecy."

"Wait a minute," said Han Solo. "The Emperor is dead. It happened right over this lunar base! I saw his flagship destroyed with my own eyes! And Luke knocked out all his clone tanks before he left Byss!" Han looked questioningly towards Luke, who sat directly across the conference table, his arms folded under his Jedi cloak.

"I'm pretty sure I took out all the tanks," said Luke. "And I didn't hear of any other secret clone labs while I was the Emperor's... Supreme Commander."

Luke's sister, Leia, sitting next to her husband, gazed intently at her brother. "The Emperor may return. We all know that," she said. "He's cloned himself before, and he can do it again. His Dark Side powers hold him together as bodiless energy and mind. He's a presence that can enter... anyone."

Leia put her hands protectively on her stomach. The child within her was growing, filled with the Force. A wonderful baby. And the Emperor had threatened to possess it, when she was his prisoner on Byss.

"The Emperor himself is not the question, at the moment," said General Dodonna. "The Emperor's second death has not stopped his underlings from going forward with his master battle plan. The Glass Mountain listening post gave us ample evidence of that, during the six months it was in operation. This is a much different situation than we were presented with after the Battle of Endor.

"General Dodonna is correct," said Mon Mothma. "In fact, the five Rebels who escaped the holocaust at Glass Mountain have brought even more dreadful tidings. They tell us that Glass Mountain was attacked by a new Imperial assault group—black-armored stormtroopers led by seven warriors using the powers of the Dark Side of the Force."

Everyone looked at Luke. Luke frowned at the mention of the Dark Side. "All right... if that's true, then we are in trouble," he said. "I can't put off any longer my hunt for lost Jedi Knights. I have some... good leads on where to start." He didn't want to mention the Holocron. He knew at least some of the people sitting at the table would be skeptical of its mysterious riddles and prophecies. "So... I'll be leaving for the old Nespis VIII space city in the morning."

"Nespis VIII?" asked Han. "I know that place. It's been abandoned for centuries. What makes you think you'll find Jedi there?"

"Are you going by yourself?" Leia interrupted.

"Yes. Alone. But Lando and Wedge have agreed to accompany me part of the way."

"That's right," said Lando. "The Glass Mountain team learned the Empire has succeeded in placing spies inside the Alliance. We don't know who they are... but we're going to use them to our advantage. When Luke leaves Pinnacle Base, whoever's running the show for the Empire will know within hours. Luke will be followed... and we'll be ready for 'em."

"So you're going along as a gunship escort?" asked Han, sounding a little envious. Nobody had told him about the plan.

"Sort of," said Wedge. "This'll be a two-rancors-with-one-spear kind of operation. Luke will split off and disappear while we stage a diversionary attack on an Imperial intelligence outpost—to even the score for Glass Mountain. If we're lucky, the same Dark Side thugs who destroyed Glass Mountain will be after Luke. We'll draw them into a trap."

"Three rancors with one spear," said Lando.

Luke leaned forward, and his eyes flashed. "The official word—the word that leaves this room will be that I'm on a mission to the Entarr System. Entarr, as you know, is one of the six core systems in the Auril sector, directly adjacent to the Cron Drift Ellipsis. The old Nespis space city lies halfway between Entarr and Adegia.

"The plan calls for six E-wings and three X-wings to jump with me straight to the Cron Drift Vector. As soon as we exit hyperspace, I'll slip away while Lando and Wedge take the rest of the team against the Imperial Intelligence and Surveillance Hub that orbits Entarr... The absence of my old X wing won't be noticed!"

General Rieekan shook his head. "Sounds like a risky plan, Commander Skywalker. If the Hub spots your X-wing, won't the hunters have access to that information? They'll know exactly where you are."

There was a respectful pause, as everyone digested the wise old General's warning. Then Wedge spoke up. "We've got an Imperial hyperspace transponder, sir. Took it off one of the World Devastators we're tearing down on Calamari."

"Right," said Lando. "We'll be using it to jam the Hub's hyperspace communications going in. If hunters follow us, as we expect, they'll wonder why the Hub's being jammed and they'll be drawn there to investigate."

"At least that's the plan," said Wedge.

"I hope it works!" said Han, sounding skeptical.

Wedge grinned. "Me too, boss."

* * *

Luke Skywalker hugged his sister and kissed her lightly on the cheek. He felt her roundness and he smiled. Then Luke turned to Han and their right hands gripped each other's wrists.

"Watch yourself: kid. It's a big crazy universe out there."

"You too, Han. Take care of my Jedi while I'm gone all of them."

"Hawrmn!" Chewbacca grabbed Luke from behind and for a moment it seemed like he was going to prevent Luke from boarding the modified X-wing. But it was only the usual excessive Wookiee hug.

Leia looked intently into her brother's eyes. "I wish I could come with you."

"We both have different jobs to do, Leia. Right now you should find out as much as you can from the Holocron. I'm sure it will give us more clues. Ben said it's a key to the revival of the Jedi Knights."

"I want to return to Nar Shaddaa... I need to find the old woman who gave me the lightsaber...Vima Da-Boda."

"Right... but wait until I get back. We must bring together everyone we can find. Lost Jedi... fallen Jedi... children of Jedi... anyone with an extraordinary sensitivity to the Force."

"Nhhrawwn!"

"Sorry Chewie. I don't remember hearing of any Wookiee Jedis. But I'll bet there were some. Ben told me once that Wookiees have a special relationship to the Force."

"Hey, if you're planning to turn Chewie into a Jedi, forget it. Last thing I need is somebody clowning around with a lightsaber in the cockpit of the Falcon!"

"Freet wheet badoo!"

Artoo-Deetoo rolled at a fast clip on three legs across the hangar deck toward the group of old friends. See-Threepio shuffled stiffly behind him, calling out in anxious tones.

"Artoo... Master Luke doesn't need you on this trip. It's too dangerous for you. The droid techs said you need a complete overhaul after your dreadful experience on Byss!"

"Pfoot tweep brazzi!"

"Sorry, Threepio... I know how you feel about your counterpart. But I am taking Artoo with me. Captain Weeba ran diagnostics on Artoo this morning. He's in fine shape—right Artoo?"

"Foop bweep breet!"

"Oh dear. I was afraid of that. I was hoping that you'd give Artoo a hero's vacation... After all, it was he who won the Battle of Calamari! Don't you think, Master Luke that he could at least have his bearings replaced?"

"Tell you what, Threepio. After I get back from the core, Artoo will receive a top-down overhaul. Why don't you arrange to have the finest components shipped in while we're away?"

"That's an excellent idea. Master Luke. I recently heard that the Bawtoon system came over to the Alliance. They make the best astromech replacement parts in the Galaxy!"

Lando Calrissian walked across the cavernous hangar toward Luke. His light-interference commando garb made him seem almost a chimera. "Commando teams are ready, Luke. Snubs and E-wings, as ordered."

"Okay. Lando. Let me get my co-pilot on board and we're away."

The crew chief lowered a magnetic winch over Artoo's gleaming dome and skillfully raised the little droid toward the co-pilot's socket in the waiting X-wing.

Luke's X-wing was a prime example of the famous Incom T-65 that pilots often call a snub fighter. This was the same ship that had carried Luke into the *Death Star* trench at the

Battle of Yavin... the same ship that had twice brought him to Dagobah, to fateful meetings with Master Yoda.

But unlike Artoo, Luke's ship had been subjected to a thorough rebuild and tune up. Tech-droids and Rebel engineers had gone through the old snub fighter from stem to stern, replacing every mechanical part with brand new components, and tuning the electronic systems to optimum performance levels. The ship's worn-out engines had been junked in favor of the new, more powerful Incom 12P12 sublights and the MK7 hyperdrive modules.

Armament had been upgraded to the now standard Alliance narrow-beam lasers, at twice the blast power of the old models. A versatile turret gun had been added for rear-firing protection, and the X-wing now boasted its own field-surround deflector generator, which worked in sync with the weapons systems, with millisecond windowing for outgoing blast patterns.

Some said the X-wing was an antique-but Luke's customized ship was an "antique" in name only. And with a Jedi Master at the helm, even the most "advanced" adversary was going to find himself in big trouble.

With Artoo socketed into the fuselage, Luke prepared to climb aboard. As his foot went to the ladder, he felt a wave of light touch his mind, and his heart soared with optimism.

Turning his head he saw Leia smiling and for a second she seemed to vanish and be replaced by an older woman, of middle years, with three teenage children at her side. A woman of great strength and wisdom, strong in the Force. Someday she'll lead the Alliance, Luke thought.

"Come back to us, Luke."

"I will. Thanks, Leia... the Force be with you."

The Wookiee and the Corellian and the Princess stood on the edge of the hangar bay watching and listening as the six E-wings and four snub fighters whined and soared above the towering rock formations of the Pinnacle Moon.

Then all ten ships thundered and flashed and disappeared.

* * *

The golden automaton fussed and talked to itself as it toddled across the tarmac. "Do be careful, Master Luke. If Artoo is damaged again, an overhaul may be out of the question. He'll have to be tossed on the recycling pile!"

As Threepio passed a fuel-pod, he sensed a furtive movement in the corner of his visual field. He rotated his head toward the motion. A Rebel mechanic was crouched in the shadows doing something with a small electronic device.

"Oh, it's the crew chief's assistant... Excuse me, sir. Is everything all right? Are you in pain?"

"Everything's fine, droid. Now move along. Can't you see I'm busy?"

"Oh... ever so sorry, sir. I didn't mean to intrude."

As Threepio moved stiffly on toward the parts requisition department, something like a suspicion flickered across his robotic intelligence... and then was replaced by his programmed faith in his human masters: "How odd... he seemed to be hiding. Oh, well, I'm sure he knows what he's doing. After all, he is a member of the Rebel Alliance!"

Dark Warrior

Luke was still in hyperspace when Sedriss QL received the coded transmission from an Imperial mole inside the Alliance: "Skywalker claims to have located hidden Jedi Knights. He has left for the Entarr System to bring them back."

"Find out who's with him, Mordi."

"He has an escort of six E-wings and three T-65s, sir."

"Excellent. He's as vulnerable as he'll ever be. Torr! Kark! Alert the others! We're going on a hunt! A Jedi hunt!"

Bephon Kark grunted. "They've found another one? I thought they were all dead except for Skywalker and his sister?"

"Skywalker's our prey on this hunt. Where's Solusar?"

"He'll be here shortly, Sedriss," Kark answered. He was a tall, powerfully built warrior, bristling with destructive energy. The whites of his eyes were red. "Solusar's being fitted for his new armor.... Are you sure you want to go against Skywalker? After all, he defeated the Emperor."

"Are you afraid of Skywalker, Kark?"

Kark grunted. "I don't feel fear, sir. But I have made a realistic assessment of Skywalker's capabilities."

"So have I, and I judge him vulnerable."

"The Emperor will be pleased, sir, if you kill Skywalker."

Sedriss frowned, remembering that the Emperor had yet to take a new clone body. The Adepts were suggesting that this time Palpatine might not return. Something about the effects of the Force Storm—the Emperor had channeled most of his Dark Side energy into the storm, before it turned against its maker.

If he does not return... and if I kill Skywalker... then I will be perfectly positioned to win the respect of all the military commanders. Who knows... I might become...

A sudden influx of Dark Side energy entered the room, startling Sedriss out of his reverie. For a moment he thought the Emperor had appeared, in response to his forbidden thoughts. But it was Kam Solusar, outfitted in the fretted black armor of a Dark Side Warrior. The Dark Side of the Force was with Kam, quite powerfully.

Kam bowed to Sedriss QL. "Master, they tell me you're going after the son of Darth Vader."

"Yes. And you'll join us. This will be a test. I need to know if your surrender to the Dark Side is complete."

"It is, Master. It is complete."

"I am not your Master. I am your superior officer, the Emperor's Dark Side Executor. The Emperor will be your Master, when he returns from his... journey."

"The Emperor is dead, sir."

"Dead? What gave you that idea? He is simply standing apart from us for a time... to test our loyalty. Believe me, he is watching our every move."

"I know that, sir. I saw him."

You what?

"A spirit figure came, while I was putting on the armor. Its face was indistinct. It spoke to me, a few words. It said it was the Ruler of the Galaxy, sir."

Sedriss was beside himself. "Yes... and then what? Did he tell you when he's resuming physical form? Did he?"

"All he said was that I showed great promise, sir. Then he touched me. A profound darkness moved over me, sir, a tremendous power. I can still feel it."

"I too felt it... when you entered the room. For a moment I thought you were the Emperor himself... Listen, Solusar, you're a very lucky man. You don't know how lucky you are. The Emperor has given you his blessing, on the day of your Dark Side initiation. Remarkable."

Sedriss embraced the converted Jedi, a bit awkwardly. *Yes, he could definitely feel it... the power. This one would be a great warrior for the Empire.*

"Come, Solusar... here are the others. Let's all drink a toast before we begin the hunt,"

Eight were assembled now, in the meditation hall of Bast Castle. And many other dark personages seemed to hover over them, watching from the shadows as these eight filled their glasses and hoisted them to the statue of Darth Vader that dominated the room.

Sedriss QL, face filled with sagacious violence, was the unquestioned leader. The wisdom of serpents was in him. His title was from the Sith, and he affected the appearance of a Sith Lord, although he was not one.

Each of the others wore the unreflective fretted black armor, with variations, of the Dark Side elite: KrDys Mordi, Vill Goir, Zasm Katth, Baddon Fass, Torr Darkheart, and Bephon Kark.

Whatever human personalities these six once displayed were long ago submerged in their empowerment. Ominous visages, malign and threatening countenances, eyes like lowering skies punctuated by dark suns. Sinister men. Cynical, bursting with murderous will. Corrupt, but somehow unalloyed in perfect corruption... Purely evil, they were like one person, the very personification of the Darkness that had possessed them. Dark Side Warriors. Dark Jedi.

And Kam Solusar—what of him? Sedriss QL raised his glass. "Here's to our brother Solusar, survivor of the Jedi Extermination—May he reside forever in the power of the Dark Side!"

"Hear, hear!" Glasses and goblets drained.

Kam smiled grimly and permitted a servant droid to refill his goblet a second time. Then he offered his own toast, "Here's to another survivor. Here's to the son of Darth Vader. May he one day understand, as I have, that he is forever an heir to the Dark Side!"

The drinks were tossed down and the glasses smashed on the pedestal supporting the statue of the legendary Sith Lord.

Their boots reverberated on the ancient stone floors. Iron gates rumbled open. Seven ships were waiting, gleaming like black glass in the light of three moons.

The pursuit had begun.

The Road! Q Nespis

At precise coordinates halfway between Entarr and the old Nespis VIII space station, beneath the dazzling grandeur of the Cron Drift, six Rebel E-wings and four X-wings dropped out of hyperspace.

Without waiting for a signal from Luke, Lando Calrissian, whose E-wing had been bulked-up and modified to house the Imperial transponder, began jamming all hyperspace communications in the area.

Luke killed his engines and let his X-wing glide away, at half lightspeed, across the Drift, toward a distant point of light. The mighty Cron Drift hung above him, a green and purple expanse of light reflecting space dust, thousands of parsecs across, the remnants of a triple supernova that occurred four thousand years ago. Some said the three-system explosion was caused by Dark Side magic.

In his rear sights, Luke saw Lando's team accelerating away toward Entarr and its lonely bright moon. He checked his sensors. No sign of being scanned. Hyperspace frequencies were jammed, across the board. Everything was going according to plan.

"Looks like we're clear, Artoo."

"Voot brrt."

Luke kicked on the X-wing's sublights and accelerated toward the distant city in space.

* * *

More than 25,000 years ago, before the Old Republic, hyperspace travel was only a theory, not an actuality. When faster-than-light engines were finally developed, the great dimension of hyperspace suddenly opened its doors—and it proved to be a terrifying and trackless realm outside ordinary time and space.

The ancient physicists had to admit their theoretical science could not predict the coordinates at which the first adventurers would return to "real space," once they had entered that great unknown.

The "mapping" of hyperspace became a death-defying trial-and-error experiment. But once a safe jump was made, the precise navigational configuration could be repeated, with the sure knowledge that another ship using the same parameters would emerge at the same coordinates in real space.

Over time a network of "safe points" were established throughout the Galaxy. Early commercial hyperspace traffic jumped between these well-established points—and so the

"hyperspace trade routes" came into existence. The embarkation and terminal points of the trade-routes were known as "jump gates."

Beacons marked the first jump points, then primitive spaceport facilities were built, as trans-Galactic traffic increased.

As Master Ood had reminded Luke when Luke was using the Holocron, the first hyperspace terminals were little more than primitive frontier outposts. Inevitably, they grew and expanded, without order or design, into way-stations and gathering places for all the races of the Galaxy.

The largest of the spaceports evolved into labyrinthine cities in space, where many thousands would spend their whole lives, serving those who were passing through on their way to other systems.

Such a city was Nespis VIII, constructed on the node of the nine Auril systems. (Three of these systems were later destroyed, forming the Cron Drift.) Nespis VIII was the city in space that Luke Skywalker had seen in a vision. Nespis VIII was where the Force promised him he would find a lost Jedi.

* * *

Artoo announced the approach coordinates on Luke's viewscreen. The Incom 12-P12 sublights whined down. Directly ahead, like a broken jewel in the night, hung the ancient space city of Nespis VIII.

Luke felt gravity tug at his X-wing, as he steered the agile fighter down among the towers and domes of the great convoluted structure. He was looking for an open hangar-or a docking bay that hadn't been laid waste by scavengers and time.

"Brit-bweep-twee?"

"Yeah, Artoo. If there's a Jedi hiding in this mess, we'll be lucky to find him!"

Luke was only half-joking. His senses were already reaching out, probing the ruined space metropolis for the presence of a Jedi mind. He was finding disappointment.

"There's life here... I can feel it. But nothing larger than an Otethan space-rat."

Luke arced the ship around a lofty blast-blackened construction and swooped down among a maze of blade-like spires and obelisks. Reflections of the distant Adegan suns danced blue and cold against the X-wing's canopy.

"Fwee-brro-bip bip bweep!"

"... Wait a minute. There is something... That tower ahead of us, almost like in my vision... That's as good a place as any to start."

Skillfully, Luke worked the X-wing through the architectural confusion toward a tall green spire divided into three sections by huge globular blisters.

Circling the spire he spotted a sheltered hangar open to the vacuum of space. "This looks very familiar, Artoo. Let's take her in!"

His co-pilot burred acknowledgement, and seconds later the X-wing's landing gear touched down among the scattered debris and jetsam of the hangar flight deck.

"I feel like I've been here before. This is exactly like the vision the Holocron showed me!... I wish I'd brought the Holocron with me. Maybe it could tell me what to do next."

But Leia had been waiting impatiently for Luke to surrender the Holocron so she could continue her Jedi studies. Luke had monopolized the ancient Jedi artifact for a solid month – he really had no choice but to accede to his sister's wishes.

"Oh well, Artoo... I guess we'll just have to find out for ourselves."

Luke clambered down the X-wing's ladder to the hangar deck, wearing his full-vacuum life-support suit. Artoo-Detoo was lowering himself from his co-pilot's socket using the ship's new onboard repulsor-gantry.

A pair of massive airlock doors stood between them and the interior of the great space city.

Luke punched randomly at the control panel next to the big doors, but nothing happened.

"Here, Artoo... plug in and see what you can learn."

Obediently the little astromech pushed his probe-arm into a socket on the control panel. Using his own power-pack he sent signals deep into the city's lifeless computer-network, seeking out the circuits that controlled the airlock.

Luke looked around impatiently, surveying the cavernous gloom of the hangar... "It's a crazy idea, coming here... But Ben said the Holocron..."

Artoo began to whistle excitedly.

"What is it, Artoo? What have you found?"

(Without the benefit of the X-wing's computer to translate Artoo's electronic noises, Luke couldn't know that the little droid had discovered that Nespis VIII's nuclear power plant—designed to last 300,000 years – was fully operational! It had merely shut itself down, to conserve energy, on the day the city was abandoned!

There was a simple code that would turn everything back on—lights, heat, atmosphere... even food synthesizers and droid maintenance crews. And that code was readily available to Artoo in the city's operations directory!)

The hangar was suddenly bathed in bright light from above. A second later, hidden motors hummed to life, servos clicked, and the massive hatch doors began to slide slowly open.

"Artoo, you're the best."

"Brrt-voop-bweep!" Without waiting for further congratulations from his Master, Artoo-Deetoo rolled past the welcoming doors and into the airlock holding-chamber.

Still marveling, Luke followed.

On the opposite wall there was a bright orange stud labeled "Activate Airlock." Luke hit it with the palm of his hand. The big doors closed behind him. Atmosphere hissed. Another set of doors dilated smoothly open in front of him. Everything worked.

Luke and Artoo entered the ancient city in space.

Bones of the Jedi

As he pulled off his space helmet, the first thing that struck Luke's eyes was a glowing, multi-colored frieze, figures of a long ago time sculpted from solid crystal: ancient spacers and their bulky fuel-burning ships, etched against a background of suns, worlds, and moons. This heroic tableau, lit from behind, stretched the entire length of a gallery that descended at an angle towards a larger brightly lighted space beyond.

Artoo charged ahead, but Luke cautioned him. "Wait, Artoo—Let's take it easy. We don't know what woke up when you switched on the generators – security droids... armed sensors... who knows!?"

Emitting a fearful whistle, the little droid obediently let Luke take the lead, and they moved at a stalking pace toward the light.

Halfway along the gallery Luke noticed blaster-burns in the crystal pageant. Sculpted images of lightsaber-wielding warriors were blackened and fused, their faces obliterated.

"Vandalism... somebody who didn't care for Jedi Knights, from the look of it." Luke stopped for a minute to examine the details of the frieze. These Jedi wore armor, more lavish than anything he had seen before. Functional equipment mixed with symbolic adornment from a time when the engineers of war were also artisans of elegance.

In one scene, a young Jedi dueled with a stylish multi-armed droid. A training session, apparently – an old man in the coarse robe of a Jedi Master was looking on sternly. The six arms of the training droid each flashed a different weapon. As the young Jedi's lightsaber sliced off a knife-wielding appendage, another seemed poised to fire a laser-bolt.

"This is my history, Artoo. For thousands of years Masters like Yoda and Ben have been training Jedi... Those days will come again, if I have anything to say about it."

The passageway ended in a cavernous waiting room, brightly lit, with a thick central lift column. A bank of computer terminals lined one wall. Comfortable furniture was scattered about, much of it overturned. Floor-to-ceiling viewports looked out at the Cron Drift and the Galactic starfield.

Luke realized at once he was in the reception area of a lodging dock, designed to house visitors to this section of the Nespis station.

Artoo made a noise to catch Luke's attention. Luke turned. There, scattered on the floor to the right of them were the shattered remains of a droid of some kind.

Luke picked up a twisted blaster-hand. "Weapons droid... an ISD-350 series. The Empire used these before I was born."

"Brrt tweep-bwip."

"Yeah, there was a firefight here. C'mon, let's look around..."

Luke and Artoo moved cautiously around the great room, stepping over more ruined war droids. Chairs and tables were blast-burned.

As they came around the wide central column, a startling sight met Luke's eyes: skeletal remains, of an alien race he had never seen, were strewn amongst the furniture.

Luke sucked in his breath, and Artoo whistled in awe.

Two... three... at least four aliens had died violent deaths on the waiting room floor, untold years ago. Their thick bones protruded from rags and corroded armor. Their huge, oddly-shaped skulls grimaced at Luke like demonic apparitions. Their weapons were still gripped in bony fists...

Lightsabers! They had used lightsabers!

Luke reached down and respectfully removed one of the Jedi weapons from clenched fingers of bone.

The lightsaber had a good heft... it was a finely crafted instrument. Luke touched the ignition stud.

The saber emitted a satisfying hum and shot out a bright blue shaft of energy.

"This is a very good blade, Artoo. It must have belonged to a great Jedi." Luke switched of the lightsaber.

Maybe the frightening appearance of these alien skulls was deceptive. Were these in fact Jedi Knights – even great Jedi Knights—who had died in an Imperial ambush?

Luke examined the skeletal remains. The skulls had high foreheads, large brain cases. The fingers were long and tapered.

If these were Jedi, why did their bones survive at all? Both Masters Yoda and Obi-Wan Kenobi had utterly vanished at the moment of death.

Yes, and my father did not.

There was more damage to this part of the room. Luke pushed aside smashed and scattered furniture, looking for other clues to the identities of the murdered aliens. Artoo helped, whistling and tooting as he rooted around in the wreckage.

In short order, Artoo began to beep excitedly and raised his mechanical arm in triumph—a tattered leather case hung by its braided strap from Artoo's grip-claw.

Inside the pouch, Luke found everything he could have wanted... and more:

Printed documents and a written log proved that these four were in fact Jedi archaeologists, from the Anoat system. They had been engaged in critical excavations on the planet Ossus, in the Adegan system, during the time of the Jedi exterminations.

Ossus was an important Jedi stronghold in ancient times, and these Jedi hoped that they might unearth something, perhaps a Holocron or a trove of ancient Jedi books—which would help the Jedi Knights in their desperate plight.

Unfortunately, the Empire had spies everywhere. The presence of the Jedi archaeologists on Ossus was reported, and the archaeologists were forced to flee before an onslaught of Imperial shock troops.

According to their log, they took refuge here, at the Nespis VIII space station, which had lain abandoned for centuries. They had managed to activate the station's atmosphere, but their supplies were almost non-existent.

The last entry tells of the approach of a Star Destroyer, circling the derelict space city... then hovering next to their tower refuge:

"We sense approaching darkness... someone on board that warship can feel our presence... as we feel his. Most certainly we are doomed."

Luke pulled the rest of the contents from the bag. An archaeologist's tools-picks, scrapers, a laser-drill. There was also a heavy tantalite box, about 30 centimeters square and 15 centimeters high.

The box was invisibly hinged on one side and opened easily, unfolding to reveal what appeared to be a game board. The board was decorated with symmetrical designs made of multi-colored crystals embedded in gray tantalite:

(insert board design here)

Drawers in the side of the board opened to reveal fifty thick chips of crystal, carved in assorted shapes—half of a red hue and half blue.

"It's obviously some kind of game, Artoo... and these must be the pieces."

Luke was fascinated. Artoo seemed unusually quiet, as his sensor-eye scanned the colorful crystals.

Luke picked up one of the red pieces. He held it in his palm. It grew perceptibly warmer. "These are lightsaber crystals, Artoo. But they've been carved in the shapes of game pieces... They feel almost alive."

Luke remembered a conversation he'd had with Ben Kenobi, which began his lightsaber training. Luke had held his father's ignited lightsaber in his hand... and he had remarked to Ben that the weapon felt like it was alive.

"It is, in a way... through you, Luke... The lightsaber is one of the ways in which a Jedi contacts the force."

Anybody could switch on a lightsaber and use it to cut virtually anything. But in the hands of a Jedi, the lightsaber seemed to take on special qualities. It became an extension of a Jedi's awareness, of his life energy, of his sensitivity to the Force...

The red stone in Luke's hand began to glow softly. He took it between his thumb and forefinger and raised it to his eyes. Did he see something behind the glow? Was there a tiny mechanism buried in the heart of the crystal?

Luke looked at the tantalite board, with its curious designs of embedded stones: green, violet, orange, yellow, white—each cupped to hold the red and blue pieces. There was a circular mosaic of onyx and chalcedony crystals at the very center of the board.

"This game board could very well represent the Galaxy," he thought.

Luke placed the red stone on the black and white center. Immediately, he fell into unconsciousness.

Fire in the Cron Drift

Waves of cleansing darkness washed the mind of Kam Solusar, as he scanned his navigation screens. Solusar had been assigned the co-pilot seat on *Eliminator-1*, Sedriss QL's unique Incom warship. He worked with his back to Sedriss, who was piloting the I-10 Howlrunner in tandem with the six smaller I-7 tactical fighters, *Eliminators* 2 through 7.

They were still in hyperspace and Solusar was enjoying his Dark Side empowerment. He remembered the spirit-figure that had appeared to him, as he put on his Dark Side armor, after his initiation by Sedriss. The apparition had said it was the ruler of the Galaxy. It had touched him, and that was the moment when power had entered him.

Sedriss had said the figure was the Emperor, replenishing himself in his disembodied state before he took a new clone body. But a frightening thought occurred to Solusar. What if it wasn't the Emperor? What if it was someone—or something-else? What if the Emperor served something greater than himself?

Just then they emerged from hyperspace with a blazing view of the Cron Drift spread out before them.

Solusar shuddered and turned his attention to the navigation screens. He watched as Katth and Fass popped out of hyperspace behind *Eliminator-1*, in formation with the others.

"Solusar. Are the Shadow Droids still with us?"

A massive dark shape emerged from hyperspace directly behind the last *Eliminator*. "Yes Sedriss. One of them just came out of hyperspace... and there's the other two."

"Good. Send a message – order the Shadows to take up a backup position near the Cron Vector, while we check out the situation on the Entarr Intelligence Hub. For some reason, I'm getting nothing but static from the Hub... I fear the Rebels have already taken it, in retaliation for Glass Mountain."

"Yes sir." Solusar punched up the security codes and Sedriss QL's voice instructions, recorded as he spoke, were automatically digitized and transmitted to the Shadow Droids.

Sedriss chuckled. "If Skywalker was foolish enough to attack the Hub, he's in for a surprise. Leth's new war toys will get a battle test!"

"Leth's a genius, Sedriss."

"Hmmm. He likes to think so. His World Devastators were a failure. Central control never works in war—you need strong field commanders, free to act as they see fit. Leth's modifying the Devastators now, to give the captains override capability. There will be fail-safe systems, in case of mutiny. The 'Master Control Signal' is obsolete... thanks to Skywalker."

Acknowledging his transmission, the Shadow Droids moved in unison toward the Cron Vector. Solusar watched the angular dark shapes of the Shadow Droids taking up positions against the colorful background of the Drift. The outline of the great war droids on his scanning screens was impressive: a sinister configuration of bulbous beam-eyes, thick trusses, massive pulse furnaces, surveillance gantries, turbolaser turrets, outriggered missile launchers, grappling teeth and ripper claws.

"Leth's Mind Splitter is certainly effective."

"Yes. I guess you're proof of that. And these Shadow Droids are impressive. But only the heat of battle will tell us if they can live up to his promises."

As the three Shadow Droids hovered in position, the seven Dark Side hunters swiftly crossed the orbit of Entarr's single bright moon, then killed their engines as the great planet's pull took over.

Entarr was a heavy-gravity world. Ordinary men needed repulsor-suits to survive on its surface. The massive globe was inhabited by a race of giants-near-human in physical features, but with appendages as thick as trees, and bones like you might find in a rancor graveyard.

The heavy gravity increased the weight of a visiting spacer ten-fold. For that reason, Entarr did not receive many visitors. And for that very reason, the Empire had set up an intelligence outpost there and a munitions factory that utilized the dense metals found in Entarr's core.

The Auril sector Intelligence and Security Hub was suspended in low stationary orbit over Entarr's great red ocean a slowly rotating sphere about ten miles in diameter, with a central flight shaft, from pole to pole.

"Look at it—like a baby Death Star," said Sedriss.

Indeed, from a distance, the I.S.H. bore a striking resemblance to that long-gone battle station. But as the seven glass-black tacticals made their approach, it became clear that unlike the Death Star, the outer surface of the station was featureless, except for the turbolaser and ion cannon defense towers that studded the smooth globe at regular intervals. Surveillance dishes and transmission antennae were hidden from view.

The I.S.H. orb was prevented from crashing into the ocean by its orbital speed combined with powerful repulsor dynamos. The same technology produced an abbreviated gravity for the technicians who inhabited the station.

Solusar ran repeating scans of the Imperial communications channels assigned to the Hub.

"The Hub does not acknowledge our recognition code, Sedriss. All I'm getting is static."

"Can you feel the fear?"

"The fear, sir?"

"Yes, I'm sensing fear and anger, concentrated in one part of the Hub. Pull up a technical readout from the Security Resource."

Solusar keyed in the request to the ship's computer, and a split-second later a blueprint of the Hub flashed on a monitor screen in front of Sedriss.

"Yes... as I thought. The detention area. There's a large concentration of emotion there."

Solusar understood at once. "The station has fallen to the Rebels. The station personnel have been herded into detention cells."

"Exactly... The Rebels have taken the Hub. The question is, is Skywalker with them?"

Sedriss QL closed his eyes and concentrated for what seemed like many minutes. Solusar, a Jedi of long experience, did the same.

"I don't feel any Force-users on the Hub," said Sedriss.

"Nor do I. The Son of Vader is not in this place." Kam Solusar agreed, but what he didn't say, was that he had caught a brief gleam of a Jedi presence from another direction, toward the Adegan suns.

"They hope we'll enter their trap," said Sedriss. "Let's oblige them."

He snapped on his com-mike and barked an order to the six Dark Side tacticals.

"*Eliminator-1* to *Eliminator* team. Shields up and follow me... Prepare to meet offensive fire!"

The sleek Howlrunners closed on the orbiting sphere like seven birds of prey.

At Sedriss QL's command, they rose as one toward the polar aperture... then shot into the Hub's core with blinding speed.

Rebel Strategy Tactics

"Threepio will you get out of the way! I'm trying to break the security locks on the perimeter defense batteries!"

"If Artoo was here, he could do it easily, General Calrissian."

"Yeah, and if you weren't such a twit, you would have asked Artoo-Deetoo to teach you his tricks!" Lando slammed another key-chip into the weapons board and watched in frustration as all twelve control monitors flashed:

ACCESS TO STATION DEFENSES DENIED
YOU HAVE THREE INSERTIONS REMAINING BEFORE LOCK-OUT

The taking of the Hub had gone without a hitch. The Imperial transponder they'd scrounged off one of the World Devastators had been the key.

The I.S.H. wasn't governed by external signals but it was vulnerable in other ways. All its surveillance technology and all its operating systems were linked to a single massive A.I. computer.

Large-scale Artificial Intelligence was a relatively new technology for the Empire—the logical evolution of the smaller units that had been used in droids for centuries.

The A.I.'s advantage was that they didn't operate from fixed programming. Their autonomy and their flexibility was their strength, as long as the input data was carefully supervised and filtered. But it was also their weakness, for if inputs could be skillfully manipulated, the A.I. could be thrown into a schizophrenic state.

And that's exactly what Lando's team had done. Using a trick from Artoo's book, the Rebels had written thousands of self-contradictory codes and beamed them into every sensor and electronic system in the station.

In minutes, the A.I. was babbling irrationally to itself, and they dropped into the Hub's flight shaft virtually undetected.

The rest was easy: when they touched down on the main internal landing deck at the station's equator, they found only scattered resistance. Only a hundred or so stormtroopers were assigned to the heavily armed station. The three hundred technical personnel surrendered without a fight, and were removed to the detention area.

All except the Hub Supervisor, who sealed himself on the Command Deck for a solid hour, destroying data, erasing computer memories, disabling power sources... and locking down the Hub's defense towers.

"Hey, Zev? How ya makin' out with the L-7?"

Zev Veers had an L-7 logician droid working the other main panel that governed the massive weapons systems protecting the Entarr Intelligence and Security Hub.

"No luck, Lando. Looks like we'll have to greet the hunters with the gear we carried in."

"Wedge's guys are unloading the heavy armor now—" Lando stopped over the body of the Hub Supervisor and reached for the comlink he'd dropped in the fight.

See-Threepio piped up, "Sir, if I may make an observation, it would have been wise to obtain a technical readout of this intelligence station before you attacked it!"

Lando tried to be polite. He had learned to tolerate the golden protocol droid's insistent "helpfulness," "Thanks, Threepio. I'll remember to consult you next time we plan a commando raid... Now will you do me a favor and see if you can find an Artoo unit in the droid depot? Preferably one that hasn't been politically programmed."

"If I may inquire, where's the droid depot, sir?"

"Take the elevator to the main level. There's a big droid shop just off the supply depot. I saw it when we stormed the main hangar."

"I am pleased to be of service, General Calrissian."

Well, that's a relief, thought Lando, as Threepio shuffled off. Lando jabbed a thumb against the comlink. "Wedge—this is Lando. You read me?"

"We read you, boss. Loud and clear. What's up? Got those turbos unlocked yet?"

"No.... and I don't think we're going to. What's your situation?"

"We're secure here. All the stray techs and stormtroopers are under lock and key... My scouts just reported in. They say seven fast black Imperial Howlrunners are approaching Entarr's polar axis."

"That'll probably be the Hunters. Initiate plan two—blast 'em to hell."

"Right, boss. You want to join us?"

"No... me and Zev are going to keep at these defense boards. We'll need the big turbos if the Hunters call in backup."

"Yeah I wouldn't be surprised if they do... Okay, time to kick some more Imperial butts—"

"Good luck—the Force be with you, Wedge."

"You too, boss."

Wedge was piloting the first of two LT-AT's as they glided rapidly along an access tunnel beneath the wide landing deck that encircled the interior of the orbiting Intelligence Hub. A scanner screen in front of Wedge showed six Incom I-7s and one I-10 about to touch down.

"Incom Howlrunners. Nice lookin' ships. Wonder who those guys are?"

"They're Imps, Wedge. That's all you need to know." Gunner Tanus Prog got a ready signal from the AT's twin ion bursters.

"Yeah, I know. And I'm a Wookiee with a wig on. The Empire doesn't give the really sinister looking hardware to just anybody. Those ships are designed to send a message—a higher order of nasty is at the controls, you can bet on it."

"An Imp is an Imp, that's what I say, Wedge. The sinister stuff is just scare-tactics."

"If you say so, Prog.... Okay, here we go!"

The two LT-AT's hit an up ramp at full-speed and emerged like projectiles onto the flight deck—

"Okay! Disable their engines and guns and we'll grab some more prisoners—we'll find out what they know about Luke!" Both attack vehicles erupted bolts of green laser fire.

* * *

SedriQL flicked open the trigger-switch on the I-10's control stick, lowered his thumb, and one of the Rebel LT-AT's spat a torrent of white hot fragments—then boiled flame and smoke and exploded, tossing chunks of metal and Rebel flesh in all directions.

A nudge of the stick and the big Howlrunner was airborne, screaming off the deck and looping up through the Hub's core, past level after level of gleaming technology.

The other Dark Side ships were not so quick-or so lucky. The I-7 directly behind SedriQL, piloted by Baddon Fass, took a direct hit in the initial fusillade, its engines shattered by proton torpedoes. Fass's I-7 never touched the deck. It lurched and spun back into the open flight core and then dropped like a stone, careening off walls and finally falling out of the bottom of the Hub before it exploded in a million fiery fragments.

Wedge kept the heat on, moving his LT-AT rapidly into position to slam the other I-7s.

As *Eliminator-I* shot out of the flight shaft, SedriQL screamed into his com-mike: "Get clear! All ships get clear! The Rebels have taken the station!... Solusar order in the Shadow Droids! We'll teach those scum they've bitten a rancor's tail!"

The Shadows, waiting quietly in deep space, heard Solusar's call to battle. As one they rumbled to life and moved toward the Entarr system.

Wedge watched the five remaining Howlrunners disappear up the shaft. "They'll be back," said Wedge. "These guys can't resist a fight. I hope Lando gets those defense towers unlocked!"

Shadow Droids

Three gigantic shapes, all sinister edges and angles, bristling with firepower, sped in tight formation across the orbit of Entarr's moon, and began to brake against the massive planet's pull.

Shadow Droids—space-faring war machines built around the brains of fallen Imperial fighter aces. Another of Umak Leth's murderous wonders, conceived during the fertile period after he received the Emperor's Dark Side initiation.

So far only sixteen Shadows existed. Sedriss had requisitioned three to his Dark Side Elite. The others were being deployed as part of the overall battle plan—Operation Shadow Hand—which had gone into effect before the Emperor's fateful departure for Pinnacle Base.

Hardwired to the droid's tactics computers, immersed in nutrient baths at the heart of the giant war machines, the Shadows' cyborg controllers exchanged a blizzard of digital code. The three great war droids zeroed in on their single target—a small metallic moon in low stationary orbit over Entarr's red ocean.

The artificial moon had to be saved. It was an Imperial Intelligence Hub, and it had fallen into Rebel hands. One of the Masters' Howlrunners was down. The Masters had to be protected. The moon had to be saved.

Everything else could die.

"General Calrissian, look who I found... hiding in the droid shop the answer to your problem!"

Lando raised his eyes from the Hub's weapons board to the monitor screens. All twelve screens flashed red:

ACCESS TO STATION DEFENSES DENIED
YOU HAVE ONE INSERTION REMAINING BEFORE LOCK-OUT

"Stang!" Lando cursed softly and turned around. Suddenly he was face to face with a big dumb grin in the uniform of a Rebel defense specialist.

"Kck Nlchkll. Kin I help ya out, Lando... before ya succeed in lockin' down all the guns?!" The brute showed crooked teeth, while his eyes flashed powerful intelligence. Thank God, thought Lando—a Yaka.

"Jellyface Nhazz... that *you*?"

"Yeah. Been awhile. Six months ago th' Imps took me and seven Arkanian wise guys off an Alliance tub that was checkin' out the Entarr arms flow... Now if you'll take a peek at the scanner to yer left, you got major trouble headin' your way... some kinda big war droids from the

look of 'em... Whyn't ya let somebody who knows what he's doin' crack that board for ya, Lando? Cthk nka!"

Stunned at the sudden image of the Shadow Droids on the scanner, Lando stepped back wordlessly and let the oversized Rebel defense specialist approach the tech-panel that governed all the important weapons systems on the orbiting Hub.

Zev Veers stopped what he was doing at the other end of the control board and came over to join Lando. "This guy better know his stuff. Those babies look like they could take out a Super Star Destroyer before breakfast."

"He knows what he's doing, Zev, believe me."

It seemed like Lando had known Jellyface Nhazz all his life. Nhazz had been a gun-runner and sabacc card-counter long before he decided to join the Alliance. In the old days, Lando had lost a lot of money to Nhazz, before it dawned on him that Yakas weren't as stupid as they looked.

Threepio piped up, "Isn't it marvelous, sir? A Yaka defense specialist! And I found him!"

"I'm eternally in your debt, Threepio."

There was a metallic scream followed by a thunderous roar. The whole station shook and six of the control screens made loud snapping sounds and went white.

"The war droids hit us!" shouted Zev, jumping to his station. "Systems readout says the polar turbos are gone! The flight shaft is wide open now!"

"So what else is new?" said the Yaka. "It was wide open to th' Howlrunners too... But this time the enemy ain't comin' down the hole. Hcra Niwdoog! They're hittin' ya head on!"

Lando gritted his teeth as the Yaka worked calmly over the weapons board, oblivious to the explosions, punching illuminated studs and calling up operation code on the screens.

If Lando knew which one of the key-chips would open the weapons board, he wouldn't need Nhazz. But he had only one try left—and there were four hundred numbered chips in the rack.

"C'mon, Jellyface—what's taking so long?"

Strings of numbers began to roll across the bank of monitors, and the Yaka emitted a pleased grunt. "Another minute, Lando. I almost got it."

Before that minute was over, the room erupted in white fire and shrieking metal—and Lando felt something hot pierce his leg. Threepio was blown back by the blast, and Zev was knocked face down on the floor by a falling I-beam.

As he dived for cover, Lando shot a quick look towards the Yaka—Nhazz was sitting bolt upright at the weapons board, a stream of blood trickling from the side of his head.

"Damn. They got him."

The Yaka fell backwards, hitting the floor with a dull crash. Jellyface Nhazz did not move again.

Lando groaned, and the pain in his leg burned hotter. "There goes our last hope! We'll never get those turbos workin' now!"

The control board began to spark and smoke, and three more screens went blank. As Lando made his way painfully to the board, Wedge Antilles and three Rebel commandos rushed into the room—

"Lando! Zev! Ya okay?"

"Yeah, Wedge... I'm fine. See if Zev's still alive! And check Threepio—I think he got hit pretty bad!"

Lando stumbled against the control panel, as Wedge and his crew pulled the I-beam off Zev.

"Zev's okay. He's conscious. Looks like he's got a broken leg, though."

"Right... get him to safety. I'll see if I can do anything here..."

As two of the Rebels carried Zev out of the burning command deck, Wedge checked Threepio. "I can't get a response out of Threepio. The shock of the explosion must have shut him down. He's got a few new dents, too."

"Right. Put him with Zev and the wounded. Then get all the ships into the air. Hit those Howlrunners and war droids with everything we got!"

"What about you, boss? You're hurt!"

"Don't worry about me. I'm a card player who signed on to fight a war. I've got one more draw before I'm out of the game."

"Right, boss." Wedge disappeared, dragging Threepio by the feet, as another explosion rocked the space station.

The Battle of Entarr-Phase One

The Shadow Droids had launched missiles against the Hub's polar turbos and ion cannons while still thousands of miles out. As the missiles found their marks, Sedriss QL wondered why the hundreds of unscathed defense batteries didn't respond.

As the six Incoms continued to circle the Hub like wasps, a swarm of Rebel E-wings and snubs rose out of the flight core to meet the rapidly approaching war droids. Sedriss smiled darkly.

"Retarget the Shadows on the Rebel attack force. If I'm right, there's very few Rebels still on the Hub. They're all in the air! We'll engage them in a firefight and that will be the end of it!"

In terms of numbers, it was an even match. Sedriss had six Eliminators and three Shadow battle droids—a total of eight fighting machines. The Rebels had three X-wings and six E-wings. The X wings were an older craft, which gave Sedriss an immediate advantage. But the new E-wings were fast and agile attack ships that had become the fighter-of-choice for commando raids and surgical strikes into enemy territory.

Add the incredible skill of the Rebel pilots to the equation, and it was a toss up which side would prevail.

Sedriss expected the Rebels to go after the Shadow Droids—but the Rebel ships veered suddenly away from the approaching war droids and hit the Eliminators hard, running fast two-on-one strategies.

The tactic was simple and dangerous: one X-wing maneuvered for a head-on collision with a Darkside ship, while an agile E-wing arced low and wide, to get under and behind it, striking before the deadly crash can occur.

Of course! The Rebels are betting the Shadow Droids won't fire into the duel and risk hitting the Howlrunners!

As a Rebel X-wing rushed straight at *Eliminator-3*, Bephan Kark delivered a spray of laser fire. Kark's laser beams splattered off the snub's forward shields while his radar screamed a warning of an E-wing targeting him from below. Kark jammed his gloved hand against the turret-controls, kicking in the automatic circumferential targeting computer too late.

Kark's sleek black Howlrunner spewed orange and blue flame and danced wildly toward Entarr's red ocean.

Calmly Bephan Kark reached for the flashing emergency lever that would initiate separation of the pilot's cabin from the rest of the ship, including the personnel bay holding a platoon of black armored stormtroopers.

The ship halved neatly. Moments later gyros and repulsors kicked in, stabilizing the cabin's fall. Behind him the personnel bay exploded in a rapid succession of bright bursts.

Torr Darkheart was not so lucky. His entire Howlrunner became a blazing globe of fire and he died a hero's death as he managed to steer his burning ship into one of the attackers, taking the Rebel E-wing down with him.

Sensing the continuing hesitation in the Shadows, Sedriss shouted an order. Immediately, the great war droids opened up with their massive turbolasers—thick jets of fire lanced through the dogfight, blowing two snubs and one E-wing out of the sky.

The Rebels had no choice. They switched at once to a scatter-and-sting strategy, directing every bit of firepower at the three great war droids.

None of the Rebels had met a Shadow Droid in combat. The Shadows were a recent addition to the Empire's arsenal. The Rebels were in over their heads.

With speed-of-light decision making, the Shadows' cyborg controllers divided the remaining E wings and X-wings between them, locked on their targets, and opened up with a torrential fusillade of laser and concussion fire.

As the last X-wings and another E-wing flared and shattered, the rest of the team somehow managed to maneuver and return fire, only to see their blasts deflect harmlessly against the Shadows' rapid-response molecular-absorption shielding.

Wedge saw at once the futility of attempting to oppose the killers. "Shields up and away!" he screamed.

But the E-wings own shields were proving worthless against the massive amounts of energy behind the Shadows' lasers. Only Wedge's E-wing, by some grace of the Force, managed to dodge and run, avoiding the lightning quick targeting of the cyborgs. Two more E-wings exploded, sending a rain of sizzling metal against Wedge's canopy.

Suddenly Wedge found himself alone in the sky, against three invincible Shadow Droids and the four remaining Howlrunners. As the seven killing machines locked him in their sights, he took the only option he had left—he jumped to hyperspace.

Lando Calrissian stood with his legs astraddle the prone figure of the Yakan specialist, examining the remaining monitor screens and sweating profusely. *"All my team... down. Where's Wedge?"*

He glanced down at the fallen specialist. *"Old Jellyface looks so peaceful, lying there.... He's the lucky one the living still have to fight."*

With extreme nervousness, Lando ran his fingers over the rack of key chips. *"Four hundred keys, Only one is going to get me access to the turbos and ion cannons that'll take out those war droids..."*

Lando closed his eyes, and suddenly he was seeing himself back on Nar Shaddaa, sitting at the Sabaac tables next to a card-counter Yaka named Jellyface Nhazz.

The Yaka was grinning and pointing at a particular card lying face down to Lando's left.

"Huh...? That isn't the right card, ya ugly goose..." Lando reached for another card.

The Yaka grunted and grabbed Lando's hand, forcing it down on the card to the left.

Suddenly Lando's eyes were wide open and he was back in the real world—the command deck of the Entarr Intelligence Security Hub.

"Ah... *what have I got to lose?*" He grabbed blindly at the rack, and slammed a key chip into the access slot on the control board.

The remaining monitor went green.

WEAPONS AUTHORITY ACKNOWLEDGED
OPERATOR HAS CONTROL OF ALL STATION DEFENSE SYSTEMS

"I knew it," shouted Lando. "I knew that was the right one!"

Within seconds, the Imperial Intelligence Hub rumbled and sprayed sun-bright flame from sixty different defense batteries.

One of the Shadows was destroyed immediately, transformed into a dazzling energy nova that nearly blinded the remaining Dark Side pilots.

A second war droid took a hit and spun crazily, firing in all directions-nearly hitting Sedriss QL's *Eliminator-1*. Then the cyborg-controlled war machine plunged like a meteor into the orbiting station, where it blasted a gaping hole in the smooth outer skin. A second later, a volcano of red fire and thick black smoke belched from the hole.

Sedriss snarled at his co-pilot. "Okay – that's it. Order the last Shadow Droid to hold its fire! Tell Mordi and Katth to back off and watch for more Rebels. One of the E-wings jumped... and Skywalker is still missing. *Eliminator-4* is to follow me in."

"Goir heard you. He's with us," was Solusar's clipped response.

Sedriss was grim and very angry as he steered his Incom 10 through the rain of slag fragments from the battle and headed straight for the southern pole of the Hub's flight shaft. Vill Goir's ship was right behind him.

"There can't be more than five or six Rebels left in the Hub. But now they've got the defense batteries operational, they'll kill us, unless we retake that station!"

"Right, Sedriss. I've alerted the stormtrooper platoons. They're ready."

There were, in fact, seven of Lando's commandos still alive in the Hub. Besides Lando himself, there was Zev Veers, laid out with a broken leg on a tarp in one corner of the main hangar behind a bulkhead. Next to Zev was another injured Rebel, Shan Orn, a Cathar nursing a severed appendage. Both Zev and Shan had blasters in hand.

Next to Orn, propped against the bulkhead wall, sat See-Threepio, lifeless except for an occasional whirring sound from deep within his electro-mechanical innards.

Four Rebel commandos—Fin Non, Tanus Prog, Kane Stone, and Nestor Tral—stood guard at the hangar's open entrance, looking out at the great flight deck that encircled the interior equator of the station. They were armed with blaster rifles and one portable ion cannon, the new N-RR-44 Compact, designed to be transported on a man's back.

The hangar had no doors or shield protection—the Rebels had blasted both when they took the Hub.

The polar turbolasers were gone and there were no defense batteries in the flight shaft obviously to use major weapons there risked destroying the station. So the glass-black *Eliminators* of Sedriss and Goir rose unopposed up the night core and settled toward the equatorial main deck.

In the hangar, the commandos moved swiftly to combat positions behind bulkheads and transport vehicles. Fin Non already had the N-RR-44 humming ominously on its rotating tripod, as it charged its pulse oscillators. Tanus Prog put his link to his mouth, "We got visitors, Lando... two of the Howlers are coming in!"

"Okay – try to hold 'em 'til I finish off the other war droid! The thing has raised some massive shielding. It's still spitting missiles at the Hub, taking out battery after battery!"

Tanus Prog gave an affirmative, and signaled his cohorts. "Lando says to hold them in the ships as long as we can."

"He's crazy! All they gotta do is—"

What happened next happened fast.

Sedriess was determined to retake the Hub, and to do it without any margin of error.

The two black *Eliminators* streaked across the equatorial landing deck and through the hangar opening in tight formation then came to an abrupt halt in the middle of the great space, hovering on columns of repulsor energy.

The Howlrunners' automatic targeting systems located seven warm bodies in the hangar. Turret guns hummed and clicked into position. As Sedriess and Vill Goir pressed the firing studs, the turrets erupted with slashes of green fire, blasting the Rebel positions.

"Hit the turrets, Fin! Hit the damn turrets!"

But Fin Non's hand was frozen to the N-RR-44's trigger—and the rest of his body was only a cloud of red vapor.

As Tanus Prog jumped for the ion gun, another streak of green heat flashed and hit the gun, and Tanus fell back screaming in a shower of molten metal.

The Howlrunners settled onto their landing skids, keeping up a circular pattern of withering turbo laser fire.

Of all the Rebels, only Kane Stone and Nestor Tral remained unscathed, protected behind an overturned cargo tractor. Shan Orn had lost another appendage to shrapnel, and was bleeding badly, crying out in stifled bleating tones. Zev Veers had dragged himself and the Cathar to a floor hatch, and was exerting great effort to open it, as blast-sparks rained all around him.

Threepio sat unmoving, the spark-showers scarring his golden body. He remained oblivious to the raging firefight... and to the fact that he might be blown to shreds at any moment!

Amidst the scream of lasers, the *Eliminator's* hatchways hissed and unlocked. The boots of fourteen elite black-armored stormtroopers clattered on the ramps.

Behind them Sedriess QL, Kam Solusar, and Vill Goir emerged in the gleaming armor of the Emperor's Dark Jedi.

Nestor Tral gasped as he watched the powerful Dark Side warriors stride across the hangar "We're dead men, Kane."

"No, we aren't. We don't have a scratch on us."

Kane Stone stepped out from hiding, a blazing blaster rifle in each hand. Nestor Tral was right behind him. Between them they took down seven stormtroopers before they died.

Sedriss gave orders to Solusar to take five stormtroopers and scour the station for survivors. "Vill Goir and I will get whoever's on the command deck... You check the detention level. The rebels will have locked up most of the station personnel. They're blind to the fact that you have to kill everyone when you capture a position!"

As Sedriss and Goir and three stormtroopers trooped off, Solusar brought his men together and gave orders. He sent three of the troopers to the detention level to free the prisoners

Then Solusar, a Jedi for forty years, closed his eyes and concentrated. He immediately zeroed in on Veers and Orn, still warm and breathing behind the bulkhead. "They're both wounded. One is almost dead. The other wants to hide from us. I feel his intention."

Followed by two black-armored stormtroopers named Zill and Ormeg, Solusar strode toward the bulkhead protecting the two wounded Rebels. He held his blaster loosely in his right hand.

As he came around the bulkhead, he found himself eye-to-eye with Zev Veer's weapon—pointing at him out of an open floor hatch. Behind the blaster, the pained intense face of Zev Veers took careful aim.

Solusar raised his left hand as Veers fired, and the green energy bolt was deflected harmlessly by the power of the Force. Solusar fired his blaster, hitting Zev's hand, and Zev dropped from view with a cry of pain.

"Take that one prisoner," said Solusar. "The other one can die."

Zill pointed his blaster at Shan Orn and finished him.

At that moment Threepio snapped awake, his round eyes lighting up and servos whirring. "Master Luke... Artoo? Oh... bless the Maker... where am I?"

Solusar smiled. "Hmmm. Bring along this protocol droid. I have a feeling he'll prove useful to us."

The Battle of Entarr-Phase Two

KrDys Mordi and Zasm Katth ran *Eliminators 1* and *2* through evasive patterns, several miles out from the Hub. They were waiting for word from Sedriss... and they were keeping an eye out for the E-wing that had jumped.

"Katth—why's the Shadow Droid still firing at the Hub? I heard Sedriss order it to pull back!"

"Got me, Mordi. I never heard of a droid ship disobeying a direct order. Must be another of Leth's screw-ups."

Indeed, it was a small oversight on the part of Umak Leth that was causing the Shadow Droid to break its obedience programming. Leth had constructed the cyborg war droids around the brains of Imperial fighter pilots—great men who had fallen in battle, but whose physical remains had survived. His "small oversight" was that many of these fighting aces had been friends. And they retained their affection for one another—and their sense of comradeship even after they were entombed in the monster war machines.

Simply put, the last of the three Shadow Droids was angry. Two of his best friends had been blown to bits by the Hub turbos. And he didn't trust the Darksiders to get revenge.

The Shadow probed the I.S.H. orb with powerful scanners as it rained missiles on the Hub's defense towers. It finally found what it was looking for—the defense command deck.

Then it went after it.

Lando heard the clatter of boots approaching the command center, and he knew it was time to fold his hand.

He turned to release one last barrage at the last Shadow Droid—and then grimaced his disappointment. He couldn't find the droid on any of his scanners.

A hand-blaster ray shot by Lando's ear and hit a readout panel. Lando dived for the floor, falling over the dead Yaka as he grabbed for his own weapon.

There was a stairwell six feet away that Lando had marked as a possible escape route the moment Tanus Prog radioed that two enemy ships were landing inside the Hub.

There was no way he was going to reach that stairwell.

Sedriss QL and Vill Goir marched into the command deck ahead of their stormtroopers. Sedriss looked around at the wreckage, the bodies... and the flashing weapons board. He gestured to his men, and three troopers went to the board and began shutting it down.

Sedriss sneered as he looked at Lando lying on the floor, blaster in hand. "Now, I know this man. He is an important member of the Alliance. A General, I believe."

Lando turned the blaster and aimed it at Sedriss QL's face.

"Don't," said Sedriss. "You'll regret it." Sedriss raised his right hand in a subtle gesture. Lando felt invisible fingers tighten around his neck. Suddenly, he knew he was dealing with an enemy he couldn't beat.

He fired the blaster anyway.

Vill Goir's gloved fist shot in front of his superior's face, deflecting the blast.

"Why thank you, Goir. I could have got it myself... really."

"I'm sorry, Sedriss. I didn't want to lose you."

"Your lack of faith in my ability to protect myself is disturbing. But I forgive you—your sense of duty is without flaw."

The next moment was madness.

A great tearing sound was heard, the scream of protesting metal, followed by a thunderous roar as the entire command deck shook, knocking Sedriss and half his men off their feet.

Next a powerful concussion seemed to hit the room and one wall bulged inward. Sedriss could feel the presence of an angry mind beyond the wall. He knew exactly what it was—"The Shadow Droid! It's gone berserk!"

One of the war machine's massive gripper claws came through the wall, and suddenly the atmosphere began to leave in a howling rush. "To the ships! Take the prisoner!" Sedriss screamed.

But the prisoner was nowhere to be seen. Lando Calrissian had made it to the stairwell.

Four of Sedriss QL's stormtroopers were sucked out through the hole in the orbiting station as the Shadow Droid continued its ravages with grappling teeth and gripper claws. The other troopers tried to stop the berserk droid with blasters, as they retreated to the corridor. And Sedriss tried to reach the cyborg controller with his mind... tried to calm it... tried to overpower it... tried to kill it with the Force.

The last trick worked. The Shadow Droid suddenly stopped in its tracks, and began to shake and vibrate, arcs of electricity running along its seams and flashing beneath its sensor turrets. One staccato burst of laserfire sprayed the ceiling of the command deck... and then the Shadow Droid was still.

The crisis was over. Sedriss ordered his men to seal off the deck. "This station belongs to us. Let's go below and help Solusar free the prisoners."

And then the Hub began to fall.

Two levels down, Lando Calrissian had found himself in a vast space tilted with humming repulsor dynamos.

He recognized at once that these machines must be creating a counter-force to Entarr's heavy gravity. They were keeping the Hub in orbit.

So he began shutting them down.

There was suddenly no time to save the Hub. They must evacuate at once... or die. Sedriss and Goir reached the hanger as the increasing gravity began to make movement difficult.

"My ship!" screamed Goir. "Where's my ship!" *Eliminator-4* was gone. *Eliminator-1* sat alone amidst the battle wreckage in the echoing hangar

"Solusar must have taken it. He did the right thing; this station is doomed! Get your men on my ship!"

Cursing at the loss of his precious Incom I-7, Vill Goir barked a command to his stormtrooper platoon, and they followed Sedriss and his men, with laborious steps, up the ramp into *Eliminator-1*.

The Hub lurched and the sleek black I-10 slid on its skids across the hangar floor. Fortunately for Sedriss, it slid toward the door. Seconds later, he had the Eliminator hovering, boosting the repulsors to compensate for the rapidly increasing gravity in the Hub.

The ramp was in. The hatch closed. Taking a visual sighting through the hangar door, Sedriss noticed a figure crawling on hands and knees across the flight deck... "Look, Goir. It's the Rebel General. Poor fool. He's about to go down with the station he captured!"

Sedriss moved the I-10 out of the hangar and across the flight deck. He gave a mocking salute to Lando as he glided past toward the edge of the deck. Then Sedriss dropped his ship into the access shaft and let it fall free as he aligned the fuselage with the Hub's axis.

A second later, the sub lights kicked in and *Eliminator-1* shot upward toward the north polar opening at tremendous speed.

Eliminator-1 almost collided with a Rebel E-wing that had just entered the flight core.

* * *

Wedge and Lando got away seconds before gravity sent the Imperial Intelligence Security Hub crashing into Entarr's great red ocean.

Lando marveled at the wave the Hub created, a towering mass of water that seemed to be reaching for their fleeing E-wing.

"That's going to make one mighty tidal wave," said Lando.

"Yeah. Fortunately Entarr's used to that kind of thing. The planet's huge gravity attracts asteroids like a magnet. Nobody even tries to live on the coast... nobody takes their kids to the beach."

Lando sighed. The mission had been a qualified success. The Hub was down, but they had lost eight ships and twenty-eight men.

"What about Luke?" said Wedge. "Think we ought to jump over to Nespis VIII and see how he's doing?"

"I think we ought to leave Luke to his own devices. In fact, if you'll check your rear scanner, you'll see we've got three Howlrunners tailin' us. What do you say we lead 'em as far away from Luke as we can?"

"Excellent idea. Let's take 'em someplace where they're not welcome, and where you and me can sit down and have a beer."

Wedge punched the coordinates of Pinnacle Base into the navicomputer. "We're ready, boss. Do you want to do the honors?"

Lando reached for the hyperdrive throttle. Starlines filled the night as the E-wing went to lightspeed.

City in Space

A city constructed over black nothingness. A vast decayed edifice of girders and spires and corroded durasteel. Ancient starships sat rotting in exterior docking bays.

"Nespis VIII? The droid's lying. Why would Skywalker come to this forsaken place?" One of the black-armored stormtroopers, Zill, was assisting Solusar with the interrogation of Threepio. The other trooper, Ormeg, was piloting *Eliminator-4* as it closed on the ancient hyperspace terminal.

Zill and Ormeg, once handsome men, were so no longer. Caught in a turbolaser backfire, they both had disfiguring burn scars across their faces and close-shaven heads.

"Protocol droids aren't known to lie," said Solusar. "Besides, the DIS-M12 has full control. Every file in the protocol's memory has been opened and searched."

The DIS-M12—Droid for Interrogation and Sabotage, Model 12—hummed quietly as it ran a second scan for hidden memory.

At the moment, the hulking interrogator's neck socket was host to the shiny head of a certain golden protocol droid. The rest of the protocol's metal body lay slumped in the cargo bay of the Imperial Howlrunner next to the sedated form of Zev Veers.

No hidden files were found. DIS-M12 had successfully combed Threepio's memory for clues to the whereabouts of Luke Skywalker. An exact record of the last Alliance conference in Pinnacle Base had been uncovered. Thus it was that Kam Solusar, without the knowledge of Sedriss QL, had found his way to Nespis VIII.

The interrogator droid suddenly spoke using Threepio's vocal synthesizer, "If I may say so, sir, this 3PO unit is overdue for a memory-wipe. Shall I proceed?" The inflections of the voice were Threepio's, but the sound was rasping and two octaves lower.

"No. That won't be necessary. I may claim this droid as plunder. And I want you with us when we find Skywalker. I want him to see precisely how the Empire has outwitted him."

"As you wish, Master Solusar."

Ormeg interrupted. "I've got a reading, Solusar. The city's life-support systems are in full operation. ETA in six minutes."

The sublights were whining down as the stormtrooper handed over the control yoke to Solusar. Solusar settled into the pilot's seat and turned his concentration toward the sprawling space station. In bare seconds, his mind found Luke's.

He felt the other Jedi turn toward him.

"All right. He knows I'm here... Get your gear on, men."

Solusar was masking the Dark Side in himself, attempting to project a presence of Jedi idealism and heroic intentions. He knew Skywalker was hunting lost Jedi. Solusar had been such a one, before his transformation. He knew the attitude he had to maintain in order to win Skywalker's trust.

The sleek black Incom I-7 Howlrunner closed on a blade-like green spire divided by great globular blisters.

"He's inviting me in. Prepare to dock."

"Sedriss will be pleased, sir, to learn we have the quarry."

"Yes. So he will." Solusar kept the mask over his mind, the hopeful face of a Lightside warrior, seeking the company of another lone Jedi.

The I-7 glided toward the sheltered hangar near the tip of the green spire. There an X-wing sat on its landing skids amidst scattered debris.

"That's Skywalker's ship—I know it." Solusar guided the I-7 in and let it settle next to Luke's X-wing.

Son of Vader

Luke came out of dreamless unconsciousness only minutes before he felt the approach of the other Jedi.

"Damn it, Artoo. I must have been out for twelve hours! Why didn't you wake me up?"

"Fra deet tzoot!" The little astromech moved in impatient circles, as he had been doing for hours, after trying unsuccessfully to awaken Luke with gentle jolts from his electric prod.

Luke looked at the open tantalite board with its many colored crystals set into a pattern suggesting the Galaxy. He saw the red playing-piece sitting exactly where he had placed it in the board's black and white center.

"I think this is a powerful game. The crystals have been carefully carved and faceted to tune them to vibrations of the Force. As soon as a Jedi touches them, some kind of Force-circuit is completed, similar to when a Jedi holds a lightsaber... I guess I wasn't prepared..."

"Twirr-doot-fwdeet?"

Luke rubbed his stiff muscles and looked around at the wreckage of the violent confrontation that had occurred here so many years before. He picked up one of the skulls of the alien Jedi who had died in the fight.

"I'll bet this guy knows how to play the game. I wish he was alive to teach me."

Suddenly the riddle told by Master Ood of the Holocron came back to him:

"The lightside game is lost but found. The Jedi who is lost loses yet again. But in losing he is found by the lightsider who finds the game."

Luke felt the presence of a Jedi Knight, approaching the station.

* * *

The meeting did not occur as it had in his vision. Luke did not see a lonely man standing on a balcony looking out through a great viewport at the distant Adegan suns.

Instead he was presented with two blaster-wielding stormtroopers, in black armor and war-helmets, and an ugly-looking interrogator droid wearing the head of C-3PO.

The Jedi himself, if that's what he was, walked behind, wearing a dark cloak over fretted armor. His face was weathered, space-burned, middle-aged. A tough man, about fifty-five, Luke guessed. The power of the Dark Side is on him.

Luke ignited his lightsaber and prepared to defend himself.

Solusar stepped forward. "Put your blasters away, men. He's alone. I'll take care of this." Solusar locked eyes with Luke "You are the son of Vader," he said.

Luke flinched at the name. "I am Luke Skywalker, Jedi Knight, son of Anakin Skywalker." He waited for the man to identify himself: but Solusar only looked Luke up and down in silence.

Suddenly Artoo, spotting Threepio's head on the DIS-M12, began to beep excitedly. The interrogator droid responded in the distorted voice of Artoo's beloved counterpart. Curiously enough, some of the DIS M12's invective was not that different than Threepio's usual scolding of the faithful astromech, "Stop your insane twittering, you mechanical hodgepodge. As soon as my Masters are finished with this human, they are going to strip you to your sprockets and give me your obsolete electronic brain to play with. I just might program you as a carpet-sweeper!"

"Twint breet?" Artoo sounded mournful and hurt.

The DIS-M12 continued the taunt, "Don't feel sorry for yourself—but you can pity this tin head I'm wearing. You can be assured it will never rejoin its body. When I'm done with it, it will be pounded flat and tossed in the slag-furnace."

Solusar interrupted the droid's strange harangue. "Shut down, droid. I'll switch you on if I need you."

"Oh, of course, sir, I was only—" Click.

Solusar knew it would not be easy to take Luke prisoner. Skywalker was a formidable adversary. and a lightsaber duel with the younger man might go badly.

"They tell me you bested the Emperor," he said.

Luke didn't reply. He was probing the darkness behind the man's fearless visage. If this was the Jedi Knight promised by the Holocron, then there had to be a crack in the monolithic wall of Dark Side will that now confronted him. But he could find none.

Solusar suddenly walked away from Luke. He purposely turned his back to the great Jedi as he surveyed the wreckage in the cavernous waiting room.

"Looks like there was a fight here... and these fellows got the worst of it." He picked up one of the alien skulls. "Kortethan. I knew one once. He was a Jedi archaeologist."

Luke noticed the Dark Jedi betrayed respect as he put the skull back where he found it. "And what's this? Lightsider... the Force game! It's been many years since I've seen one of these." He picked up the red stone that Luke had placed on the board. The shadow of a smile crossed his lips. "Do you play?" he asked Luke.

"Who are you?" said Luke, ignoring the question. "Why have you come to this station?"

"Forgive me, son of Vader... I am most impolite to one born of such powerful lineage. I am Kam Solusar, a Jedi for forty years. My Master was Ranik... my father." His face darkened.

"Then you are a Jedi?" Luke asked doubtfully.

"Yes... recently empowered by the Emperor's chosen Executor. I, like you, have become a son of the Dark Side of the Force. He gave Luke a sharp, penetrating look.

Solusar suddenly unhitched his lightsaber with his left hand, and held the unignited hilt in front of him. In the open palm of his right hand he held the red playing piece.

"Son of Vader," he said, "You and I are destined to a contest. Which shall it be—the sword or the game? I suggest the game."

"I don't know anything about this game," said Luke. "I think you ought to put down your weapon and surrender to me. The Alliance will treat you well... and my sister and I will help you."

Solusar laughed. "Skywalker... I am here to kill you and take your corpse to my superior. But I am willing to give you the opportunity to best me, in a fair fight... The lightsaber or the game?"

"Can you show me how to play this Jedi game?"

"I have played Lightsider at least a thousand times. Yes, I can teach you."

"And if I win, will you go peacefully as my prisoner?" .

"*If* you win, certainly. I am a man of honor. If you win, Kam Solusar is your prisoner, to do with as you please." The Dark Jedi laughed. "But of course there isn't much chance of that!"

Luke nodded. "Show me the game."

The Force Game

"We start at the outside and work in toward the center." Solusar smiled darkly and placed one of his red stones on the board with unhesitating self-assurance. The stone made a sharp clicking noise as it landed securely in a cavity of green crystal.

"Alderaan system. I claim the Alderaan system."

Luke looked surprised. "But Alderaan no longer exists."

"I'm sorry to hear that. But this is a very old game, son of Vader, I claim the Alderaan system... Now, if you will stop criticizing and turn your attention to the Force, you will learn how to play the game"

Luke closed his eyes for a second and his field of vision was flooded with images, which seemed to stream at him out of a point of light about twelve inches in front of his face. Warships... a great fleet of ornate warships emerging from hyperspace over Alderaan. The strange warships, by their thousands, moved in over the cities, releasing powerful laser-blasts from their undersides, leveling building after building.

Luke opened his eyes. Solusar was grinning wickedly. "Do you like my beautiful ships?"

"What happens next?" asked Luke. "What do I do?"

"What you do is your problem, Jedi. You can build weapons, launch a fleet, send in ten thousand Jedi Masters... But the effectiveness of your response depends on the Force. You see, it is not so simple as just deciding to match my move with greater strength. It's like the lightsaber... you have to align yourself to the Force, let it move you, let it help you make your moves."

Luke was silent. He looked at Solusar, tried to understand what motivated this fallen Jedi Knight to test him in this way. He decided that Solusar wanted to prove he was the greater Jedi... perhaps even a Jedi Master.

Solusar smiled. "Take your time, son of Vader. In the ancient days games could last for weeks."

Luke picked up a blue stone. He hesitated a moment, concentrating in the Force. Then he put his blue stone on top of Solusar's red stone. "I destroy your fleet," said Luke. "Alderaan is free."

Solusar smiled a wry smile. "Nice try. But you didn't hear what I said!"

This time Luke didn't have to close his eyes. The images seemed to be right in front of him. powerfully energized by a gathering intensity of the Force. He saw a thousand ships of the Republic—his ships—emerge from hyperspace and engage Solusar's Dark Side forces in fiery

combat. The skies of Alderaan were aflame with laser beams and exploding war vessels. The fight seemed to go on and on... and then abruptly was over. All of Luke's ships were destroyed.

"You see?" said Solusar. "The game is more than wishful thinking. You have to really know what you're doing." He reached over and took Luke's stone and put it in his capture box.

"You have an advantage," said Luke. "You've played the game before."

"True. I played it often in my youth. But it's at least thirty years since I've seen one of these game boards." He took one of his pieces and turned it between his fingers. He seemed to be remembering pleasant memories... of a more peaceful time.

Then another memory crossed his mind and Solusar frowned. He was remembering the murder of his wife, his two sons, and his father, the Jedi Master Ranik. Solusar looked intently at Luke—his eyes seemed to smoke with hatred. "Your move, son of Vader. I cede the initiative to you. It's the least I can do for a... beginner.

Why does he hate me? thought Luke... *And why does he keep calling me "son of Vader"?*

Luke looked at the playing board, which still seemed mysterious to him. He picked up one of his pieces and held it over the board. "Do the crystals on the design have to represent star systems?"

"The green crystals are always star systems. The other colors are not defined. You might, for instance, call for a lightsaber duel by playing your stone on a white crystal. Or you might send your opponent on a quest by placing your stone on a yellow crystal... or even a white or orange one, for that matter. What matters, in the end, when all the stones are used, is how many stones remain on the board and who holds the center. And of course, the enjoyment of the game itself"

Luke had a sudden inspiration. He put his blue stone on a white position. "You are on Dagobah," he said. "You are in the company of Yoda, a great Jedi Master."

Solusar turned pale. "Uh... all right. Yes... I see I have no choice."

In fact, Solusar was suddenly walking through dense jungle growth, hearing the sounds of strange creatures calling to each other among the dripping trees... Ahead, sitting on a log, was a small alien with large eyes, larger ears, and a face like a wrinkled turnip. Solusar wanted to turn and run away... but he couldn't. He was trapped in this vision, by the power of the Force.

The alien Jedi smiled a crooked smile and wrinkled his nose. *"A Jedi, he is... yes... once very great... but no longer. Belongs to the dark side, does he... He has taken the easy way, the path of anger ... Hopes for revenge, does he?"*

"Don't taunt me, little one!" In his vision, Solusar pulled his lightsaber and ignited it, threatening the alien Jedi.

"Ohh! Kill Master Yoda, he wishes! Be careful, the Darkness in you may be, but not in your lightsaber!"

Solusar looked at his lightsaber in shock. It had turned into gnarled wood, with bright blue flowers growing all over it!

Disgusted, he threw the flowering stick on the ground and moved to grab the little Jedi. But suddenly Master Yoda was sitting ten feet away, on a tall rock formation. *"Careful! Anger is not the way of skillfulness!"*

Solusar stopped in his tracks and looked at the hateful creature who taunted him with ancient Jedi platitudes.

"There is still time," said Master Yoda. "Time there is to remember your true self... time there is to throw off the shadows that hold you."

And the old Jedi Master vanished.

As the vision ended, Solusar was furious. "All right. Very good... You've secured a position. I congratulate you.... Now it is my turn!" He slammed a red piece onto the board claiming another green crystal.

"This is the Ottethan system, where rancors run wild! Your ship has crashed and burned and you are attempting to reach the fortress of a local warlord... Blood flows freely from your wounds, and its scent is on the air.... The rancors sniff your presence. Your only weapons are your Jedi skills and your lightsaber..."

Solusar grinned devilishly. "This should be easy for a Jedi Master of your caliber! But if the rancors eat you, then I win the position and the game!"

The field of Force seemed to shift around Luke like river currents, and suddenly he was on a rugged plain strewn with the debris of fallen asteroids and ringed by a forest of desiccated trees. A bulbous red sun squatted on the horizon, casting a crimson glow over the arid land. A herd of rancors was gathered at the edge of the forest, feeding on the carcasses of some kind of antelope.

Luke's ship, an antique blockade runner, lay crushed and burning a hundred yards away, sending a plume of black smoke into the cloudless sky.

Luke was standing, alone, next to a huge pitted boulder. His clothes were torn, his arm was bleeding, and his foot seemed to be sprained. His lightsaber was in his hand.

He heard a low snarl behind him, and he turned to see three rancors running full tilt in his direction.

I know the game now, he thought. I don't have to take everything unchallenged. This is all a configuration of the Force... like the shaping of water.

He stood his ground as the rancors closed on him. Their savage roars had alerted their fellows who were feeding by the forest. Several of the herd broke away from the feast and moved in Luke's direction.

Luke let his thoughts and feelings relax toward that great presence of life energy he knew so well. *This is very much like using a lightsaber... only different, he thought. In this game, all the dangers... and all the powers... are in the mind.*

The wound in his arm closed and the sprain in his foot was gone. Quick as a womp rat, he leaped to the top of the huge boulder, just as the rancors arrived.

The rancors howled and snarled and tried in vain to reach Luke with their powerful claws. Luke considered slicing their forelegs with his lightsaber—then he had a better idea.

Since none of this is real, why should I put up with any of it? Let these rancors become tauntauns, and I'll ride one of them to safety!

No sooner had he spoken, then the raging rancor beasts began to change before his eyes, morphing into gentle tauntauns.

But halfway through the transformation, the process began to reverse itself.

Aha! My adversary is making his riposte! thought Luke, and he let his feelings reach in deeper into the strength that had become his greatest ally in life.

The process changed direction. The rancors were again turning into tauntauns. Even the rancors the distance were becoming tauntauns.

"There are no rancors on this planet... only tauntauns!" shouted Luke, and he leaped onto the back of a strong-looking tauntaun, which conveniently acquired a saddle and reins while Luke was still in the air.

Triumphant, Luke rode the tauntaun at top speed across the ragged plain, all the while considering his next move. When his tauntaun began to breathe with difficulty, Luke remembered it was used to colder climates. So he lowered the temperature of the air.

But then an awful thing happened.

The sky suddenly split open and a shaft of purest darkness reached down to him, and then everything around him, including the tauntaun, disappeared.

He was falling and floating in a lightless void, and gasping for breath. Suddenly bright red needles appeared near him, turning randomly, and then all pointing at his body at once.

It was a nightmare from which there was no escape. Luke tried desperately to make it go away, make it change, but it only grew worse—the needles began to prick him and slide into his flesh and face.

Luke opened his eyes screaming.

Solusar was standing on the other side of the table, his eyes full of fierce intensity. The Dark Jedi was holding a small cylinder in his right hand. It was slightly larger than a comlink, with three bands of gleaming diodes along its shaft, separated by arrays of tiny switches. One end was a faceted lens. Kam Solusar was pointing that lens at Luke Skywalker.

"Mind Splitter," said Solusar. "It really works. Very soon you will begin to realize your inner rage, as I did... your innate disposition toward the Dark Side of the Force!"

Luke screamed and tried to throw himself out of the path of the Splitter's invisible ray—but Zill and Ormeg, Solusar's two black-armored troopers, grabbed him and held him fast.

Artoo bleated and moved toward the stormtroopers, his electric prod extended. With a free hand, Zill pulled his hand blaster and fired a quick bolt of laser energy at the little astromech droid. Artoo was stopped in his tracks, as his mechanical systems shorted and popped and the stench of burnt wiring filled the air.

"Serves you right," said the DIS-M12, snapping alert from its wait-state. "Nasty little servant droids who break the rules end up in the furnace!"

"All right, son of Vader. Here is your moment of truth" Solusar walked around the table that held the game board and pressed the Mind Splitter against Luke's forehead. He flicked three tiny switches, and Luke's body went limp.

The troopers looked at Solusar for instructions. Solusar kept the Splitter trained on Luke's forehead. "This will take only a minute. He's almost there now. I can feel it."

But in fact, when Luke glimpsed the diabolic device in Solusar's hand, he understood instinctively how to deal with it. Despite the chaos and pain that surged in his brain, he concentrated the Force in front of him, deflecting the Splitter's mind-shattering ray harmlessly to the side.

"Hold him—he might get violent." Luke lay there in the powerful grip of the stormtroopers, gathering his energy and equilibrium. Unaware that Luke was deflecting the invisible ray, Solusar waited for the scream he knew must come.

Suddenly, Luke struck out with the Force, sending the Mind Splitter spinning from Solusar's hand and flying across the room. In the same moment, he threw off his two captors and leaped to his feet.

Luke drew his lightsaber. The blade hummed and shimmered.

"Is the game ended then?" he said. "Is this how I find my first Jedi Knight—a slave of evil who is determined to betray his Jedi ancestors?"

"I'll teach you about my ancestors!" screamed Solusar, and his own lightsaber flashed and droned as it clashed with Luke's.

Zill and Ormeg raised their blasters, ready to fire at Solusar's signal. Solusar gestured them back and charged with a cry of vengeance on his lips, slashing for Luke's throat with the deadly energy blade.

Luke dropped and the blade whizzed harmlessly over his head. He came up with his lightsaber under Solusar's arm, ready to sever it at the elbow—

Solusar made a move so rapid Luke barely saw it: the Dark Jedi flipped his wrist over and sent his light blade suddenly downward. Luke glimpsed the blade heading for his right shoulder, and he lunged desperately forward, throwing himself against Solusar. Solusar lost his grip on the lightsaber, and the weapon grazed Luke's back and went end over end through the air.

Black-armored Ormeg let out a gasp of mortal surprise as Solusar's weapon sliced through his war-helmet. The saber continued its trajectory, and the top of the trooper's head came off, spouting brains and blood. Ormeg fell back dead.

The second stormtrooper raised his blaster and fired point blank at Luke. Luke deflected the bolt easily with his lightsaber, continuing the motion in a fluid arc, cleaving the black armored soldier in half.

Luke stood between Solusar and Solusar's lasersword. The fallen Jedi looked around in desperation. Luke knew Solusar's next move would be telekinesis—hurtling objects, throat-crushing, the whole range of mind-over-matter abilities in a Dark Jedi's bag of tricks.

Luke knew he would never win this man away from the Dark Side by using endless permutations of violence. There was a better way. There had to be.

"Let's finish the game," said Luke.

"What?" Solusar looked confused, full of free-floating rage.

"You heard me. We are Jedi... let us play the game of Lightsider to the end."

Solusar shook his head. "And if I win? Can you accept what that means?"

"Let the game reveal the stakes... and the future. I'm willing to take the risk... Are you?"

Solusar pondered for a moment, considering what moves he might make, should the game resume. Finally he nodded his agreement. "Very well, son of Vader. I accept. Put down your weapon and take up the stones."

Luke retrieved Solusar's lightsaber and switched it off. He hooked it on his belt, next to his own weapon. Then he checked Artoo. Artoo's prod arm was fused, but otherwise he seemed in good shape just a little singed around the vent louvers.

"Take care, Artoo. This won't take long... I hope."

Lightsider

Luke took his place at the table, across from the fallen Jedi. "It's my move," Luke said.

"It makes no difference. But I will tell you, Skywalker, I have only one move left in me. Let me make it now. I believe this move will decide the game."

Luke looked at the time-worn face, the eyes that communicated infinite sadness and anger. He had a sudden intuition that Solusar's move was going to project him straight into an abyss he thought he had left behind. *The Dark Side has its hooks in this man*, Luke thought. *And through him the Dark Side still hopes to own me. Resuming the game may be the greatest mistake I ever make.*

"All right, I agree," said Luke. "Play your stone."

Solusar took one of his red pieces and held it over the board. Slowly he brought it down. There was a soft click as it seated in the cup of a violet crystal.

"You have come to an uncharted world called Anoth. You are seeking a Jedi Master named Ranik Solusar and his son, who is a Jedi Knight. The son is not there—he is away fighting a great battle for the Light Side and for the Republic. But you find the father, Ranik, and you find the son's wife, F'heela. And you find their two boys, strong in the Force, Jaxon and Tev."

As Solusar spoke, Luke saw azure skies. He saw an Imperial shuttle descending toward rolling green hills and fantastic outcroppings of rock.

Solusar continued. "Your Master has sent you to this place on an urgent mission. It is not in your power to disobey him, nor do you have any desire to disobey him."

Luke was full of sudden dread. "I see what you are doing. Solusar. I do not accept this move."

"You have to accept it. It was you who asked to finish the game,"

Luke was silent. He was getting an uncomfortable feeling in his chest. It was difficult to breathe. Something, years before, had damaged his body, seared his lungs, scarred his skin... He looked down at his black gloved hands, his flowing black cape. He heard the sound of his own breathing.

Solusar's voice sounded like a dirge. "It is very simple, Skywalker. You are the son of Darth Vader, playing the Jedi game with the son of Ranik Solusar. Now, in the Force-dimension of the game, you have become your own father. And I will become my father. And when you slay me, as you must, your journey to the Dark Side will be complete."

"No!" Luke cried a hoarse protest, and tried to rip the iron mask from his face, but it was fastened securely—it could not be removed.

"Now, son of Vader ... do what your Father did, so many years ago."

Behind the mask of Darth Vader, Luke watched the mother and the two boys, as they cowered under the guns of the Empire. Twelve white-armored stormtroopers had blaster-rifles raised, ready to execute these young Jedi.

The bent old man, Ranik, stood protectively in front of the little family. He carried no weapon. His hand seemed poised to block the shots of the Imperial blasters.

Luke was surprised to hear the old Jedi speak, as he must have spoken in the far off day, *"Darth Vader ... I know who you are. You were once the student of my friend, Obi-Wan. You showed great promise. I told my friend you would one day become a great Jedi Master... How wrong I was, for I see you have sunk to the darkest regions of the heart. You have become everything that is opposed to the Jedi Way. You have become the Enemy itself, the one who would dare to murder the Light..."*

"What a fool you are, Vader. If you only knew, the Light cannot be murdered, for where Light is, there can be no darkness. Flesh can be murdered, but we are not this mortal flesh... we are luminous beings."

"I tell you, strike me down if you wish... but if you value your soul, do not harm this woman. Do not touch these innocent boys."

Luke understood what Solusar was up to. His opponent couldn't expect Luke to raise a lightsaber against these innocents. But by calling up the true sentiments of his Jedi father, Solusar hoped to entrap Luke into accepting blame for their deaths.

If I accept this mask, then I accept blame for all the crimes of Vader.

The conflict in him swelled and shimmered dark until dread pressed every corner of his mind and seemed about to smother him alive. He wanted to scream, but there was only silence, and the black tide of fear that had haunted him ever since his return from Byss... the fear that, like his father, he might one day yet succumb, utterly, to the Dark Side of the Force—

But... I am... not... Vader.

Again Luke tried to tear off the iron mask. *"Ranik Solusar!"* he shouted, *"I am the son of Anakin Skywalker, who is released by the power of the Force and the Light which casts out Darkness!"*

Luke shuddered as he heard his own voice, distorted by the electronics of the mask.

"If that is so," said the Jedi Master, *"then why do you so readily wear Vader's armor?"* There was a note of irony in old Ranik's voice.

"Ranik," Luke said, *"there is a lesson for both of us in all of this..."* Luke's hoarse breathing filled him with dreadful memories.... Desperately he tried to lift himself out of this reenactment and return to the room where he sat across the gameboard from Ranik's son. But he was held firmly in the role that Kam Solusar's move had assigned him... held firmly by his own inability to alter these images.

"Listen, Ranik... We are playing a game, and this game we play is all a configuration of the Force, like the shaping of water. This is not real."

The old man smiled grimly. *"Is it real that you are about to murder me? Is it real that you are about to kill my son's wife and children?"*

Luke felt the Dark Side leaning down on him, with all its terrible weight. He felt his opponent's willful intention that Luke Skywalker must act out this dreadful killing. Luke struggled mightily against the intention, without success.

And then inspiration came to him. *There is a way. Don't fight it. Don't try to tear off the mask. Don't deny the terrible truth. Anakin Skywalker was Darth Vader. Darth Vader was your father. Let this be Vader, if that's what Solusar wants. Let this be Vader...*

Yes, he thought, *let this be Vader, but let it be Vader as he was in that moment when he turned against Emperor Palpatine, to save the life of his son, Luke.*

On Anoth, in the game, Darth Vader dropped to one knee and bowed his head to the old Jedi Master Ranik Solusar in the time-honored gesture of respect among warriors. The voice that came deep and distorted from the electronic breathing mask cut like a lightsaber through the illusion of the game, *"I ask you, Kam Solusar, son of Ranik, to consider your own words, the words you have spoken today through your father. They are the words of a true Jedi, a great Jedi. I honor Ranik Solusar... I honor his family... and I honor you, his son."*

Old Ranik looked stunned, disbelieving. Tears came to his eyes. *"Then... then... they can live? My sons... my wife?"* Suddenly his face began to metamorphosize, his hair darkened, his spine grew straight.

Kam Solusar stood there, instead of his father, in the mind of the game. He looked around at this place he had called up from the depths of his great wound. He looked at the figures of his wife and sons.

F'heela was crying. *"Kam! You're back! Oh thank God!"*

"Father!"

F'heela embraced Kam and he felt the wetness of her tears as they kissed. Then Kam hugged each of his sons in turn.

Solusar turned to look at Darth Vader. But Vader was gone, as were the stormtroopers. In their place stood Luke Skywalker, Jedi Master.

"For many years," said Luke. "you carried in your heart the image of Darth Vader's unspeakable crime against your family. Now that image is no more. In the power of Darkness, my Father was an instrument of evil. In the power of his love for his son and his son's love for him, the Darkness was broken, and he was released. If the murderer can return to the Light, how much more likely can his victims be healed."

Solusar, still clinging to F'heela, looked at his wife and children. He was somber and regretful. *"This is a dream, Luke Skywalker. A good dream, but soon to vanish, and leave you and I sitting in a derelict space city playing an ancient game of light and darkness."*

"This is the shaping of the force," said Luke. "In the power of the Force, your family is restored to you."

"My family can never really be restored to me!"

F'heela looked curiously at Kam, perhaps wondering why he said this, while holding her tightly in his arms.

"No, they cannot," said Luke. "But your love for them and their love for you never really died. Just as my father, in his love for his son, carried the seeds of his own release so you have never relinquished this love for your family."

"The power of Darkness could not touch that. All it could do was feed on your hatred of the Darkness itself. So it must be to the very end of our great struggle. You yourself have said it, 'Where Light is there can be no darkness.' The Dark Side cannot touch the Light. It can only devour itself."

They were back in the waiting room among the bones of the dead. Luke Skywalker took his blue stone and placed it atop Solusar's red stone on the violet crystal. He picked up both stones.

Solusar looked at Luke. A shadow seemed to have lifted from the older man's mind.

"Have I won the game, then?" asked Luke.

Solusar didn't smile. His expression seemed to become one of firm resolve. He nodded and stood up. Luke could see that all the energy, all the rage had gone out of him.

"Can we stand together, Luke?"

Darksider

Sedriss was in Bast Castle when he learned the news from Vill Goir, who was coordinator of all covert spying operations inside the Rebel Alliance.

"I've received word that Skywalker has found a Jedi Knight. He's bringing the man to the Rebel command post on the fifth moon of Da Soocha—the moon they call Pinnacle Base."

"Oh?" Sedriss seemed preoccupied. He was programming attack coordinates into his operations computer.

"The Jedi's name, I am told, is Kam Solusar."

Sedriss stopped what he was doing and turned to face his subordinate. "What you have just told me fills me with unpleasant premonitions, Goir. We made a dreadful mistake in taking Solusar into our secret order.

"But Sedriss... how do you know he has betrayed us? He may be playing the fool with Skywalker. Indeed, he might show up at any time with Skywalker's body—or better yet, with Skywalker alive, sealed in carbonite."

Sedriss shook his head. "That's your fantasy, Goir... not mine. My troubles are only compounded by this news. The Emperor has not incarnated, and certain powerful Adepts are spreading the idea that he's gone for good. I'm caught in a precarious position, trying to maintain the effectiveness of the Emperor's battle plan in the face of mounting impatience... If word gets out about this failure, you and I may find ourselves under direct assault from these Adepts. I wouldn't want that, nor would you. Their Dark Side power is considerable."

"No one beyond our group needs to know about Solusar, Sedriss."

"Yes. Don't tell the others. Don't even tell Mordi."

"But Mordi is your second-in-command. He should know if anyone knows," said Goir. He gave Sedriss a meaningful look. Sedriss understood.

"Mordi is no longer my first officer, Goir. I am appointing you to that position."

"Why thank you, sir." Vill Goir bowed stiffly.

"Now... I want you to make Solusar a priority focus of your intelligence operation. And find out everything you can about what Skywalker is up to."

"It is already done, Sedriss."

After Goir was gone, Sedriss walked restlessly around his office a few times and then went to the meditation hall. He stood before the great statue honoring Darth Vader and looked up at the masked visage. He wished the statue would communicate some shred of Vader's dark wisdom to him, now when he needed it most.

But of course, there was nothing. There were only Sedriss QL's ruminations.

To commune with darkness... to feel its black fire swell within me until I am utterly imbued with the Force, until my consciousness is immersed absolutely in that infinity, that is the path to greatness.

The Emperor will return... I can feel it. And he will not be pleased with me.

Dark Jedi indeed.

Sedriss QL suddenly felt very weak. Chaos, bordering on madness, seemed to threaten just beyond the perimeter of his mind.

He wanted to scream, but of course he did not. Instead he pulled himself together and went back to his office to work on the attack coordinates for Operation Shadow Hand.

The statue of Vader, as usual, was silent.

-Finis-