



STAR WARS

A Force to Contend With

By
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WARNING: This book is intended for a mature audience. Due to violence and sexual themes, some persons, especially those suffering from PTSD or childhood trauma, could possibly experience unpleasant feelings or flashbacks.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

This book is intended to support the mythos as created by George Lucas, but given the amount of SW fiction that is available, and the amount of divergence from various authors, movies, and re-releases of movies, it is most likely out of the scope of this writer to fully address, capture, or give credit to the others who have most certainly influenced his thoughts and appreciation for this saga. I can only hope that my small perspective adds to the lore, as opposed to detracting from what I believe Lucas set out to achieve with the original Star Wars and what I hope AJ Abrahams will recapture come this Decemember.

I dedicate this to George Lucas, with gratitude for all many way in which Star Wars has touched my life.

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Episode 1
A Force to Contend With

Concerned that eventually someone may actually succeed
In killing him, Darth Sidious invested a great deal of resources
Into three vital contingency plans. Cloning Troopers had been just the first
Stage of the Clone Wars as it was always his hope to secure a method of cloning
Sith warriors in an effort to establish a new legacy that
Would rival that previously held by the Jedi Order.

Additionally, there was no end to the rumors that the Emperor
Had been seeking pathways to immortality. Many believed he had already
Achieved this, but it was often more difficult to discern between fact and fiction
When it came to Emperor Palpatine. Only one, Admiral Alarna Byrnes,
Known as Darth Qwuen only to Palpatine, knew the intimate details of his
Machinations, and the depths of his depravity.

While Byrne searched desperately for ways to please Palpatine,
His paranoia grew in leaps and bounds. He saw plots against him
Everywhere he turned. The fact that there was validity to at least some
Of the perceived threats only dogged him harder to find a solution. It came in the
Form of a new classification of Droid: Bloodhunters. Scattered around
The galaxy were an untold number of Bloodhunters, sleeping, waiting to
Be summoned for the sole purpose of vengeance. In the event of his death,
The Droids would be activated, their only purpose to destroy
Any person who would benefit from The Emperor's absence.
And not just persons, but their entire families,
And in some instances, whole planets were designated as targets.

Again, as with most things, most people simply assumed
It was a fear campaign, because it was simply too difficult to fathom
Someone so evil that they would destroy every gain out of spite.
And, since no one had ever seen a Bloodhunter,
Or known anyone to have 'disappeared' because of one,
It was shuttled off to the back of people's minds,
Because holding onto such things tended to mess with a person's
Ability to sleep at night. But, not to let an opportunity pass
Once the idea of Bloodhunters were in the Public's mind,
There was no reason not to put it to good use:
Bloodhunters became part of the myths to steer children away
From misbehaving. Palpatine's legacy of fear continues unabated...

Star Destroyer 'Immanence' dropped out of hyperspace into a star system comprised of a white dwarf orbiting a red giant. The white dwarf had long since burned all its fuel, and what was left was mostly carbon and oxygen, compressed into ball about the size of an average terrestrial planet, but with the average mass of a sun. Though white dwarf stars were common, what made this particular find so valuable was its age. It was upwards of twelve billions years old, inferred by the measurable fact that the surface had cooled sufficiently to allow the carbon at the most upper surface to crystallize. In another hundred billion years, the star might be one giant diamond, but for now, the diamond shell was only seventeen kilometers thick, and illuminated from within as if were a lantern.

In addition to the white dwarf, there were five terrestrial planets circling near the red giant, one Jupiter class planet with a dozen or so moons, and a scattering of asteroids and comets skirting the system. Still, the white dwarf stood out; a sparkling, self-illuminated gem, pulsing as if it had an internal heartbeat. From the perspective of 'Immanence,' it was like a singular jewel resting on velvet. The 'velvet' was a large patch of sky where a stellar cloud occluded the background stars, cutting a patch out of the galactic disc, with the phenomon called "frame dragging," where the gravity of an immense rotating mass literally dragged chunks of space time around like taffy adding to display of sparkles, auras, and rays. No one expected the white dwarf, or its radiant beauty, but then, no one really knew what to expect from the seemingly random coordinates provided by the Commander. Both sensors and visible inspection clearly revealed the solidity of the dwarf's surface, with evidence of past volcanic like activity as the star resisted its inevitable path towards solidification. One screen gave a visual representation of the magnetosphere surrounding the dwarf, revealing that its internal engine was still churning out a rhythmic energy. For the pleasure or convenience of the crew, the signal was converted to an auditory signature: a rapid, oscillating pulse that almost sounded like a cat purring over whale song.

The age of the white dwarf meant it was likely one of the first stars to illuminate the night sky after the emergence of the Universe. Its proximity to the nursery probably meant it had initiated the birth sequence of all its sister stars when it finally died, sending a pressure wave out into what at the time would have been an even bigger gas cloud than what remained to date. With each subsequent birth and death of all the stars in this region, the hydrogen was transmuted into all the other elements necessary for more complex systems, such as life itself. The Stellar Nursery was still very much alive, birthing stars, while the dying stars gave up their bones to become planets. Even now, not yet visible, a massive star had already erupted into a supernova, deep within the dark nebula behind the dwarf. The crew was no more concerned about the oncoming event than a person would be about a volcano on the other side of the planet. It was that far away and they would be gone before the light of the supernova hit this system.

Admiral Alarna Byrne listened to the command staff chattering as they analyzed the entire system, with only a few focusing on the jewel of the immediate sky. She was aware that one person wanted to penetrate the stellar nursery to get closer to the nova with probes, but he kept the musings to himself, recorded the data on his sensor and noted his personal observations on his terminal. A vent above and just behind Byrne stirred the edges of her cape, and pushed her sunset red hair against her back and over her shoulders. She brushed a strand away from her cheeks. Her green eyes were steady, unwavering, and if she blinked at all, one had the sense that she had reposed in meditation, only to emerge a moment later ready to fight. Most people could

not maintain her gaze. She was the only female on the ship who wore a skirt, non-military issue, with a muscular tone that screamed yoga master, but one couldn't exactly look down to admire her legs for fear of being called out on impropriety, and so, most people sort of just looked down and to the side. In one of those rare moments when there was unexpected lull in the background conversational volume, someone remarked about women always finding diamonds.

"I've killed people for making lesser sexist remarks," Byrne mused out loud, her eyes focused on the jewel. Except for droids, all chattering was subdued, as if she were a librarian reminding people they were to be quiet. No one doubted the veracity of her statement. They had witnessed such events. The only reason she hadn't killed anyone today was that she was particularly pleased by her discovery. And when she was happy, the crew was happy. Or at least, minimally more safe.

"There is life in this system, Commander," said Captain Motka Orlov. He was a bio-engineer by trade, but in a pinch could double as a medic. If his hair hadn't been military short, it might have looked as if he was standing in an active Faraday cage being pulsed with static electricity. His gray eyes were penetrating, but ever respectful, in a subtle Nagai way, and he projected peace fortified by strength, but with the air of confidence that comes from the knowledge of a hidden dagger or two on his person.

"Sentience?" Byrne asked, not looking at him.

"There is no evidence of technological features, but that doesn't rule out sentience," Orlov said.

"I want a piece of that star," Byrne said, finally stating her intentions out loud.

Everyone looked at her.

Captain Liza Jesser pointed out the futility of such an operation. "Defying the gravity well is beyond our technological capabilities. Ignoring gravity, neither droid nor humans could survive the heat, radiation, and magnetic flux emanating from the core. Even if we could get a work platform on the surface, there isn't a drill in existence that could penetrate that surface due to the pressure." At 1.5 meters, she was probably the shortest person out of the entire crew. She, too, sported a military cut, razing her brown hair almost to the roots. The style only enhanced her feminine qualities, bright eyes, accentuated cheek bones, and pale skin with ruby lips.

Byrne didn't appear to be listening.

"I wasn't considering a drilling exercise," Byrne said. "I was thinking about blowing it up and collecting the debris."

Again, she had her command staff's attention, but no one spoke their visceral objections.

"What?" Byrne asked, dismayed at their skepticism. "They don't call this ship a Star Destroyer for nothing, do they?"

There was not even a cough at her attempt for humor.

"It would take over a dozen Star Destroyers all firing at one point to even remotely make a dent in the surface," Jesser began. "And if you did make a hole, more than likely there is sufficient pressure built up inside that you'd just get a geyser of plasma in your face."

"You know, I keep you around because of your pragmatism, but you are still not thinking big enough. One only need make a small, tactical nudge to claim greater results," Byrne said. She sighed and pointed to the sensor. "I think these six comets will do the trick. This one here has enough mass that we only need it to fly by the fifth planet to start a change in its orbit. The remaining comets need only impact that planet's surface near the equator, at successive intervals to add the necessary momentum. Six months later, the fifth planet will collide with the dwarf with sufficient force to shatter it like an egg and surround this boring red giant with a halo of

perfect diamonds from dust to boulder size. Imagine an asteroid belt of the purest diamonds nature can provide.”

“Your math can’t be that good,” Jesser said.

“Run the numbers,” Byrne insisted. She advanced closer to examine Jesser’s calculations as the computer ran virtual sims. “Even if it’s just a passing glance, or we only knock a few pieces off, the relative value of a cargo hold full of this quality of diamond could very well give all of us the ability to retire. I’m talking wealth beyond anything any of you have ever imagined, all combined, and that’s even after paying premium taxes to the Emperor.”

“I think you are overstating the profitability of these crystals,” Jesser said. “If you’re thinking lightsaber components, you’re talking about a fringe market at best, and it is a diminished market at that.”

“There will be a resurgence in the old ways after the war,” Byrne said. “And crystals of this caliber are used in more tech than just lightsabers. Natural crystals have the best frequencies, and with the trace elements distributed randomly over this star’s surface, impressed directly into the crystalline structure due to the extreme temperature and pressures, each individual piece should offer a distinct, individual characteristic that only a Force sensitive could appreciate. Additionally, the fact that this is a first generation star means that the crystalline structure will have a resonance reflecting the energy signature of the early Universe. Why are we still discussing this? Make it happen. I will be in my quarters if you require my talents.”

Byrne turned to leave.

“Admiral,” Orlov interjected. He knew he risked death after the finality of the Commander’s last directive, but he felt the urgency in his need to speak. “The fifth planet has life on it.”

“So?” Byrne asked.

“There might be intelligence,” Orlov protested.

“Again, so?” Byrne asked.

“The Rebels may like to paint a picture that the Empire is indifferent to life, but the truth is we have an edict to preserve life and order,” Orlov said. All biological life had a potential exploitive factor in terms of revenue and future products.

“Assume there is intelligent life on the planet, do you suppose they will evolve technologically enough to depart this system in eighteen years?” Byrne asked. Everyone believed that was unlikely, but even if one believed otherwise, they wouldn’t argue the opposite. “We happen to know that hidden inside that nebula a supernova has already occurred. In less than twenty years the gamma radiation from that blast will irradiate all living things in this system. This place will be completely sterile. The window of opportunity is now. I intend to take it.”

“The fact that there is life in this system at all attests to its tenacity, making it worthy of further scrutiny,” Orlov said. Clearly he wasn’t getting anywhere with his ‘scarcity of life argument,’ the belief that all life was sacred. It was not the most popular philosophic position in the Empire. Life was so obnoxiously abundant that there was no need for preservation and with interstellar travel being the norm, it had a tendency to proliferate quickly. With competition for raw resources fierce, the value of life, sentient or not, had decreased. It was always cheaper to expand or take resources through force than to engineer greater technology that might minimize competition for those same resources, and, dare he say it, ‘share.’ “There is life on that planet, and two of the moons orbiting the gas giant. This is a grand opportunity to study divergent evolution in a closed system. Further, one of our protocols is to determine if there is any

compatible species or biological organisms that may benefit the Empire, either in terms of labor, for its nutritional properties, and or undiscovered medicinal characteristics.”

Byrne nodded. There was always an opportunity to profit off niche biological systems. “You can put a platform in orbit of the fifth planet and release survey and collection droids to gather samples. Also establish a base on this moon here, preferably in a cave, and assign Fixit to the study and classification of all the samples, so if anything useful can be salvaged or transplanted, we can collect it at a later date. Meanwhile, I want the rest of us focused on pitching these comets, as this window won’t last forever. Continue with Silent Running protocols. No transmissions, not even normal telemetry between extravehicular activities.”

Jesser rolled her eyes. Radio silence would make her task of shifting comets more difficult. Computers would have to be automated and programmed on site. Jesser forced herself to breathe. Paranoia was a healthy skill set in the Empire, especially at this moment in time, with so many people jockeying for power in the relative instability of change. Eventually, she figured, things would get back to normal, and rule of law would abide over personal gain. Until then, she knew the game and just had to play it well. Or at least, better than those around her.



The FX medical droid series was usually permanently attached to the floor and wounded were brought to it. Fixit, however, was mobile. The wheels at its base allowed it to glide effortlessly across the room, while simultaneously rotating its body in one direction, or its head in another. Most of its appendages were pulled in close as it navigated the corridor. It arrived at its destination, communicated its arrival via UV frequencies, and entered when the door opened. Byrne was sitting in her chair, feet up against the window looking out at the diamond star, wondering if when it became completely solid it might qualify for the title of planet. Semantics. Scientist were frequently changing classifications systems, so it was possible for a planet today to become a planetoid or moon tomorrow. The door closed behind Fixit and it edged closer. It did not feel the need to remind her that it was summoned. It merely waited to be addressed.

“I think my birth control failed,” Byrne told the medical droid.

“Abstinence failed?” Fixit asked.

Her eyes shifted to the droid. “I am armed with a blaster,” Byrne told the droid.

“No disrespect intended,” Fixit said. “It’s just that fraternizing with the crew comes with penalties even you may not be able to avoid.”

“Even me?” Byrne echoed.

“Everyone suspects you have favored status with the Emperor,” Fixit said. Its head pivoted, allowing its various eyes to take in the entire room. “But even his reach couldn’t protect you from political maneuvering of crew and rivals. I believe the maxim you promote is, all weaknesses are eventually exploited by the competition.”

“It is. The best way is to have no weaknesses,” Byrne agreed. “That is why I would like you to do something about this liability.”

The Droid took a moment to consider the problem; so long that she almost imagined it was having an ethical dilemma. She wondered if it were time to have its memory wiped. She had put off doing that simply because she hated having to retrain Droids to recognize her personal eccentricities. That, and everytime one reprogrammed a Droid you risked a dramatic personality changed, and she was able to tolerate her Fixit better than any previous Fixit. Fixits in general were programmed to save lives, indiscriminately, so having one that could discern the difference between friends and foe was a luxury.

“You are due for a routine medical exam. Perhaps once I am on moon’s surface you could use that as an excuse to visit your favorite medical droid,” Fixit said, offering her an out.

“I am always amazed at the size of your ego. It’s almost like you have the personality of a real medical doctor,” Byrne said.

“Indeed, I am a real medical Doctor. And Veterinarian,” Byrne said. “May I inquire into the paternity of the liability?”

“Only if you want to be permanently turned off,” Byrne said. “We’re clear about this? There is to be no physical evidence remaining that might suggest impropriety.”

“I understand,” Fixit said.

“You’re dismissed,” Byrnes said, and went back to staring at her star. There was no doubt that crystalline structure of this purity and complexity, bathed in both radiant and magnetic energy, could be imbued naturally with the Force. She could feel the distortions pulsing through her, invisible currents that whispered her name. This meant if she managed to get a big enough Force crystal, she could use it to power her ship directly from the Force. She had held a hand full of Force Crystals once, specifically, a gram’s worth, each the size of a grain of sand. Just that handfull had enhanced her connection with the Force sufficiently to send her into ecstasy. She wondered what would happen if she put her hand against a solid Force crystal the size of a Tie Fighter. She shivered. But even if they weren’t specifically Force imbued crystals, having an alternative source for lightsaber crystals would give the Emperor the ability of creating a new order of Jedi, with lightsabers as abundant as blasters. Crystals from the Adeg system were scarce and hard to find due to the previous Jedi Order hoarding them, and though Sith could use alternatives to crystals, it still took time to create each individual saber. That was one reason each Jedi was instructed to make their own lightsabers. If a master took all his time creating lightsabers, they would hardly have time for anything else.

Byrnes forced herself to stop doing the math. There was so much potential wealth here that there was just no reason to actually count. Her find was even more appreciable than she could have anticipated or even wished for. This was her ticket out.



The comets were shoved off onto their new trajectory much faster than the establishment of the temporary base on the moon. Byrnes returned from her procedure, disguised in the form of a routine exam and inspection of the base to ensure all the typical protocols were established. A long range module allowing for a Tie Fighter in tandem was left in orbit about the moon, along with several cargo containers, each attached to the periphery of the long range module with uniform spacing. Each module had sufficient space to salvage diamonds, biological samples, and frozen critters alike. As she came off her personal shuttle, Captain Granes met her at the foot of the ramp.

“We’re ready for the jump to hyperspace when you are,” Granes said. “Your specified coordinates will park us in interstellar space. You do understand we don’t have to leave the system to avoid the dangers of this planet colliding with the dead star? At best, there might be a sizeable stellar mass ejection, but we’re not expecting the entire star to be appreciably shattered or diminished in any significant way.”

“I’m aware of where we are going and why. Commence with the jump. Alert me when we have arrived, I’ll be in my quarters,” Byrne said.

She retired to her quarters. The night sky shifted as the Star Destroyer turned on its center axis. She saw the glow of rockets pushing the final comet along its new trajectory. The planet the comet was aimed at wasn't even visible from this vantage point. The dim glow of the white dwarf was pleasant, like a night light. The moon she had been on might have made a nice retirement base, if it weren't for the fact it would soon (relatively) be dead. Her retirement plans required a different set of criteria, anyway, with more long term stability in order to meet her need for personal safety.

The Star Destroyer was a Gladiator Type, used to enforce law on outlying systems. At 500 meters long, its surface revealed its age, but it was no worse for the wear and tear it had seen. Byrne and her crew had earned enough profits in her excursions for the Emperor that it was bought and paid for several times over and had had all the most recent upgrades. Most of her missions were so profitable that the Emperor had always been gracious with her skimming off the top. It was also that profitability which had also kept her crew reasonably loyal. She had no doubt they would knife her in the back given the chance, but it was risky, as she was the Emperor's best, perhaps only, 'Finder,' and, well, anyone that took her place would have to match or exceed her performance level, which would be a hard thing to do. Indeed, her performance over the years was so good that she was finding it ever more challenging to maintain her profit margins. Until 'lucking' into this diamond star, she had been suffering with the fear of having reached her plateau. An exit strategy had always been in formulation, but only now was it time to put it into play.

Immanence arrived at its new location. "Nowhere," no doubt some were complaining. The void between stars. Interstellar space. Boring. A waste of a jump.

Granes contacted her. "We've arrived."

"Thank you. Assemble the entire crew on the hangar deck for an impromptu inspection," Byrne said. "I'm planning to give a speech, so top dress."

"Everyone?"

"We're in the middle of nowhere, Silent Running, what emergencies do you imagine will befall us? Everyone. Let me know as soon as the entire crew has assembled," Byrne said, and disconnected the call.

From her private desk, she watched video feed of crew killing themselves to get into formals and get to the hangar deck. She was actually impressed when they beat all their prior records. No doubt, the idea circulating amongst them that they were all soon to be richer than they ever imagined had increased their proximity based loyalty. She noted the call light, and could see Granes' trying to page her from the communication panel on the main hangar deck, rear of the ship. It was an impressive sight, even from the monitor, to see 1,200 people assembled on the deck, a hint of their reflections on the polished, black floors, with traces of white from lights overhead, blue shield generators, and various computer panels and displays.

Byrne flicked a switch on her panel. The artificial gravity on the hangar deck switched off. The crew came off the floor. The next switch Byrne's clicked turned off the main shield, holding the atmosphere on the hangar deck. In less than ten seconds, the entire crew was swept into space. She turned off her monitors and proceeded to her next task. She took her place upon a holographic transmitter pedestal and placed a call direct to the Emperor.



“I hate how she flouts her spiritual beliefs in front of the crew,” Jesser complained to Orlov as he was lying next to her, naked, on the floor, hidden in a supply room, glistening wet being just one of the evidence of having recently been engaged in a bit of a workout. He appeared spent, but Jesser had only just gotten warmed up, reminding him of one of the dangers of ‘coupling’ with someone so much younger than he was. The room was hardly bigger than a closet, but it met their needs. Mocking the Commander’s voice, “Oh, these crystals are attuned to ancient, creative energies and when I have one I will be special...”

“You really shouldn’t do that,” Orlov said, quietly, wondering who stored the MRI packs on top of a nuclear battery. True, there should be no radiation leakage, but if there were... Bottom line, not only was someone not thinking, they probably violated a protocol.

Jesser slapped his chest. “You believe in all that esoteric crap?”

“I’m referring to mimicking or any other form of disparaging or ridiculing your commanding officer,” Orlov said. “The more you do it, whether you merely think it or not, the more likely you will eventually reveal your contempt, in either micro-expressions or direct verbal slips. Whether you believe anything else about her, the Commander is sensitive.”

Jesser blinked. “Oh, nice side stepping. You do believe in the Force. You’re a scientist! All atoms can trace their origin back to the beginning of the Universe, so by definition, all matter should be equally sacred, and since clearly everything is mundane, then there is no supernatural.”

“Or, as a scientist, you might accept the premise that as the Universe continues to expand and cool off, then more and more complex structures can crystallize into existence, and every complex structure has its own particular harmonic resonance.”

“Oh my god,” Jesser said. “You’re one of them!”

“Them?” Orlov asked.

“One of those whacko nut job cultists,” Jesser said, leaning up. “Don’t you suppose that if abilities like clairvoyance were real things then the authorities wouldn’t have been able to raid a Jedi stronghold in order to help society move away from ancient religious concepts holding society back.”

“Or, maybe there were mostly children there who weren’t capable of better?” Orlov offered.

Jesser reached for her pants and started to get up.

“I should have known,” Jesser said.

Orlov pulled her back to his side. “You say you should have known, but wouldn’t that indicate clairvoyance?”

“Let me go,” Jesser said.

“Look, I’m not saying I believe,” Orlov said. “I’m merely pointing out, statistically, there are things that don’t make sense given the paradigms in place.”

“I think we should stop seeing each other,” Jesser said, pulling free and getting dressed,

Orlov sighed. “Because you suspect a difference in operating philosophies, you think we’re incompatible?” Orlov reflected.

“Can you turn it off and talk like a normal person? I think your math sucks because you’re a biologist. You are not only a bad scientist, you’re bad scientist ‘round the clock,” Jesser said.

“Baby,” Orlov said.

“Oh, don’t ‘baby’ me,” Jesser said, pushing him away. “Give me a head start, just in case someone’s outside the door.”

Given the fact Orlov hadn't dressed yet, that wasn't going to be a problem. He let Jesser depart and started getting dressed. He was still tightening his belt when he stepped out the door, only to run directly into her. It startled him.

"Damn it," he complained. "Don't do that."

"Something's wrong," Jesser said.

"Weren't we just discussing intuition?" Orlov asked.

"Okay, not believing in magic doesn't mean that I can't be aware of available information and suspect a problem even if I can't immediately identify any danger," Jesser argued.

"I'm sure there is nothing wrong," Orlov said.

The Universe responded by turning off the lights. Jesser grabbed him out of fear.

"Power failure," Orlov stated.

"Artificial gravity is still on," Jesser argued.

That much was obvious. Orlov found the switch to the supply room and the door opened under power. Glow strips provided minimum relief, marking containers and shelving. He pulled her inside the room, closed the door, and illuminated a torch. He then opened a case and handed her the contents.

"Put this on," he said.

"A pressure suit?" Jesser asked.

"Assume something is wrong at this point. Do you want to keep breathing?"

Jesser exchanged her clothing for the pressure suit, as did Orlov. She was afraid, and shaking, but it struck her as odd that he seemed quite confident. So confident, that as she paused to observe him going through the routine of his emergency procedures, she noted that even in the midst of a crisis he was taking time to admire her body as she exchanged her clothes.

"Really?"

"I can't help it," Orlov said, a slight smile.

"We could be dying and you are still thinking about sex."

"If we are about to die, I'm glad I spent my last, best moments with you."

"Oh, that is so going to get you laid again," Jesser said. "Later. If there is a later."

Orlov handed her a belt with a number of accessories, including a knife, blaster, grappling hook and line. He turned off the torch he had lit.

"Why did you do that," Jesser asked, grabbing his arm.

"Turn on the night vision option on your visor's head's up display," Orlov said. "Assume we've been boarded by an enemy. A light would draw our attention."

Jesser nodded. There was evidence that her breathing rate had increased, her mask fogging up from the rapidity of her breath.

"Liza, I need you to focus, honey," Orlov said. "You've trained for this. You can do this. Now just follow me."

Jesser nodded and followed him out into the corridor. There was no obvious person waiting to kill them and the lights were still off. Her grip on Orlov's arm increased in intensity. He touched her hand, reassuringly. Even with the gloves on, it was enough that she knew he was aware of her fear.

"Where is everyone?" Jesser asked.

He took her into the nearest crew compartment. This particular compartment housed twelve crew members and was in a state of disarray. The disarray might have suggested that people had changed hurriedly into combat gear; only, combat gear was still present, lockers

standing open. What was missing were the formals, with daily grind uniforms strewn on the bed, or badly hung up. He proceeded to a terminal and read the message on the display. Orlov's heart sank.

"Oh, damn," Orlov said. "General assembly was called thirty minutes ago."

Orlov grabbed Jesser's hand and pulled her towards the corridor. She planted her feet and pulled him to a stop.

"Where are we going?" Jesser asked.

"To the meeting," Orlov said.

"Dressed like this?" Jesser asked.

"Look, we're already late, right, so they know we're missing, and she's flushing us out. The best way out of this is to report for assembly late and throw ourselves on her mercies," Orlov said.

"You know she is going to know. The whole crew will know. We'll be executed!" Jesser said.

"Trust me, for once. It will be alright," Orlov said.

"And if you're wrong?" Jesser asked.

"If I'm wrong, we're only delaying the inevitable, so let face this dead on," Orlov said.

"Did you have to use 'dead on'?"

Orlov squeezed her hand and led the way to the main hangar deck. He wasn't surprised to find the airlock sealed. After all, this was probably a test. Would he put himself in the airlock knowing that just on the other side was a crew waiting to humiliate him for breaking protocols? Being trapped in an airlock was hardly ideal, but no doubt, with the pressure suits on, they'd have to find other ways to torture them if that was the plan.

"Change of heart?" Jesser said.

Orlov opened the door, pulled Jesser into the airlock, closed the inner door, the one proceeding into the ship, and opened the second, leading out onto the hangar deck. The only thing that kept the two of them from being launched across the hanger deck as the door opened was that both didn't fit through the door simultaneously. That, and there was only a fraction of the air in the lock needed to really drag them along. Orlov grabbed an inner handle and grabbed Jesser by the belt.

"What the hell?" Jesser asked, responding to the feeling of vertigo as she passed over the threshold and came off the floor.

"Activate your boots," Orlov said.

Jesser activated her boots as Orlov pulled her towards the floor. She heard the sound of her boots locking against the decking as it resonated up the inside of her suit. They walked out onto the hangar deck.

"This is bizarre," Jesser said.

Jesser walked towards the opened hangar bay doors, looking for any signs of damage that might explain why the shielding was down. She was attracted by a light in space, came closer to the edge, and magnified with her helmet. What had attracted her attention was the flashing light of a droid, tumbling in space, its head spinning and its feet kicking in protest. She went closer to the edge, lifted her torch, and shined it out into space. The reflection of light off medals and ribbons fluoresced in darkness. She turned to run, but ended up in Orlov's arms. He had been right behind her.

"They're dead. They're all dead," Jesser said.

There was no saying it was okay, that things would be okay.

“She did this!” Jesser said, looking up into his visor. He was a good five centimeters taller than she.

“No,” Orlov said, not wanting to believe that. He was only looking out into space. Even at full magnification, he couldn’t account for the entire crew, so he could only assume it was everyone, minus whoever did it. Given the average distance of the nearest bodies, and their vectors, they had probably been blown out into space about thirty minutes ago. Saved by an affair! He nearly voiced out loud.

“Who else could it be?”

“A rebel spy, perhaps,” Orlov said.

“Then he is still on board?” Jesser said.

“Maybe. We have to find him,” Orlov said.

“No,” Jesser said. “We need to take a long range shuttle and just disappear.”

“No,” Orlov said.

“No?! Think about it. Even if we find a spy and kill him, do you really think we’re going to be allowed to keep our command after the entire crew and Commander were killed? You think they might not wonder why us? And if I’m right and it is her, which I maintain it is, then it’s her word against ours, and we’re still screwed. We’ve got to fly. Fly fast and hard and disappear.”

“I have a family. I can’t just disappear,” Orlov said.

“We’re supposed to be dead. We disappear, we’re still dead,” Jesser said. “Our families need us to be dead. You know this to be true. We’ve got to go.”

Orlov nodded. A quick survey of the deck suggested the obvious choice. He led her to the vehicle and sealed them in. He sat there for a moment, in the dark cockpit, contemplating.

“We’ve got to go,” Jesser repeated.

Orlov knew that, but he was afraid to turn on the power. This was a bigger commitment than marriage. There would be no undoing this. His hand shook as he brought it up to the control panel. One button released the clamps holding them to the hangar floor. He did that. There was a resounding thump heard in their cockpit. He looked to Jesser. Jesser nodded. He turned on the engines and pulsed the thrusters and maneuvered them out of the hangar bay.

“Jump to hyperspace,” Jesser encouraged him.

“Give me a second,” Orlov said, trying to make the calculations. His hands were shaking worse. Maybe he should have done this before firing up the engines.

“Do you think she knows?” Jesser said, looking back at the Star Destroyer that had been her home for over four years. It was growing smaller, quickly fading.

“We’d be dead already,” Orlov said, trying to convince himself that they weren’t being targeted this very moment.

A dead crew member bounced against their forward display. Jesser and Orlov both made a noise.

“Just do it already!” Jesser said.

“Yeah,” Orlov agreed, punching in the final coordinates. He pushed the throttles forward and they were away.



“Is it done?” the ominous reverberations rung through the room.

“It is,” Byrne said, kneeling, eyes down.

“They’re all dead?” She wasn’t sure if it was skepticism or thoroughness.

“I executed them myself,” Byrne said.

The only identifying feature of the holographic hooded figure was a mouth, contorted into a grimace. A finger appeared from dangling sleeves and it tapped an electronic pad resting on the arm of the chair.

“I’ve studied the telemetry of the data you sent concerning your find. You have outdone yourself,” the hooded figure declared, just a hint of a smile.

Byrne only bowed her head closer to the floor. Because her eyes were diverted, she didn’t see the flash of uncertainty go across the Emperor’s face.

“Are you sure they are all dead?” he asked.

“Have I ever failed you?” Byrne asked.

“True. Forgive me, my pet. I’m tracking so many vectors that sometimes I forget to trust those who I have made,” the Emperor said.

“Are you sensing danger? Do you want me to come to you?”

The Emperor laughed. “No, finish your mission objectives. When you are done, you may join me on Endor. I might just introduce you to the father of your future children.”

“I’m sorry, what was that?” Byrne asked, almost leaking her sin. She did not permit herself to even wonder if he suspected. If he suspected that she had violated the only absolute rule that he had ever issued to her, she would be as good as dead.

“Force babies. Two Force strong genetic lines, with a new source of Force crystals,” the Emperor mused. “I see a bright future for us. Ah, I do so love my pet.”

Byrne shivered as if she could feel him touching her. She squashed her repulsion, pushing it deeper than she thought she could do and still maintain sanity. “Thank you, Father. May you always find my service pleasing.”

“I look forward to being with you again,” the Emperor said. “You remind me so much of your mother.”



An hour into flight, a proper clothing change, and several drinks consumed, Jesser said, for the hundredth time, “We made it, right?”

“Yes,” Orlov agreed.

“I told you she was a crazy bitch,” Jesser said.

“I’ve asked you to stop saying that,” Orlov said.

“Why? We’re done with her. I can say what I like. I don’t have to hide my feelings anymore,” Jesser argued.

Orlov frowned.

“You still maintain it wasn’t her?” Jesser said.

“I’m not a praying man, but I’m praying it wasn’t her,” Orlov said.

“Why?”

“Because she is rather thorough, obsessively so, and should she count bodies or shuttles, well, she is known as a Finder,” Orlov said.

Jesser frowned. “Yeah. There must have been a saboteur,” Jesser agreed. “But then, that just proves my point, right?”

“Your point?”

“Yeah, you know, earlier. If she was such a good Finder, wouldn’t she have seen an assassin waiting to take her out, or the crew?” Jesser asked.

“Maybe it doesn’t work that way. Or maybe, like everyone, we have limited perspective. No one sees everything. Hell, we see more than we actually process. Our brains filter what we see based on our histories and training,” Orlov said.

“You always seem to defend her,” Jesser said. “What did you do, sleep with her?”

Even Jesser caught the micro-expression of a grimace, come and gone like a flash.

“Oh my god! You slept with her!”

“Sort of...”

“How do you ‘sort of’ sleep with someone?! She’s your commanding officer!”

“Yeah,” Orlov said, nodding.

“How could you?” Jesser demanded.

“As you pointed out, she was my commanding officer,” Orlov began.

“No, I mean, how could you sleep with me without telling me you slept with her! I wouldn’t have slept with you ever knowing that,” Jesser said.

“Probably why I didn’t tell you...”

Jesser slapped him. “How many times?!” she demanded.

“Does it matter?” Orlov asked.

“Oh my god. You liked it!”

“It was... Interesting.”

“Really?!” Jesser threw herself at him, dragging him from his chair to the floor, unbuttoning his shirt in mock desperation. Part of it was her attraction for him, part of it was the adrenalin rush of surviving a crisis, and part of it was their fleeing had just made them life partners.

Orlov participated, unzipping the flight suit they had found for her. In between kisses, he managed to ask, “I thought you were disgusted with me?”

“If she gave you anything, I’m probably already infected,” Jesser said, breathless.

“Maybe not,” Orlov said, thinking the biological equation through.

Jesser paused, holding his face with both hands. “You really want to stop this train?”

“Um? Oh. No, you’re right. We’re both screwed!” Orlov agreed, and commenced with the kissing.

Responding to stimuli is not necessarily a sign of sentience. It can be a sign of life, but even that can be suspect. Casual observers miss things. Even trained observers miss things, or they observe things and infer incorrectly. For example, Fixit knew all too well that there are non-organic molecules that can replicate, but that doesn't mean they're living. Even if one infers correctly, it is frequently impossible to validate sentience with any degree of precision. Fetuses have been observed pulling away from an instrument of death, as if they knew what was coming, but that doesn't necessarily mean they were aware of impending doom. Sensing without eyes is impressive, though. Tactile and auditory might explain unexpected responses, as disturbances in the amniotic fluid may send out tiny pressure waves, carrying echoes of impending danger. Ever since quantum physicist started trying to make sense of things, they've complicated matters by adding the observer effect. It is true that the observer has a well defined role in outcomes. If it were just a procedure where no eyes were witnessing the resistance, the death might be over fairly quick. Even if there were eyes on, there would be those who would simply see resistance as a challenge, and increase determination to 'get the little bugger.' But if the sentience observing the event was also Force sensitive, and philosophically programmed to preserve life, there might be a hesitation. What complicates the matter even further is a particle could be considered equal to an observer, so could a mechanical measuring device, or a Droid, a cat, or, as in this case, a blind fetus counted as an observer. One that seemed quite determined to avoid the instrument of its death. Is this the moment where reality divides into two separate, but measurably different Universes, per the theory?

"Is there a problem, Fixit?"

"No, Admiral," Fixit responded.

"Then can we get this over with?"

"Yes, Admiral," Fixit responded. Still, it hesitated, considering the problem from a number of ethical positions. "Do you wish to have children in the future?"

The Admiral reflected. Absolutely not, was what she wanted to say, but she bit her tongue. She knew that the Emperor was grooming her for something bigger than her, but did that include children? Were the constant jokes of pairing her with someone real? Or worse, was he thinking of breeding with her himself? She pushed down on her reaction, remembering all the unwanted touching, both physical and with the Force. The scars of psychic manipulations and the Emperor's lusting eyes left a coating of invisible drool and sweat that never seem to wash off and frequently invaded her dreams like oily tentacles of some subsurface, aquatic creature. She hoped the medical Droid didn't record a blip in her biometrics as anything significant. Of course it noticed, but it probably simply deduced that she was struggling with a life decision. Her exit plan did not allow for offspring at this time. Children were a liability. But if her exit strategy failed, she would still need to be useful to the Emperor. It was best to leave opportunity open. "Perhaps. Why?"

"The implantation is in an anatomically delicate position and the surgery could affect future reproductive potential," Fixit lied. "I would like to proceed with a more precise, but time consuming method of extraction. It will be necessary to administer a more potent sedative."

The Admiral was not happy. "I don't want to be out more than an hour."

"The entire procedure should only take seventeen minutes, twelve seconds," Fixit responded.

The Admiral consented. An arm unfolded from the cylindrical body of the droid, fluid filled the syringe, a needle extended, and it was placed in the hip. One milliliter of the intramuscular injection was all it took, as the Admiral had already been given something to help her relax.



“You know,” Preston reflected out loud as he scrolled through the human anatomy text. “When I consider the cave analogy we discussed earlier, coupled with quantum mechanics, it seems that sentient life is a procession of endless caves. An endless progression of waking to different realities.”

Preston was standing center of the main cavern, which served as the primary living space. It was Spartan, to say the least, bracing off into three tunnels, one of which led outside, and another led to his bedroom, but what he was unaware of is that it was more Spartan than he could perceive. The Halo device, a simple silver band worn like a crown, rested on his head, a series of diodes blinking various colors at different rates which indicated neural activity of the subject, as well as wireless reception and transmission rates.

“What is your evidence?” Fixit asked, viewing his own internal vision, which consisted of a diagnostic flow chart of just about everything that could be measured in real time.

“Well, consider the womb. It’s kind of a cave and the fetus is attached to the wall, chained by the umbilical cord,” Preston offered.

“Very astute,” Fixit said.

“After birth, I lived with my parents in a cave, even slept in a pod, an egg shape baby cave. To come train with you, I was transported via a ship, which is sort of like a mobile cave. Then I arrived here, and well, you live in a cave, so I have just traded one cave for another,” Preston said.

Fixit didn’t respond. His primary sensor maintained its fixated position, the blueness of the sensor penetrating. He saw the cave as it was as well as how Preston perceived it, partly because he was maintaining Preston’s illusion of something more ‘homey,’ to meet his expectations. Preston noted the Droid’s gaze and wondered if Fixit had a preferred filter for interpreting the incoming data of the world, even entertained what it would be like seeing the world from a Droid’s perspective. Three dimensional acoustical maps were certainly more precise in measuring the external world than visual information was. Thermal imaging could also be rather revealing.

“Do babies dream?” Preston asked.

“Do you dream?” Fixit asked.

“I’m no longer a baby,” Preston responded.

“Do you remember being a baby?” Fixit asked, trying not to laugh at the 7 year old. The child was still a baby, as far as the Droid was concerned, but then, even adult humans seemed like children to him.

“I had a very pleasant childhood,” Preston recalled. Saying so not only brought to mind how much love he felt from his parents, but also from all the ‘teachers’ who had spent time with him. One particular favorite was Mace Windu. He had been having conversations with Mace for nearly a week before his parents realized it might not be just an imaginary friend.

“You were a very happy baby,” Fixit agreed. Fixit activated his holographic projector and displayed three dimensional images of a sleeping Preston. “Notice the eye movement. It’s called

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