

## "TANGLED WEB PART FOUR"

Luke Skywalker stared at his artificial hand, unsure of what to do. Emperor Palpatine, whose very being seethed with the Dark Side of the Force, had just offered him a place as the second most powerful man in the Galaxy. It was a tempting offer. All that power.....

He tore his eyes from his hand and stared down at the severed hand of his father. Darth Vader's artificial hand twitched and sparked, the last bit of its mechanical life draining from it. Luke's eyes fell on Vader himself. The powerful Dark Lord of the Sith lay on the floor of Palpatine's Death Star, his normally controlled breath coming out ragged. He wheezed, holding up a hand as if that could stop Luke's lightsaber. Luke's eyes darted back to the severed hand. So much like his own, it was frightening. Vader truly was like him. He was his father.

"No," he heard his voice say. He closed down the lightsaber and tossed it to the side. He wouldn't need it anymore. "You've failed, your highness. I am a Jedi, like my father before me."

He heaved a sigh of relief. His conflict with the Dark Side was over. Palpatine stared at him, his hollow yellow eyes burning with anger.

"So be it.....Jedi," the Emperor hissed. "If you will not be turned, then you will be destroyed....."

Palpatine's hands stabbed toward Luke. White and blue lightning shot from his out-stretched fingers, coursing through Luke's body. Luke cried out in surprised pain, falling to the floor. It felt as if every fiber in his being was burning with pure evil. He writhed under the assault, trying to latch on to anything that would stop the pain. He even called out to his father, thinking that maybe, just maybe, Vader would take pity on him and help. Instead, Vader rose and took his place by the Emperor's side, watching coldly as the Emperor sent more and more lightning blasts into Luke's body.

"Father, please....." Luke whined.

Luke shot up in his bed, his eyes dancing toward the darkened corners. For a second, he expected the Emperor or Darth Vader to attack him. Then, the strange visions disappeared. It had been a dream. Nothing but a dream.

Jedi Master Luke Skywalker heaved himself out of the bed and stepped over to the viewport in his room. That dream had been so vivid, he almost thought he was seeing a vision of the past. Yoda, the Jedi Master who trained him, had said once that Luke would have visions of the past. "Old friends, long gone," were his exact words. Over the past few days, Luke had been having many of those visions, yet he honestly didn't know where they were coming from. In one, he was fighting a massive, leathery creature in the bowels of Jabba the Hutt's palace. In another, he was locked in a duel to the death with a clone of himself as an insane Jedi Master looked on. Each dream contained visions of strange events Luke had never even witnessed. He knew that he couldn't be seeing visions of the past. He knew what his history was. Just about everyone did.

Everyone knew how Luke Skywalker, simple farm boy, had discovered that the three droids his Uncle had bought contained a message for someone called "General Kenobi." It had become a legend how he and Obi-Wan Kenobi had hired the recalcitrant crew of the *Millennium Falcon*. Han Solo had almost refused, but William Riker and Deanna Troi talked him into it. Instead of finding Alderaan, they found the Death Star. When the *Falcon* was captured, Luke, Han, Chewbacca, and Riker staged an impromptu rescue of Princess Leia and Captain Jean-Luc Picard. Unfortunately, it wasn't perfect. Ben Kenobi sacrificed his life, allowing them to escape. They immediately headed for Earth with the stolen Death Star plans.

In the meantime, the Rebellion mustered a fleet at Wolfe 359 and assaulted the Death Star. It didn't go according to plan. The defenses of the Death Star, utilizing battle plans and tactics stolen from Picard, was able to obliterate the Rebellion fleet. The future appeared hopeless, until Data found a minute flaw in the Death Star's defenses. Surprisingly, a battle station the size of a small moon was vulnerable to an attack by something as small as a snub fighter. Luke had convinced Wedge Antilles, Biggs Darklighter, Jek Porkins, and the rest of Rogue Squadron to join him in the attack. Captain Picard, Data, Riker, Troi, and some very daring Rebels commandeered the newly built *Enterprise D*. While the starship kept the Death Star's defenses busy, the X-Wings made the infamous trench run. Thanks to some last minute intervention by *the Millennium Falcon*, the Death Star was destroyed. The Rebellion was able to strike its first real blow against the Dominion.

Unfortunately, the heroes of the Rebellion were now on the run. For a while, they hid on the desolate planet of Hoth. When the Dominion found them there, they scattered. The *Enterprise* disappeared into the cosmos, Han Solo ran with Leia, and Luke went to Dagobah to train with Jedi Master Yoda. While on Dagobah, Luke experienced a vision of Leia and Han being tortured. He ignored Yoda's warnings and went to save them. It turned out to be a trap. Darth Vader was waiting for him. During the ensuing fight, Vader revealed that he was really his father. Vader sliced off Luke's hand, but the Jedi managed to escape. Thankfully, so did Han Solo. Vader had the smuggler frozen in carbonite and gave him over to Boba Fett. The bounty hunter was going to deliver him to Jabba the Hutt, but he never made it off of Bespin. Just as Fett was about to make the jump to hyperspace, the *Enterprise* arrived and ambushed him. Solo was freed.

The Rebellion rallied around the heroes who destroyed the Death Star and escaped Vader's clutches. They organized and went on the offensive. Over the course of two years, they were able to drive the Dominion back through the Maw Wormhole and into Cardassian space. Luke faced Vader again at Deep Space Nine, the experience making him a full Jedi Knight. For the first time, the Rebels could rest. They appeared to be victorious, and they formed the New United Republic of Planets.

Luke smiled, staring at the stars. It was during that peace that Luke had met the love of his life. K'ehleyr was the ambassador to the United Republic from the Klingon Empire. She was a stunning, powerful woman, one that Luke found intoxicating even though she was half-Klingon. At first, she had only shown him hostility, but that soon melted. They had explored Earth together, acting like giddy tourists in love. They were even talking of marriage.

Unfortunately, those plans never came to fruition. K'ehleyr was killed by Klingon assassins. Even though he was miles away from her at the time, Luke could sense her die, feel her pain. It took him off guard and, succumbing to his anger and grief, he reached out through the Force and strangled the murderers with a single thought. He grimaced at the memory. For a split second, he could remember the surge of the Dark side that had coursed through him at the time. It had been so easy, to snuff out the Klingons' lives with his mind.

As Yoda had warned him, anger was the beginning of the Dark Side. After that, Luke became discontented with the United Republic. He became frustrated at their pacifistic ways. He wanted to lash out at his enemies, to strike them down swiftly with the most amount of pain. Eventually, he deserted the United Republic and went to the Klingon Empire. There, he found kindred spirits. The Klingons were more than enthusiastic to take up Luke's crusade. They were just as thirsty for blood as he. At his suggestion, they attacked the Romulan Empire. Under Luke's leadership, they swarmed over Romulan space, taking sector after sector. Luke's second-in-command, General Martock, seemed particularly pleased with the results. He was constantly at Luke's side, egging

him on. Luke was deeply under the influence of the Dark Side, and he didn't mind it at all. He reveled in his new-found power.

Thankfully, Leia intervened. She snuck away from Earth and confronted Luke on the Klingon Homeworld. She pleaded with him to return, and when he didn't, she actually drew her lightsaber and challenged him. For a split second, Luke had considered fighting her, but then, he realized what he was about to do. He refused and took that all-important step away from the brink. Martock didn't appreciate it. The Klingon screamed at him to strike Leia down. When he tried to attack Leia himself, Luke cut down the General, only to discover that the General Martock he knew was a Changeling.

Luke returned to the Light Side of the Force with a vengeance. He discovered some ancient texts that told him that his fall and return allowed him to assume the title Jedi Master. Luke immediately began to search out and recruit new Jedis. He became a symbol to the United Republic, one of the most important and influential figures there were.

That was precisely the reason that President Mon Mothma had called him back to Earth. The news that the Dominion had built a second Death Star had rocked the United Republic to the core. The fact that such news came with the destruction of Bajor made it even more devastating. Although he wasn't sure what he could do about it, Luke agreed to return. He could give the leaders moral support if nothing else.

He closed his eyes. He calmly drew strength from the Force, feeling its comforting presence course through his very being. He hoped this would all be over soon.

Captain Jean-Luc Picard stared down at Earth from the window of his ready room. A surge of emotions coursed through him. On the one hand, he always enjoyed returning home. No matter how much he enjoyed living on a starship, it was always comforting to see his home planet turning beneath him, if not stand on its surface. On the other hand, the circumstances for his homecoming could have been better.

The minute it was reported another Death Star had arrived in the Alpha Quadrant, Starfleet recalled all available ships to protect Earth. The *Enterprise* had reached Earth just half an hour ago, coinciding with the arrival of Rogue Squadron, the *Defiant*, and a very battered *Voyager*. Two dozen other ships were already in orbit and more were on the way. The Mon Calamari Cruiser *Home One* was maintaining its constant vigil along with a small task force. Within hours, the bulk of the United Republic fleet would be ready to take on the Death Star and its escorts. It would be a horrific fight, one that they couldn't afford to lose.

The door chime sounded. Without taking his eyes from Earth, he called out, "Come."

Picard could already recognize the stride of Commander William T. Riker. The younger man cleared his throat. The Captain finally turned to face his first officer.

"The Interdictor task force just reported," Riker explained. "They were successful in pulling the Dominion fleet out of hyperspace near Gamorr. If everything is going according to schedule, Data should be making his pass now."

Picard's lips twitched into a brief yet grim smile. It had been his idea to send Data in a specially modified A-Wing to do a quick scan of the new Death Star. Using the gravity well generators of ten Interdictor cruisers, the United Republic would pull the Dominion fleet out of hyperspace near the Gamorr system. It would take the entire Dominion fleet a few minutes to synchronize a new jump towards Earth. During that time, Data would be able to make a few quick passes with the enhanced sensors of the A-Wing over the Death Star. The android had found the flaw in the first Death Star. Hopefully, he would be able to find a weakness in this one as well.

The precise android mind of Lieutenant Commander Data carefully counted down the nanoseconds until reversion to real-space. His specially modified A-Wing hummed around him and Data prepared himself as best he could. The brilliant tunnel of light slowly resolved itself into streaking stars that eventually shrunk to points of light. Data's body lurched slightly as the fighter dropped out of hyperspace.....and into the middle of a Dominion fleet.

Another being might have panicked. The sight of so many enemy vessels was truly intimidating. Thankfully, Data's artificial nature precluded any such reaction. He merely noted the proximity of the nearest Star Destroyer, a mere five kilometers. Thankfully, most of the fleet's TIEs were chasing off the United Republic's Interdictor cruisers. By Data's calculations (and they were always correct), the TIEs wouldn't be within weapons range for another six minutes. More than enough time for him to make his detailed sensor scan. Besides, his A-Wing was faster than most. It was stripped down, having only the barest essentials. One laser cannon, no torpedo launchers, minimal shielding, and no life support. It didn't even have navigational or targeting computers. Data's complex mind could handle all the calculations with room to spare.

Without hesitating for a moment, Data swung the fighter around and dove for the massive Death Star. He flipped a series of switches, bringing the compact sensor array on-line. It immediately began to soak up scads of information, noting construction details, material used, power system relays, everything that Data would need to know in plotting its destruction. Data didn't bother to watch the flow of information into the computer banks. Plenty of time for that later. Right now, he was more concerned with the fleet's defenses.

Sure enough, several of the Star Destroyers were moving in to try and intercept. Data noted their movement and deemed it rather futile. The massive vessels' turbolaser batteries were useless against his craft. If they actually launched their TIEs, he might have a small challenge. Until then, he turned his attention to the Death Star himself.

This one was larger than the first Death Star. Much larger. Data could calculate the actual difference down to a few thousand decimal places, but he filed that information away for his own personal analysis. He had learned a long time ago that his human compatriots disliked his precise reports.

Data orbited the massive battle station ten times, altering his trajectory to cover the most surface area in the least amount of time. He was sure that it had been enough. He quickly pulled out of his orbit just as the fleet's TIEs were beginning to catch up with his fighter. He entered a course into the navicomputer that would return him to Earth quickly. He would start his analysis on the way back. With a flip of a lever, the A-Wing rocketed into hyperspace, leaving the Dominion fleet far behind.

The Emperor watched his holographic tactical display. The United Republic's A-Wing disappeared in a burst of pseudo-motion, the Star Destroyers not even close to firing range. The TIEs were beginning to return to their respective ships.

"We were unsuccessful," Darth Vader observed from his post.

The Emperor shot a withering glare in the Dark Lord's direction. If Vader sensed his murderous intent, he gave no outward sign. Instead, the armor-encased figure stood, the only sound the hissing of his respirator.

"We were successful, Lord Vader," the Emperor corrected fiercely. "I want the Rebels to know what they're facing. Then they will send every ship they can against us. The Klingons and traitorous Romulans will as well. We can crush all of our opposition in one blow!"

The Emperor turned back to the hologram and smiled cruelly.

"Inform the Admiral that we will wait here for three days. We will allow the Rebels to analyze the data they have collected. After that, it will only be a matter of time," Palpatine crowed.

Vader remained motionless, staring at his master. Palpatine turned vehemently on him.

"Go! I will summon you when I need you!"

Vader grudgingly left the throne room, heading for navigation. A smoldering anger simmered within him. His hatred for the Emperor was growing stronger every day. Palpatine's flippant destruction of the Changelings had shown how little he valued his lieutenants. It had been the Changelings first. It might be Vader next. If he was going to eliminate the Emperor and take his throne, he would have to do it soon.

Mon Mothma stared out her office window at the city of Paris. Off in the distance was the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, so many previous treasures. That included the people as well. Earth was such a special planet. Even though she had grown up on Chandrila, she had long ago considered this planet as home. It was so peaceful. The Terrans had labored long and hard to make it a virtual paradise. The Dominion occupation had almost destroyed it, but the people of Earth had worked hard to make it a utopia once again. To think that it might all be destroyed.....

She closed her eyes. It seemed like every time the United Republic made some headway, the Dominion surged back. They destroyed the first Death Star, yet they had to flee. They managed to drive the Dominion from the Alpha Quadrant, and Luke Skywalker fell to the Dark Side. They managed to ratify a treaty with the Romulans, only to have Jazzia Organa murdered at the ceremony. Now this.

A chime sounded. Without turning from the window, she called, "Come."

The doors slid open silently. Without looking, she knew who it was. Admiral Ackbar, Captain Picard, and Lieutenant Commander Data were expected.

"President Mon Mothma?" Ackbar's gravelly voice asked, a hint of concern underlying his words.

She turned around slowly, eyeing each man in turn. Ackbar's features were the hardest to read. The Mon Calamari Admiral's large eyes swiveled around the room carefully. For his sake, Mon Mothma had raised the humidity slightly. Ackbar's natural environment was an ocean. He tended to concentrate better when his skin was moist. The Admiral had once been a slave of Grand Moff Dukat. During his years of forced service, he had absorbed everything he could about Dominion tactics and strategies. When the Rebellion liberated him shortly after the destruction of the first Death Star, he had brought that knowledge to them. It was thanks to Ackbar's expertise and brilliant leadership that the Rebellion had been able to drive the Dominion out of the Alpha Quadrant.

Captain Picard was also directly responsible. Not only had the Enterprise helped take on the first Death Star, they had also rescued Captain Solo from Boba Fett. As if that weren't enough, Picard and his crew had personally engaged and defeated the Dominion on countless occasions. He was one of the sharpest tactical minds the United Republic had to offer.

Data was an oddity in the United Republic. True, there were thousands, if not millions, of droids in the Galaxy, but Data was unique. More complex than any other droid, no one was sure whether he was sentient or not. Starfleet had declared that he was sentient due to some controversy several years ago. No matter what the case, Data's keen analytical mind was perfect for situations like this.

"I trust you gentlemen have something prepared?" Mon Mothma asked quietly.

Ackbar glanced at the other two and nodded, his eyes swiveling to face the president.

"Yes, we do," he replied, setting a miniature holographic projector on her desk.

At the touch of a switch, a holographic representation of the Death Star hovered over her desk, including imagery of its escort fleet. A shudder ran up and down Mon Mothma's back. Even at this size, the battle station was intimidating.

"As we feared, the Dominion has corrected their previous mistake. There is no trench and hence, there can be no trench run," Picard said, pointing at the hologram grimly. "There is, however, another alternative."

The view of the Death Star zoomed in on a small hole. Mon Mothma frowned at it. It seemed rather small but then, the battle station dwarfed everything around it. For all she knew, a Mon Calamari battle cruiser could fly down that gap with room to spare.

"This access hatch seems to have been missed at the shipyards that constructed this Death Star," Data explained. "Interestingly, it leads directly to the main reactor core."

"So do we fire more torpedoes down the shaft and hope for the best?" Mon Mothma asked, a trace of humor in her voice.

Data, unfortunately, missed it. "No, Madam President, we cannot. As far as this limited sensor information can tell, the shaft has too many twists and turns for a torpedo attack to be successful. A snub fighter could easily fit. Perhaps a larger ship. We do not know for certain."

"Starfleet Intelligence is desperately seeking any plans they can find," Ackbar explained. "We hope to have more details soon."

"This sounds relatively easy, gentlemen," Mon Mothma chided. "We hardly need an entire fleet for this operation. Why the rush to recall ships to this sector?"

"Unfortunately, there is more, Madam President," Picard said gravely. "The Death Star itself is protected by a very powerful shield. No starfighter could penetrate it. It would take at the very least the combined firepower of all the ships Starfleet can muster to even weaken it."

"During which time, the Death Star's escorts would pick us apart," Ackbar added sourly.

"Have we heard from the Klingons and Romulans?" Mon Mothma asked weakly.

"The Klingon Ambassador assures us that they are sending a substantial force, but Chancellor Gowron is hesitant to strip the Empire's defenses. He's presumably worried that the Dominion may attack if they send us too many ships," Picard said. "As for the Romulans, who knows. Their ambassador refuses to say anything one way or the other."

"It is likely that the Romulans will sit back and wait to see who wins," Ackbar griped. "Starfleet Intelligence believes that they weren't all that enthusiastic about our treaty, especially since three bounty hunters showed up at the signing ceremony."

Mon Mothma shook her head, unable to believe what she was hearing. She had explained to the Praetor of the Romulan Empire personally what had happened on Bajor, that two of the bounty hunters had been United Republic agents in hiding. Obviously she had wasted her time.

"How much longer until the Death Star arrives?" she asked in a hushed voice.

"It appears to have stopped in the Gamorr system," Data said. "Once it is under way again, another week, perhaps less. With its transwarp engines, it is hard to say for certain."

"The fleet will be assembled in two days, Madam President," Ackbar said gravely. "Hopefully by then, we'll have a coherent plan of action."

"Very good, gentlemen. Let me know when the mission briefing is scheduled. I wish to attend it," Mon Mothma said, turning back to the window.

The three men looked at each other in genuine surprise. Mon Mothma's involvement with the Rebellion and United Republic over the years had been strictly political. She offered moral

support, rallied what allies they had, and generally stayed out of combat situations. It wasn't that she was opposed to Starfleet or its military actions, she just tended to give them a wide berth. For her to attend a mission briefing was unheard of. Then again, they all knew the gravity of the situation. If the Death Star succeeded in destroying Earth, the United Republic would likely fall apart. Their entire future was riding on this attack.

Leia Organa Solo paced around her quarters, trying desperately to fight the depressed mood that threatened to consume her. She could almost hear Luke chiding her to be careful, that depression was one of many doors to the Dark Side. She couldn't help it. The past several months had been tumultuous for her. Not only had she learned that her adoptive father's symbiont had survived the destruction of Bajor, she had also witnessed the new host's death. While she was still trying to sort through her feelings over that bombshell, a new Death Star had come through the Maw wormhole, destroying both Deep Space Nine and Bajor. It was all so incredible!

The doors to their personal quarters chimed. As if Luke had to announce his presence. Even though she was still extremely inexperienced, Leia could still sense her brother through the Force. The first time had been as she and Lando Calrissian were escaping from Cloud City. Since then, she was able to sense Luke's moods, feelings, sometimes even his thoughts at greater and greater distances. Telling that he was outside the door was child's play.

"Come in, Luke," she called, smiling for the first time in days.

The doors whooshed open to reveal Luke Skywalker, Jedi Master. Leia's smile grew broader. To the Galaxy, he was the last surviving Jedi Master, an icon and symbol of strength and confidence. To her, he was still the goofy kid who stumbled into her holding cell, disguised in stormtrooper armor. So much had changed since then. Both their lives had become more complicated. For Luke, it was discovering his true heritage and how to utilize the Force. For her, it had been falling in love with the most arrogant men in the universe (of that she was sure) and trying to take a more expanded role in galactic politics.

Luke stepped forward and enveloped her in a warm hug. She squeezed back, feeling his love and tenderness flow into her.

"How was your trip?" she asked.

"Fine, considering the circumstances," he answered.

For a second, Leia studied Luke's face carefully. Although she couldn't be sure, there was something nagging at the back of Luke's mind. For a split second, she almost dismissed it as concern over the new crisis, but something told her it was something different.

"What's wrong?" she asked, concern spreading over her face.

Luke shrugged and replied, "I've been having strange dreams lately."

"So have I," Leia sympathized. "It's probably because of the Death Star."

"Maybe," Luke conceded cautiously. "They've just been so strange, I've been wondering if they're Force-induced visions."

Leia shrugged and replied, "Who knows? I mean, just last night I had a dream that I was forced to be a dancing girl for Jabba the Hutt. The whole thing was so surreal, especially when you were thrown to the rancor....."

She was about to laugh at the ridiculousness of it all, but the suddenly surprised look on Luke's face stopped her short.

"Just three nights ago, I dreamed I was thrown to the rancor as well. You were lying in front of him in the costume of a dancing girl!" he breathed. "What were you doing there?"

Leia frowned, trying to remember through the dreamy haze that clouded the memories. "I think I was trying to rescue Han....."

"So was I," Luke said, clearly astounded. "What other dreams have you had?"

Leia rattled off brief descriptions about some of her dreams. In one, she had been on a forest planet, fighting stormtroopers with the aid of furry little creatures. In another, she and Han were on a planet called Dathomir, a planet Han had won in a high-stakes sabbac game. In still another, she was ready to fight with Luke in front of, of all people, the Emperor. Much to her shock, Luke was able to fill in details about her own dreams. He was having the same ones.

They stared at each other for several seconds, unsure of what to say or do. Finally, Leia spoke.

"Do you suppose it's the Force?" she asked lamely. What else could it be?

Luke shrugged. Leia frowned. "But what does it mean?"

"That I don't know," Luke replied. "Hopefully, it will all become clear with time."

The door chimed again, startling Leia. She had become so wrapped up in the mysterious dreams that she had tuned out her surroundings. She tentatively reached out with the Force, trying to identify who it was. It wasn't Han or Chewie, she knew that. The presence seemed familiar....

"It's Deanna," Luke explained.

Leia immediately smiled. Deanna Troi was a good friend. Half-Betazoid, she had trained as a psychologist. She would have been a natural, seeing as she was empathic. Before she could pursue her career, however, she met a dashing rogue named William T. Riker, a smuggler, and ran off with him, leaving Betazed far behind. Shortly after that, they had teamed up with Han Solo. From there, they had become legends in their own rights, joining the infamous Jean-Luc Picard in crewing the *Enterprise*.

"Come in, Deanna," she called.

The doors opened and Troi stepped inside, a surprised look on her face. That slowly melted into one of amusement.

"I sometimes forget that I'm not the only one who can sense others," she chuckled.

"Is there something we can do for you?" Leia asked pleasantly.

Troi shook her head and replied, "No. I just heard that Luke had arrived on planet and I wanted to say hi."

Luke smiled and embraced the Betazoid warmly. Leia quickly stifled a laugh. Luke had once confided to her that when he first met Deanna Troi, the exotic woman had so thoroughly entranced him, he temporarily forgot his own name. He apparently had the biggest crush on her, seeing as she was the "first real woman" he had ever met. If he still harbored any of those feelings, and Leia seriously doubted that he did, Luke hid them admirably.

He was about to say something when he suddenly looked out the window, frowning. Leia could sense his mood darkening and it frightened her. It almost appeared as if he were staring off through the cosmos at some indiscernible point.

"What is it?" Troi asked, her empathic abilities obviously picking up his mood swing.

"Vader is here, in the Alpha Quadrant....." Luke hissed. "And there's more. So is the Emperor."

Leia's jaw dropped open in shock. "They're with the Death Star?"

"They're on the Death Star," Luke said, suddenly blinking and rubbing his temples as if pained. "I'm not sure, but I think he was trying to summon me."

"Why?" Troi asked. "I mean, I know he's your father, but for what purpose? He knows you can't be turned."

"If that's true, then it can only be for one reason," Luke said gravely. "He destroyed the rest of the Jedi. He must want to finish the job."

Deep within his private chambers, Vader smiled to himself. Although it had seriously taxed his abilities, he had succeeded in brushing Luke's mind. It hadn't been as firm a contact as he had hoped, but it was enough. He had managed to communicate his intentions.

At one time, Vader had hoped to turn Luke to the Dark Side. He had envisioned the two of them, reigning from Coruscant as father and son. He had made the offer on Cloud City and, at the time, was sure that Luke would accept it. The boy had been wracked with anger, fear, and hatred. It should have been so simple. Instead, Luke had hurled himself into the depths of the floating city, out of Vader's grasp. And now, Luke Skywalker was a Jedi Master. True, it would still be possible for Vader to seduce him to the Dark Side of the Force. Many Jedi Masters had fallen in the past, but Vader just didn't have the time. Instead, he would bring Luke here, and then he would destroy him.

Vader looked around the confines of his isolation chamber. A snarl twitched at his battered lips for a second. Because of his fight with Obi-Wan Kenobi those many years ago, Vader was trapped in his armor, unable to live without its support. The only place he could remove it was within this specially designed chamber, where the environment could be kept at precise conditions. It was here that he ate, here that he slept. It was here that he was trapped.

He frowned, a tremor in the Force washing over him. There was someone outside the chamber. A surge of anger swelled in his already dark soul. Someone dared enter his quarters without his permission? The impudence! People had died for lesser insults. He touched a few controls, his mask and helmet lowering into place. With an audible hiss, a seal was formed. That was followed by the rhythmic inhaling and exhaling of his respirator. Once he was certain everything was as it should be, he touched the controls and opened the chamber.

He was startled to see the female Changeling and several of her compatriots standing before him. His hand immediately darted for his lightsaber, certain that it was an ambush. He knew that the Changelings hated him, just as he despised them. If they dared to attack him here, in his own inner chamber, they were sorely mistaken. The female Changeling nodded to one of her companions. That shape-shifter's form melted and resolved itself into a small creature. It almost looked like a brown, furry lizard. Vader stared at it with contempt as the female Changeling bent down and picked it up.

"Lord Vader, peace!" the female Changeling said in her low and somewhat gravelly voice. "We came here to talk."

Vader almost struck her down anyway, but he hesitated. She had never called him "Lord" before. It was always "Vader," or something equally disrespectful. The change surprised him. Perhaps he should hear what she had to say. He removed his hand from his lightsaber but said nothing. He would allow her to speak and, if she didn't annoy him, he would let her live.

She seemed to understand this, for she wasted no time. "We've come to talk about the future of the Dominion. Specifically, the future once Palpatine is dead."

Now she had Vader's complete and undivided attention. This was a subject very dear to his heart, even though he would never admit it. The Emperor refused to acknowledge his own mortality and those who spoke of it usually wound up dead.

"I'm sure you knew of our plans for conquest," the Changeling said evenly. "The fact that we truly control the Vorta and the stormtroopers, that sort of thing. At the same time, we know of your plans as well. We know about your offer to Skywalker at Bespin."

Now Vader was once again tempted to strike her down. He had thought that no one knew of what he said, not even the Emperor himself. The Changeling seemed to sense his intentions, for

she stepped forward, still clutching the chirping creature. As she did, Vader felt a strange buzzing in his head....

.....and suddenly, he could no longer sense the Force.

It was a dizzying, disorienting sensation, almost as if he had suddenly gone blind. He actually staggered slightly, gripping the sides of his isolation chamber for support.

"What have you done to me?" he demanded, a hint of genuine fear sounding in his voice.

"Nothing permanent, I assure you," she said. "This," she held up the creature, "is a ysalamiri, a native to Mrkyr. At least it was before the Emperor turned the surface of that planet to slag. It is the reason we moved there. They have the unique ability to push back the Force. Don't worry, we won't attack you. We merely wish to make sure that no one is listening in by any means."

Vader suddenly understood. The Changelings weren't here to attack him. They were here to plot the destruction of the Emperor! He straightened, brushing his black cape aside.

"Go on."

"We both have similar goals, Lord Vader," she continued. "You want to rule the Galaxy, as do we, and we both want Palpatine dead."

"Unfortunately, we can't both succeed," Vader growled, a trace of his old menace returning.

"Perhaps not," the Changeling replied with a tight smile. "We think we may have a solution that will be equally beneficial."

"What sort of solution?" Vader asked warily, his hand beginning to drift back to his lightsaber. Even without the Force, he could still strike down these two Changelings. Perhaps the rest of them, if the Force returned quickly enough.

"One that will give both you and us limitless power," she replied. "Are you interested?"

Vader considered it. True, he considered himself stronger than the Emperor, yet Palpatine was a crafty and sly adversary. Brute strength wouldn't be enough to dethrone the aging and decrepit fool. Perhaps an alliance with the Changelings was the way to go.

"Yes," he said warily.

The Changeling smiled again. "Good. We must gather the rest of the Changelings on the Death Star and then we will be ready. Expect us in three days."

With that, the Changeling turned and left. The one that was imitating the ysalamiri returned to his natural form and Vader could feel the Force surge back within him. Behind his mask, a grim smile played at the sides of his lips. Now, it was only a matter of time, and he would finally fulfill his destiny.

Corran Horn and Tom Paris slowly strolled into the briefing area, looking over the assembled troops. Rogue Squadron and the Defiant had arrived at Earth a mere five hours ago, and they were all ordered to assemble for a mission briefing. Although they had no official word, they knew that the briefing would be about the Second Death Star. It had to be.

"Geez, do you realize who that is?" Tom whispered to Corran, pointing at a human in one corner. "That's Han Solo!"

Corran glanced at his fellow Corellian. At a time, he could have been hunting Solo. Corran had been a member of Corellian Security and Solo had been a smuggler. If the situation had been different, he would have arrested Solo on the spot.

"Well, there's Captain Picard and Commander Riker," Corran pointed out. "Admiral Ackbar is here as well. This one is going to be big."

Tom didn't answer. Corran glanced at him, not sure of what was happening. He found that his fellow pilot was staring at a woman in a Starfleet uniform. Corran couldn't be sure, but she looked

as though she were part Klingon. An attractive woman, to be sure, but not worthy of being stared at. Without saying a word, Tom walked over to her. She glanced at him, clearly annoyed.

"Can I help you, fly boy?" she demanded.

That didn't seem to phase Tom in the least. Instead, he gave her his most charming smile.

"Have we met before? You look very familiar."

For a second, the woman appeared as if she were going to give Tom a piece of her mind.

Corran inched closer, wanting to watch Tom be totally humiliated. Instead, though, a puzzled look danced in her eyes as she scrutinized Tom's face carefully.

"I'm not sure," she mumbled. "Maybe....."

"Hi, I'm Lieutenant Tom Paris," Tom said, sticking out his hand. "Rogue Squadron."

"B'elanna Torres, *Voyager*," the Klingon woman replied.

"Maybe after this is all over, we could get together. I know this great little cafe in Paris," Tom said, laying it on thick.

Once again, it looked as if Torres was going to refuse, but she didn't. Instead, she nodded and replied, "If we both survive this, you're on."

With that, she turned and wandered over to a female captain. Janeway, Corran believed her name was. He gaped at Tom.

"Do you ever get shot down?" he muttered.

"Nope," Tom replied confidently. "Not in matters of the heart, and definitely not in my X-Wing."

Corran was about to reply when Ackbar motioned for the gathered personnel to be quiet. Corran and Tom rejoined the other Rogue Squadron pilots. Tom craned his neck around. There were at least a hundred people gathered in the briefing auditorium, each one of them a member of a United Republic ship's senior officers or the pilot of a fighter. There were probably hundreds more watching in the orbiting ships. It was an impressive show of strength and solidarity.

Ackbar paused for a moment and his large eyes swiveled toward the back of the room. Corran and Tom glanced over their shoulders to see what had caught the Mon Calamari's attention. They, along with the rest of the room, gasped in surprise. Not only was President Mon Mothma standing near the back of the auditorium, so was Princess Leia Organa Solo and Jedi Master Luke Skywalker. Three of the most prominent officials in the United Republic were here. Even though they knew how important this battle was before, it had just become that more intense.

Ackbar nodded, acknowledging their presence, then spoke in his gurgling voice. "Ladies and gentlemen, I am sure you have all heard of the events that have taken place over the past six months. For those of you who haven't, we have prepared quick briefings about each situation."

Ackbar motioned for a Klingon to take the floor. He identified himself as Lieutenant Commander Worf, assigned to protect Jazsia Organa for the past seven years. He quickly summed up their years working with Boba Fett as bounty hunters and explained as best he could how the Organa symbiont had survived the destruction of Alderaan. He concluded with Organa's death on Bajor at the treaty signing with the Romulans.

Captain Katherine Janeway was next. She launched into a brief narrative about the Borg collective, how the Emperor had struck a deal with General Mohc to assimilate the United Republic. At one point, she indicated an attractive young woman in the back of the room as Seven of Nine, a former Borg drone whose help had proven invaluable.

Captain Benjamin Sisko was next. He explained about the weapons shipments to Deep Space Nine and the mysterious virus that crippled the Bajoran population. He finally concluded with the battle against Grand Admiral Thrawn's forces and how valuable the Klingons' help had been. He

concluded the discussion with the emergence of the new Death Star and the destruction of both Deep Space Nine and Bajor.

Grim whispers rippled through the auditorium. Ackbar waited for them to die down before continuing.

"Lieutenant Commander Data of the Enterprise was able to make a high resolution scan of the Death Star and a network of Bothan spies was able to retrieve an incomplete set of plans from Coruscant itself. Using this information, we have been able to draft a preliminary plan. Captain Picard?"

Picard took a step forward, staring at the audience coolly. Tom and Corran knew the regal human by reputation only. He was said to be extremely professional, absolutely unshakable in any crisis. He was both a capable diplomat and a cunning warrior, a dangerous combination for the Dominion. It was rumored that he could pick apart a Dominion fleet and make them feel good about it at the same time. Picard nodded to the android, Data, and the image of the Death Star and its escorts appeared in the center of the auditorium.

"As you can see, this Death Star is much larger than the original. It is believed that Grand Moff Dukat's little project was a prototype for this one. Whatever the case, it is fully armed and operational, as the citizens of Bajor found out. It has its own turbolaser and laser batteries, armed with at least thirty squadrons of TIE Fighters. It has twenty-nine Star Destroyers and three Super Star Destroyers as escorts. If that wasn't enough, the Death Star has shielding strong enough to repel most attacks.

"We will divide the fleet into two task forces. Task Force One will have Admiral Ackbar in command. It will consist of *Home One* and six other Mon Calamari cruisers along with assorted smaller capital ships and squadrons of A-Wings and B-Wings. They will engage the Death Star's escorts.

"Task Force Two will be led by myself. The *Enterprise*, the *Defiant*, *Voyager*, and Rogue Squadron along with a series of other ships will engage the Death Star itself. Our purpose is to bring down the shields."

Picard nodded to Data again. The escorts and most of the Death Star was whisked away. The hologram focused on a small shaft that led towards the core.

"This access port leads directly to the main reaction chamber. Once the shields are down, Rogue Squadron and the *Millennium Falcon*, piloted by General Solo, will fly down the shaft. The X-Wings will take out a power regulator on the north tower while the *Falcon* will fire quantum torpedoes to destroy the reactor itself. This will set off a chain reaction that will destroy the Death Star."

Picard paused, glancing at Deanna Troi. The two seemed to communicate something nonvocal, as if Picard didn't want to say something, but Troi was insisting. Finally, Picard looked down at the floor.

"We also have reason to believe that Darth Vader and the Emperor are on board....."

Picard's voice trailed off. Paris followed his eyes and his jaw dropped open in shock. What appeared to be an old-fashioned saw blade was hovering in mid-air. It began to move, almost as if it was sawing through reality itself. A trail of white light blazed through the room, forming a sharp line at least two meters in the air. After moving two meters, it swung a hard ninety degrees and started to move toward the floor. Paris gaped as the saw blade disappeared, and what appeared to be a door opened. Brilliant white light streamed into the auditorium, causing everyone to shield their eyes. Paris managed to peek through his fingers and saw a figure stumble from the portal.

The opening suddenly disappeared, almost sounding like a large wooden door slamming. Paris removed his hand and stared in shock at the newcomer.

He was wearing what appeared to be a Starfleet uniform with captain's pips. He appeared to be balding and he looked around the room with intense, black eyes. A mischievous smirk appeared on his lips when his eyes finally fell on Picard.

"Jean-Luc!" the man cried, throwing his arms open wide. "You don't know how long I've been trying to get here! I've had to cut through so many layers of reality, I thought I would never make it here! I was sure that I would be trapped in the Continuum forever!"

The man's eyes began to wander. He frowned when he looked at a different captain. Janeway stared back, not sure what to say.

"Kathy?" the man asked, incredulous. "What are you doing here with Jean-Luc?"

The man's eyes darted to the back and locked with Luke Skywalker's. He gaped at the Jedi Master for the longest time before he thundered, "And who the hell are you?"

"We might ask you the same question," Picard pointed out.

The man spun around, staring at Picard in shock. "You mean you don't remember me? You don't remember your old friend Q?" Q, if that indeed was his name, placed a hand to his head, as if in pain. "Oh, things are worse here than I thought! Looks like I made it here just in time."

Mon Mothma stepped forward, a concerned look on her face. Not that Tom could blame her. It wasn't every day that people just appeared out of thin air into the middle of an important United Republic briefing.

"Perhaps you could explain exactly who you are and where you came from," she said, sounding quite calm and assured.

Q gave her a sardonic look and replied, "I doubt that we have time for all that, so here's the short version. I'm Q. I am....well, a god basically. At least, I am compared to all of you." His eyes darted back to Skywalker, who was studying the entity carefully. "Well, most of you. At any rate, my kind has existed since before time began. We safeguard all versions of reality, making sure that they don't destroy themselves or each other. Unfortunately, we have a situation here that needs my attention."

"What sort of situation?" Mon Mothma probed. Tom leaned forward. Maybe this Q person would destroy the Death Star for them.

"In this case, two separate realities merged together," Q said. "There was one that contained Jean-Luc Picard, Katherine Janeway, and others. And then there was the one that contained you people."

Hushed confusion rippled through the auditorium. Corran and Tom glanced at each other.

"What are you talking?" B'elanna Torres demanded hotly. "We all belong together!"

"That's just it, Torres, you don't," Q shot back. "The problem is, your dimensions have completely merged. So has your separate histories. You people can't tell the difference because you're in the middle of it all. It would take an outside observer to tell the difference between the two realities. Someone like me."

"So what's going to happen?" Skywalker put in from the back of the auditorium.

Q once again shot a wary look in the Jedi Master's direction before speaking. "Thankfully, your realities have begun to pull apart on their own. I'm just here to speed up the process a little. Within a matter of hours, everything will be back the way it should be and all of this will just be a forgotten dream."

Paris breathed a sigh of relief. The Death Star wasn't due for another two days. It looked like everything would be fine.

Darth Vader paced around his quarters, trying to contain his fury but failing miserably. The Changelings had contacted him and said that they were ready to put their plan into motion and that they would meet him in his chambers. That had been three hours ago. Vader didn't like waiting. If they made him wait much longer, he wasn't sure if they would survive.

The doors rumbled open and the last twenty-five Changelings strode into the room. The female Founder was at the head of the crowd.

"Are you ready, Lord Vader?" she asked briskly.

"What do you propose?" Vader demanded. "You have not given me enough information."

"Don't worry," she said. "This won't hurt....much."

The other Changelings stepped closer together, and their bodies began to merge. Their humanoid forms dissolved and soon, all that was left of the Changelings was a gelatinous mass that quivered and twitched before the Dark Lord for a few seconds. It seemed to hesitate before it suddenly surged forward, enveloping Vader before he could react.

Vader tried to go for his lightsaber, thinking that the Changelings had betrayed him. He found that he couldn't even move his arms. The mass of protoplasm surged around him, beginning to seep through the air vents and cracks in his armor. He could feel the Changelings flow over his body, their liquid form beginning to creep through every pore. It felt as if his very essence was beginning to blend with theirs. His thoughts began to merge with theirs, almost as if they were becoming one entity. Vader tried to remain conscious, to fight back against this assault on his very being, but it was no use. Darkness began to swarm over his vision, bright flashes playing before his eyes occasionally.

Vader's armor stood as still as death for a long, long time. His respirator had shut off long ago, its delicate filters overwhelmed by the Changeling's assault. Soon, though, a pink liquid began to seep from every crack and opening, pooling on the floor underneath the boots. It slowly began to spread over the floor. Finally, a form began to rise from the puddle. At first, it only vaguely resembled a humanoid form, but soon, more and more detail began to appear. The chalky, scarred head formed first, then the battered and broken body. Within seconds, Darth Vader looked down at his body, amazed. He was outside his armor and his life support chamber, and yet he was alive! He wasn't in pain at all.

It was then that he understood, as the Changelings had. They both wanted to destroy the Emperor, but neither could do it alone. Vader had the brute force but he lacked the subtlety needed. The Changelings were shrewd, but they didn't have the strength. Only together, as one entity, could they defeat the Emperor. He was no longer just Darth Vader, Dark Lord of the Sith. He was Vader, the Changeling.

An idea occurred to him. With a single thought, he began to smooth the scars and blemishes he had carried on his body for years. They easily disappeared, simply returning to his body. Hair began to appear on his head. His face lost the years and wrinkles that had appeared over the decades. Soon, his body no longer was the broken shell of a man it had once been. It resembled the body he had as Anakin Skywalker, the right hand to Emperor Palpatine, the killer of the Jedi Knights. As the full implications of his newfound power dawned on him, he began to laugh. It was the first time he had done so in what seemed like an eternity. It started as a chuckle, but soon grew to be a wicked gale of laughter that echoed around his chamber. The Galaxy was his.

Luke Skywalker watched from the back of the auditorium as Q and Picard argued about whether or not this powerful entity had the right to split up the two realities. Picard had been insisting that

the realities were merged now, and who was Q to arbitrarily decide if they should be separated. Q's response had been a rather sarcastic remark about the captain's baldness, pointing out that he was Q, as if that were explanation enough.

Luke wasn't sure what to make of the entire situation. On the surface, it seemed ridiculous. Even though he didn't have access to the powers of the Q, he could still touch the fabric of reality through the Force. He had been doing so ever since the strange entity had arrived, and as far as he could tell, everything was as it should be. Then again, Q had been able to make a rather dramatic entrance, one that even Luke hadn't anticipated or expected. Perhaps there was some truth to his claim after all.

Closing his eyes, he stretched out with the Force once again, trying desperately to feel the fabric of reality. It was a difficult task, one that he normally didn't attempt. Space and time were not the most accessible things in the universe, even for a Jedi Master. He was just beginning to sense the fabric of space/time flow between his mental fingers when he felt it.

At first, it was only a minor ripple in the Force. Soon, though, it grew in intensity, crashing over his body with an intensity he hadn't been ready for. It felt as if his entire mind had been knocked end over end, an invisible hand tossing him like a toy. Darkness swam in his vision, and the next thing he was aware of was Leia standing over him. Luke frowned. He didn't remember falling to the deck. He shook his head, trying to rid himself of the dizziness. He looked around the room, only to find most of the people staring at him in concern. Luke slowly sat up, a sheepish grin on his face.

"Luke, what happened?" Leia asked, brushing some of his hair from his eyes.

"You okay, kid?" Han asked, suddenly appearing at his side.

"I think so. I just felt a massive tremor in the Force, unlike anything I've...."

His words trailed off as he looked at Q. The entity was leaning heavily on the main podium, gasping for air. Parts of his body were slowly fading in and out of existence, ripples running through him. Slowly, painfully, he hoisted himself up, trying to remain balanced.

"Q, what happened?" Luke demanded.

Q shook his head, as if dazed, and replied, "Something's gone wrong. The realities aren't pulling apart anymore. There's been a purposeful merger."

"A what?" Han demanded hotly. "What are you talking about?"

"Look, it's very simple," Q said, straightening slightly. "When the two realities merged together, there were some random combinations. People, planets, whole governments, merged together. They had no choice in the matter; it was just a temporal reality that was forced on them. The Federation merged with this New Republic thing, the Dominion and the Empire merged together. This new reality maintained the balance of 'good' and 'evil.'"

"But now, two entities have purposefully merged together. Because this was a conscious act and not a random event, it's mired the two realities together so thoroughly, they can't pull apart! They're stuck together for the duration.....which won't be long."

"What do you mean?" Picard demanded.

"Look, it's hard to describe," Q shot back hotly. "It's like.....it's like two starfighters flying away from each other at phenomenal speeds. That was how it was just ten minutes ago. Now, though, it's like there's an incredibly strong cable holding the two fighters together. No matter how hard they try, the fighters can't pull apart, but they won't stop trying. Pretty soon, the fighters will tear themselves apart."

"You mean.....both realities will be destroyed?" Luke gasped.

Q nodded weakly. "More than that. The destruction of these two realities will spill over into surrounding dimensions. It will start a catastrophic meltdown that will destroy every reality there is in a matter of seconds."

"So what do we do?" Luke asked.

"I can't help," Q replied, more of his body beginning to fade away. "I'm risking my very existence by remaining here. I can tell you this. You need to find the people who have merged together and destroy them. The anchor will disappear, and the realities will be gone. As crazy as it seems, you'll need to find a way to merge 'good' people from the two dimensions to face them. It's the only way."

"How will we do that?" Leia asked.

Q looked around the room, his breathing suddenly ragged. His eyes fell on Luke once again and a weak grin twitched at his lips.

"You're the only one who seems receptive to this kind of knowledge," he said, reaching out and tapping Luke's forehead.

For a second, Luke wasn't sure what was supposed to happen. Then, without warning, his mind exploded. He was suddenly aware of and understood everything that Q had been saying. He could actually see the threads of the two separate realities weaving through the room. Although they had no real texture or color to speak of, Luke could tell the difference. Leia, Han, Mon Mothma, they all had "red" threads. Picard, Data, Janeway had "blue" threads running through them. He looked down, surprised to see a red thread running through him as well. Just a second ago, he would have guessed that he belonged with Picard. Now, using the Force, he could follow the threads out beyond himself, easily viewing where the realities had merged together. Tatooine and Vulcan wasn't really a double planet system. Tatooine came from his dimension, Vulcan from the other. As he stretched out to the Dominion fleet, he suddenly felt a tangled knot on the Death Star. The threads of the two realities had snarled together. It was there that the two dimensions had become anchored. The knot would have to be untied, so to speak.

Luke focused in on the knot, trying to determine who it was that created this problem. One party was the Changelings and the other was.....

He blinked his eyes, the threads suddenly disappearing from view. He was still aware of them, but he wasn't directly looking for them anymore. He could feel Leia's mind brush against his. He could feel her concern.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It's Vader." Luke said. "He's the anchor."

Palpatine shifted on his throne uncomfortably. It was everything the royal seat of power should be: stern, imposing, foreboding. It struck awe in all who stood before it and commanded instant respect. Unfortunately, it traded dominance for luxury. Palpatine's aging and decrepit body ached whenever he sat in it, but he hated to leave. He was the Emperor, after all. He was the absolute power and authority in the Galaxy. He should always look it.

He frowned slightly. There was an odd tremor in the Force, one that he had never experienced before. It was vaguely familiar. He closed his hollow eyes and his already wrinkled brow furrowed even more in concentration. He stretched out with his feelings, trying desperately to identify the source of the disturbance.

The Emperor's body visibly flinched as he sensed the hatred emanating from this being. Whoever it was, he or she was seething with fury and loathing, pure evil that the Emperor had never experienced before in his life. He gritted his teeth and continued to probe these feelings.

Suddenly, a wall was erected, blocking out the sensation entirely. It almost felt like the Force had been shoved away by a giant hand. The Emperor's eyes opened wide in shock, his breathing becoming suddenly ragged.

"Oh, Palpatine," someone whispered in a sing-song voice.

The Emperor's head jerked to one side as a figure moved from the shadows. Whoever it was, he was dressed in the dark robes of a Jedi. He was a tall man, well built and handsome. Palpatine frowned, scrutinizing the newcomer's face.

"Who are you?" Palpatine demanded, trying to keep the fear out of his voice. It was rare that he was taken by surprise and he wasn't sure what to expect next.

"I'm surprised you don't remember, Palpatine," the man snarled.

"What do you want?" the Emperor demanded, some of his old confidence coming back. He was still the Emperor after all. He was a master of the Force. This petty annoyance wouldn't live long.

"I want you to get out of my throne!" the man thundered.

Palpatine's face actually registered surprise. The impudence! How dare this insignificant little wretch demand that he leave his throne? He glared at the other man, defying him with his yellow eyes. "What?"

"You heard me. Get out of my throne or be destroyed," the man snarled.

"And how do you expect to do that?" the Emperor jeered.

"Like this."

The man lashed out with his arm. It turned gelatinous, forming a tentacle that quickly wrapped around the old man's neck. The Emperor's eyes widened in surprise as he clawed at the tentacle, trying desperately to break its grip. The other man smiled maniacally and laughed, a low, throaty chuckle that echoed and reverberated around the throne room. That was when Palpatine recognized his attacker. He hadn't heard this laugh for a long, long time, but he could recognize it anywhere.

"Vader?" he gasped.

"That's right, you weak, old fool," Vader chortled. "You thought you were so safe here, but you were wrong. You thought the Changelings and I were just your lap dogs, but you were wrong. You thought you would live forever....."

With a quick jerk, Vader felt the bones in Palpatine's neck snap. His hand returned to its original shape, releasing the Emperor and allowing the withered body to fall to the floor.

"....and you were wrong," Vader whispered cruelly.

Slowly, with reverence, Vader crept up the stairs towards the throne. He had dreamed of this moment for decades now, was never certain that it would come. But here it was. With Palpatine dead, he was now the supreme ruler of the Galaxy. He was the Emperor now. His hand lovingly caressed the sides of the throne, a small grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. It was his. Finally, after such a long time.

With a sigh of anticipation, Vader slowly sank into the throne. For a split second, his body was uncomfortable. The throne was hard and stiff, not giving as Vader thought. His smile grew. With a simple command, Vader changed the curvature of his back. It slowly conformed to the contours of the throne. The dull ache that was forming slowly disappeared and Vader chuckled softly to himself. He could grow to like this.

Luke was sitting on the floor of the briefing auditorium. Most of the officers and pilots were slowly filing through the doors. Ackbar had called the briefing to a close. Until they could make sense of this new situation, everything was on hold. It wasn't as if they didn't have time. The Death Star was still two days away. It might be close, but they would be ready.

Leia was at his side, her arm around him, trying to comfort him. He grinned, hoping that he could reassure her somehow. Not that he felt reassured himself. It was all so unreal. He could still sense the different fibers of two different realities that were still trying to pull apart. He could already feel the stress mounting. In a matter of days, the two realities would destroy each other, and it felt as if there was nothing he could do.

"So Vader and the Changelings merged?" Han asked, incredulous. The former smuggler was leaning against a nearby wall, trying to act nonchalant about it all. Every version of reality was about to disintegrate around them. Big deal. Happened all the time. Luke knew better, though. Han was just as worried as the rest of them but was trying to remain calm.

"That's what I detected," Luke said hoarsely, suddenly wondering why his throat was dry. He rubbed it gingerly.

He suddenly frowned, a small tremor in the Force rippling through him. It suddenly grew in intensity, washing over him like a crashing wave. Leia must have felt it too, for her eyes darted to the same place Luke was looking. She frowned, staring distantly into space. Han noticed the similar look on their face and asked, "What?"

Luke closed his eyes in concentration. It had been a powerful surge of the Dark Side, naturally coming from the Dominion fleet. It was hard to pinpoint exactly. Luke's brow furrowed in concentration, and he reached out even further. His mind accidentally brushed Vader's, and he cringed when he felt the smug satisfaction spilling from the Dark Lord's mind. His eyes snapped open.

"It was the Emperor," Luke hissed. "Vader's killed him."

"Well, good," Han replied. "That saves us the trouble."

Luke wasn't listening. His temporary brush with Vader had frightened him. He could feel the raw power that was coursing through his father's very being. It was more than Luke had ever experienced before, and truth be told, he wasn't sure how to deal with it. He had no doubt that he could face him alone. True, the Force was his ally, but he wasn't strong enough. He needed more help.

He looked around the room at his friends. Leia was growing stronger in the Force every day, but he couldn't ask her to confront Vader. Not like this. He was much too powerful for a young initiate. He considered sending word to Ceti Alpha VI and having his students come and join him. Some, like Wesley Crusher or Mara Jade, were strong in the Force, possibly strong enough to slow Vader for a time. Still, he didn't want to risk their lives. If this conglomerate of realities somehow survived along with the Death Star, the Galaxy would need more Jedi to fight against the Dominion.

He considered his other allies critically. Han and Chewie would be ready for a fight, but he didn't want to ask them to help. This confrontation with Vader was mostly a personal matter, and even though his two friends would be willing to help, he didn't want them to risk their lives. Come to think of it, he didn't want anyone to risk their lives with his. He had to face Vader alone.

No, he couldn't. What Q had said came crashing down on him. If they were going to save the two realities, they would have to find a way to merge two people from the different dimensions and face Vader. He knew that he had to be the one from his reality. Since Vader was involved, the person had to be adept at the Force.

"Luke, are you okay?" Leia asked.

He blinked, startled. He glanced at his sister and gave her a weak half-grin.

"I'm fine, I guess," Luke replied. "I'm still trying to figure out how to merge two people from the different dimensions."

"Well, Vader and the Changelings joined together," Han pointed out. "What about Odo from Deep Space Nine?"

Leia shook her head. "According to Wedge, he died when the Death Star destroyed the station."

Han gritted his teeth. He glanced at Luke. "Are you sure you know the difference between the two dimensions?"

Luke nodded wearily. They had been over this time and time again. Yes, he could see who came from which dimension. At first, Han had suspected the kid of joking. After all, Luke claimed that Riker and Troi came from the other dimension, and Han just couldn't believe that. He had risked his neck for years with those two.

"So how are we supposed to merge two people together?" Han demanded. "I mean, did Q give you any idea of how?"

Luke shook his head and replied, "No."

He continued to look over the room. His eyes briefly flickered over Picard and Data. If he could, he would merge with one of them. Picard's keen mind would undoubtedly be an asset in facing Vader. Data's cool and calculating mind and superior strength would certainly help as well. Unfortunately, Luke had no idea how to join with either man. Maybe through the Force, but he was unsure of how to even begin. Besides, he was a powerful Jedi, but probably not that strong.

His eyes fell on the crew of Voyager next. At first, Luke considered Kyle Katarn, but quickly forgot about him. He had a "red" thread through him. Even if he and Kyle could somehow merge, it would do no good. They were both from the same dimension. His eyes darted to Captain Janeway. A tough woman, strong and resilient, but Luke still had no idea....

Luke frowned as he noticed who was standing next to Janeway. Seven of Nine was sticking close to her captain, eyeing the remaining officers cautiously. Luke could sympathize. The young woman had been controlled by the Borg Collective for a long time. It was understandable for her to be apprehensive around the people she once considered her enemy. The evidence of her assimilation was still visible in the small crest over one eye, the starburst on one cheek. To suddenly be alone, without the thoughts of others.....

Luke's eyes grew wide as an idea struck him. She had been a part of the Borg Collective Consciousness, an entity that, in effect, only had one mind. It was as if they were all one person. He quickly reached out with the Force and touched the thread that ran through her. For a split second, his breath caught in his throat. The thread was a vibrant "blue." She came from the other dimension.

Seven's head slowly turned. Their eyes met. For what felt like an eternity, they stared at each other. Luke could feel the thread that ran through her begin to vibrate slightly, almost as if it was trying to draw him to her. He could practically feel Q's voice scream at him to do something, that this was it.

Before he knew what was happening, Luke had leapt to his feet and was running across the auditorium. Seven shoved past Janeway, also sprinting towards Luke. Leia cried out his name, but he ignored her. He was completely focused on the former Borg. As they neared each other, vicious looking tubules exploded from Seven's hand. She easily stabbed them into Luke's chest. Even though Luke had prepared himself for the experience, a scream of pain still burst from his mouth. It felt as if millions of tiny insects were crawling beneath his skin and swarming through his body. Still, he couldn't stop now.

Security guards quickly dashed in and tried to separate them, but Seven held on, not letting go. Data joined the fray. Luke's eyes, open wide in agony, glanced at the android with concern. Data

was definitely stronger than he and Seven put together. He could conceivably stop them. With a simple thought, Luke knocked Data away and brushed the guards off his body.

Seven finally withdrew her hand, allowing Luke to collapse to the floor. She was immediately tackled by Han, who pinned her to the ground. Surprisingly, she offered little resistance. The initial shock was beginning to wear off, and soon others were gathered around her.

"Seven, what are you doing?" Janeway demanded.

"He is not harmed," Seven replied coolly.

"Not harmed?" Han thundered. "You stabbed him in the chest!"

"It is what he wanted," Seven countered.

"What?" Kyle Katarn put in from behind his captain. "What he wanted? You just stabbed Jedi Master Luke Skywalker! Why would he want you to do that?"

"Because we are now one," a voice said.

The crowd turned and several people gasped involuntarily. Luke was back on his feet, only it wasn't the same Luke. Borg implants had erupted across his face and his body. His blue eyes were almost vacant as he stared at his compatriots. Han released Seven and rose to his feet, staring at Luke in horror.

"Kid, are you all right?" he breathed.

"We are fine," Luke replied, his voice echoing and reverberating, as if he were speaking with the voice of thousands. "We are the Borg. We are one. We will take care of Vader."

Luke carefully walked through the hangar bay of the Enterprise toward a Tyderian shuttle that was prepped and ready to go. Although his stomach was awash with nervous jitters, he was quickly able to calm it. Not only was he able to run through Jedi calming techniques that utilized the Force, he was also able to draw strength and serenity from the newly recreated Borg Collective. Of course, it wasn't much of a collective. It was merely Seven and him, sharing their thoughts and memories.

The past twenty-four hours had brought a flurry of activity. For one thing, Seven and Luke had to adjust to their new "condition," as Leia diplomatically called it. Suddenly sharing a mind with another individual was disorienting, and it took a while for Luke to separate Seven's sensory perceptions from his own.

Not only that, but a new battle plan had been drafted. Since it was now imperative for Luke to face Vader and try to "neutralize" him, as Luke had put it (or "frag" him, as Han had crassly retorted), Luke was going to take a Tyderian shuttle and fly out to meet the Death Star alone. Since Vader was now the Emperor, it was unlikely that the Dominion fleet would harass him. He would board the Death Star, face Vader, attempt to "neutralize" him, and then drop the battle station's shields. Once that was completed, the combined fleet would run interference against the Dominion's ships while Rogue Squadron and the *Millennium Falcon* made their run on the main reactor. Luke gritted his teeth. There were hundreds of things that could go wrong with this plan. Some Dominion commander might take the initiative and destroy the shuttle before Luke could even reach the Death Star. The United Republic's fleet of twenty-five ships might not be enough to take on the Dominion fleet and Rogue Squadron and company wouldn't be able to make the run. Worse yet, Vader might actually defeat Luke and the two realities would destroy themselves and, as Q had said, destroy every other reality along with them.

Still, it was the best plan they had, one that Luke was determined to see it to the end. Once again, the fate of the Galaxy was on his shoulders. It had been so many times before, it had almost become old hat.

He keyed the entry code to the shuttle and the ramp slowly dropped to the floor. Luke quickly double checked his lightsaber at his side. It was the only thing he was bringing with him. That, and the thoughts of Seven of Nine. She was going to remain with the fleet, acting as his liaison to the outside world. She would report if he was successful and let him know how the United Republic fleet was doing. It was hoped that their newfound connection would be the key to defeating the Dominion.

As he stalked up the ramp toward the cockpit, he continued to calm his stomach and his nerves. Within five minutes, he would receive clearance from Jean-Luc Picard to head out toward the Death Star. During his trip, the Interdictor Cruisers that pulled the Death Star out of warp near the Gamorr system would once again stop it a good fifty parsecs from the Terran system. At the same time, Luke would arrive and hopefully board the battle station. He would then have two hours to find Vader, hopefully defeat him, and then lower the shields. After those two hours, the Death Star would drop out of warp just outside Pluto's orbit and start for Earth. It would be met by the United Republic's fleet, and it would be a running fire fight all the way to its intended target. The fleet would have an hour to destroy the battle station before it arrived.

He closed his eyes in silent anguish. His upcoming confrontation with his father weighed heavily on his mind. It would undoubtedly be a battle to the death, and Luke wasn't sure he could kill his own father. Yes, the man was twisted with evil and hatred. Yes, Vader wouldn't have such aversions to killing Luke. At the same time, though, Luke knew that killing Vader would open the door for the Dark Side. If he succumbed to anger or hatred at all, he would be slipping down an all too familiar path. He shuddered at the thought, remembering what it felt like when he was the most powerful Dark Jedi in the Alpha Quadrant, waging his own private war against the Romulans. It was an experience he didn't want to repeat.

Luke hesitated for a second. He could feel the presence of another person on board the shuttle. No, make that two individuals. They were faint, as if the people were not only trying to hide bodily, but mentally as well. Luke stretched out with the Force and gently touched the individual's mind. He groaned to himself when he recognized who it was.

"Come out, Han, I know you're here," he called.

For a second, there was no response. Finally, though, one of the bulkheads pitched open to reveal Han and Chewie. Luke gave them a harsh look, which caused Han to smile sheepishly.

"I guess you just can't hide from a Jedi, can you?" he muttered.

Luke didn't avert his gaze. After a few seconds, Han began to shift uncomfortably. Luke Skywalker was intimidating enough before he had been assimilated. Now, with various Borg components sprouting from his body, he was all the more menacing. He had an inhuman quality about him. Han would have sworn the kid was a Vulcan, as cool and detached as he was now.

"What are you doing here, Han? I thought that you and Chewie were going to pilot the *Millennium Falcon* in the coming battle," Luke commented, turning and heading for the cockpit.

Han had to jog to keep up with the younger man. "Well, yeah, we were, but I had Lando take my place. He'll be able to pilot the *Falcon* almost as well as me. We thought we would come along and help you."

Luke turned and fixed his unwavering stare on Han once again, and, once again, Han was squirming.

"I can't allow that," Luke said in his strangely modulated voice. "The risk is too great."

"Yeah, and the risk is too great for you as well, kid!" Han shot back, suddenly ignoring Luke's glare. "You're going up against Darth Vader for the third time. You barely survived the first two encounters, and now Vader's got more tricks up his sleeve. You can't honestly expect to defeat him

and then lower the shields. It could take you two hours just to wear him out, let alone stop him. Even if you do finish him quickly, you'd still need to find the controls to the shields. If Chewie and me come along, we'll be able to take down the shields while you take on Vader. Besides, if you can't stop him, the fleet will. Once that reactor goes, Vader will be nothing more than a bad memory."

Luke hated to admit it, but his old friend had some good points. He honestly didn't know how long the fight with Vader would take. Besides, if he could hold the Dark Lord at bay long enough, the fleet would take care of eliminating him completely. Finally, Luke nodded.

"All right," he said, and resumed walking to the cockpit.

Han smiled, relieved, and turned to Chewie and nodded, as if he knew Luke would agree all along. Chewie growled a sarcastic remark, but headed towards the passenger compartment. Han followed Luke into the cockpit.

"Uh, one more thing, kid....." Han hesitated, unsure of how to phrase it. "Don't let Leia know I'm here. She'd have a fit."

Luke smiled, the first smile Han had seen since the Jedi Master had been assimilated.

"Understood."

Picard watched as Skywalker's Tyderian shuttle cleared the bay. Its wings slowly unfolded and it quickly sped away from the *Enterprise*. He breathed a sigh of relief and sank into his command chair.

"Number One, start the clock. We leave for the rendezvous point in three hours."

"Aye, sir," Riker said from beside him. In the upper right hand corner of the viewscreen, a countdown appeared and began to run backwards. For a few tense seconds, everyone on the bridge watched the numbers scroll past. Finally, Picard tore his eyes away. He knew the battle was coming. He didn't need to be reminded.

The tactical console behind him beeped urgently, and the rumbling bass voice of Lieutenant Commander Worf barked, "Captain! I've just received word from Chancellor Gowron. His fleet was ambushed by the Romulans in Sardeska Prime! They've suffered heavy casualties and won't be able to join us for at least four hours."

Picard's mouth went dry. Although they hadn't really counted on any outside help, he and Admiral Ackbar had hoped against hope that the Klingons would be able to make it and that the Romulans would, at the very least, remain neutral. It seemed, however, that their supposed allies on the other side of the Neutral Zone, had made their decision.

"Very well, Mr. Worf," he said softly. "Pass the message along to Admiral Ackbar. It looks like we're on our own."

Luke sucked in an anxious breath as the Death Star loomed in the main viewport. It was even bigger than he had expected. At the same time, though, Luke didn't feel as anxious as he had when he destroyed the first Death Star. Then he had been a scared farm boy who had no idea what he was getting himself into. That Death Star had seemed larger than anything he had ever seen. Now, though, Luke was a Jedi Master, a veteran of the United Republic, and a Borg to boot. Nothing took him by surprise. He could feel Seven's concern over his fear as if it was her own. He reassured her that everything was fine. When he had first arrived, one of the Super Star Destroyers had challenged his approach. Luke merely replied that he was Luke Skywalker, son of Lord Darth Vader. He was coming to see his father, and if the captain had a problem with that, he should take it up with Vader himself. After some nervous sputtering, the captain had allowed him to pass. A

small opening had appeared in the Death Star's shielding, and he was instructed to land in the main docking bay.

"By all the stars," Han breathed next to Luke.

"You'd better get into the hold with Chewie, Han. They might search the shuttle," Luke said.

Han nodded wordlessly, and started for the rear. Before he left, Luke snared his arm.

"May the Force be with you," Luke said.

Han glanced back at his friend and mumbled, "You too, kid."

The former smuggler disappeared into the back of the shuttle. Within minutes, the shuttle had settled on the polished floor of the docking bay. Luke was surprised to see two rows of stormtroopers waiting for him. He had hoped that Vader would be there in the bay. Finding the Dark Lord on the battle station could take hours, even days. Whatever the case, Luke would find him. The Force was his ally.

*As is the Borg...* Seven reminded him through the Collective.

That brought a smile to his lips. He acknowledged the correction and left the cockpit.

The commander of the stormtroopers trotted up to Luke, his white armor clattering as he ran. Luke reached out with the Force and brushed his mind. There was no trace of hostility or anxiety whatsoever. These stormtroopers weren't a threat to him. At least, they weren't right now. Even still, Luke's hand fell to his side and gripped his lightsaber. He wanted to be ready for anything.

"You will come with us," the stormtrooper said tonelessly. "Lord Vader awaits."

"Very well," Luke said, surprised that his appearance didn't even phase the trooper. He glanced over his shoulder and noticed that several of the stormtroopers were headed for the boarding ramp of the shuttle, carrying bulky scanning equipment.

"You need not inspect my ship," Luke called to them. "I came alone."

"We have our orders," the commander replied.

Luke reached out with the Force and touched the commander's mind.

"Your troops can return to their post," Luke said quietly. "There is no need for guards in the hangar at all."

The commander looked over Luke's shoulder and called out, "You men will return to your post. There's no need to guard the hangar."

"They won't find anything on the shuttle," Luke continued.

"You won't find anything on the shuttle."

"And you will escort me personally to Lord Vader."

"I'll escort him personally to Lord Vader."

If the stormtrooper commander suspected what had just happened, he gave no indication. He merely turned on his heel and started for a turbolift. Luke followed behind, focusing on the back of the man's helmet. The other stormtroopers slowly filed out of the hangar, returning to their normal duties.

After a half hour wait in the darkness, Han and Chewie hauled themselves out of their makeshift smuggling hold and stole down the shuttle's ramp. Much to their surprise, the hangar was completely deserted. Han had expected to find at least a half dozen stormtroopers loitering about. Luke must have handled them somehow. For a split second, Han felt a brief flash of concern. He hoped the kid knew what he was doing.

Han pulled out a tricorder and waved it around the bay. Starfleet Intelligence had rigged it up for Luke. Its sensors were programmed to lock on to the control circuits for the force field. Han hoped the thing would work. If not, he and Chewie could get very lost very quickly.

Everything appeared to be working fine. Han took the lead, stealing down the corridor quietly, tricorder in one hand, blaster in the other. Chewie watched their backs, his bowcaster drawn and ready. As smoothly as everything was going, Han still couldn't help but feel apprehensive. He had yet to run into another living being. It was unnatural. By this time, Han had expected to run across at least a squad of stormtroopers, if not two. On the first Death Star, the halls and corridors had been crawling with Dominion troops of every kind. This one was completely deserted. Although Han was grateful not to be facing stormtroopers around every corner, it was still unnerving.

After fifteen minutes of slowly creeping down the hall, Han was getting all the more nervous. They still hadn't found another living being. Han was almost tempted to just start firing blindly and screaming, hoping to attract some attention. Anything would be better than this.

"Hey, Chewie, you smelling anything?" he whispered urgently. A Wookiee's sense of smell was extremely acute. There were many times that Chewbacca had smelled a trap before it had sprung.

There was no answer. Han didn't want to turn around, but tore his eyes from the empty hallway in front of him. He was surprised to see his companion sprawled on the floor, as still as death. Han immediately dropped the tricorder and ran to Chewbacca's side, feeling for a pulse. It was difficult to tell through the layers of fur, but he finally determined that Chewie was still alive, just unconscious. Han remained crouched by his friend, scanning the passage warily. For someone to silently drop a Wookiee was astounding, and Han didn't want to get taken by surprise again.

A small blur of motion flashed by his peripheral vision. He whirled, bringing his blaster around to turn his attackers into free-floating atoms. As soon as he turned, however, his jaw dropped open in surprise and his finger refused to tighten on the trigger.

It appeared as though a section of the floor was alive. It was boiling and writing, slowly oozing its way upwards into the shape of a large club. Han slowly started to back away, bringing his blaster up from his hip. The initial shock was beginning to wear away. Whatever this thing was, it was about to meet its maker.

A tendril erupted from a nearby wall and snared Han's wrist. He struggled against it, biting off a cry of pain as it slowly crushed the bones in his hand. The blaster clattered to the floor, where still another tendril knocked it far out of reach. The club, or whatever it was, continued to grow and began to rise up until it towered over Han by a good meter.

"Sithspawn!" Han muttered.

"Exactly," a voice, not unlike Darth Vader's, replied.

With that, the club smashed over Han's head. Stars and light exploded in his vision and he collapsed to the deck, unconscious.

Leia was pacing nervously in the observation lounge of *Home One*, Admiral Ackbar's flagship. Although everyone involved had asked her to stay on Earth, she insisted on being there for the battle. If she couldn't physically be with her husband in the *Millennium Falcon*, she wanted to be in the same general area, offering what support she could. Ackbar had finally relented, insisting that she remain in the observation lounge for the duration.

Off in one corner, Seven of Nine observed her coolly. Although she was the only link to Luke Skywalker, Ackbar had insisted the former Borg drone remain off of his bridge. For some odd reason, the Mon Calamari Admiral despised what she did to Luke, even though Leia suspected Luke had some choice in the matter. Whatever the case, Seven stayed by her side with Leia relaying whatever messages Luke had for the rest of the fleet to Ackbar from here.

"Where is he now?" Leia asked.

Seven's eyes closed for a second.

"He is about to enter the Emperor's throne room," Seven said dispassionately, as if Luke routinely raided Vader's inner sanctum.

Leia wrapped her arms around herself, trying not think about it. It was bad enough her husband had volunteered to fly down the shaft of the Death Star. The fact that her brother was currently on that battle station had her worried sick.

"Tell him to be careful," she whispered hoarsely.

"He is aware of the need for caution," Seven replied.

Leia gave her a sardonic look. She glanced out the viewport and saw the familiar shape of the *Millennium Falcon* keeping station alongside the Mon Calamari cruiser. She stretched out through the Force, hoping to briefly touch the mind of her husband, just to know that he was still calm. She frowned as her touch only found foreign minds, most of whom she didn't recognize. There was a Sullustan mind, concentrating on the hyperspace calculations. If Leia wasn't mistaken, the other mind in the *Falcon's* cockpit was.....Lando. Her face contorted with fear. Where was Han?

The turbolift doors slid apart silently, revealing the darkened throne room. Luke warily stepped through the open portal, his lightsaber out and ready. Although he was running out of time, he fought against the urge to rush. The trip to the throne room had taken a good hour and forty-five minutes via the turbolift. Luke had fifteen minutes before the fleet arrived. He hoped that Han had found the control circuits.

Luke stretched out with the Force, hoping to find some hint of where Vader was. His Borg components also kicked into overdrive as well, the miniature sensors scanning every square centimeter of the floor and walls. Luke could tell what had been used in the construction of the throne room, where the power conduits were, everything that he might find relevant. It was slightly disorienting, but he absorbed the information, thinking that it might come in handy at some point.

He blinked in surprise when he looked at the throne. If the sensors were correct, the command circuits for the force field generators as embedded in one of the armrests. Luke grinned to himself. This would be easier than he thought.

He began to relax and sprinted up the stairs toward the throne. He would deactivate the shields and then destroy the throne itself so no one could raise them again. He was about to throw the switch when he sensed someone move behind him. He whirled around, his lightsaber coming to life with a brutal snap-hiss. The greenish glow of the blade illuminated the startled face of Han Solo, who threw his hands up in surrender.

"Hey, easy kid! It's me!" Han said, backing away quickly.

Luke heaved a sigh of relief and closed down his weapon, returning it to his belt. Han smiled good-naturedly, wiping his forehead with his sleeve. "You scared me there, Luke. I thought you were going to slice me in two."

"What are you doing here, Han?" Luke demanded, glancing around the throne room carefully.

"What do you think? The force field control circuits," Han said, pointing to the throne.

Luke nodded. Han made a sweeping motion towards the throne.

"Shall we? The other Rebels are waiting," Han said, bowing at the waist.

Before Luke could answer, Han started for the throne. Luke frowned, studying his friend carefully. Although he couldn't be sure, there was something wrong with him.

"Where's Chewie?" Luke challenged carefully.

"Guarding the entrance," Han replied casually, looking over the controls on the throne.

Luke nodded slowly, considering it. That was something that Han would do, leaving the Wookiee behind to guard the way in. Still, there was some intangible quality to Han that made Luke

uneasy. He still couldn't put his finger on it. He not only scrutinized his friend through the Force, he brought all of his Borg components to bear on the other man. Everything seemed fine until he managed to brush away Han's surface feelings. The hatred that suddenly stabbed through Luke caused him to stumble, but he managed to draw his lightsaber again.

"Back away from the throne, father," he snarled.

"Han" turned to Luke, a hurt look in his eyes.

"What are you talking about, kid?" he asked, innocently.

Luke's gaze didn't waver. Finally, the other man sighed. His body began to melt and soon, the dark robed form of Darth Vader stood before Luke. Vader drew his own lightsaber, igniting its orange blade. The two men faced each other for what felt like an eternity before Vader spoke. Even though it wasn't masked by the repetitive drone of his respirator, the Dark Lord's rumbling bass was still intimidating.

"I see you've made some changes, my son," he observed.

"As have you," Luke countered.

"Yes. Shall we see if it helps you?"

Vader swung his lightsaber in a vicious arc. Luke easily parried the blow, knocking Vader's saber away. Vader backed away, giving Luke an appraising look.

"I would think that Mohc's pollution would hinder you," Vader commented. "I see I was mistaken."

"You won't stop me, father," Luke said. "I don't know what you did to Han and Chewbacca, but I won't be as easy to defeat."

"Nor will I," Vader said, charging once again.

Luke quickly brought up his lightsaber, allowing the Force to flow through his body. As if it had a mind of its own, the blade danced in his hand, blocking every one of Vader's blows. Luke allowed himself to be driven back, carefully trying to lead his father away from the throne. As long as the command circuits were intact, Luke would be able to deactivate the shields later.

Vader seemed to sense his intentions. He smiled wickedly, turning to the throne.

"Oh, yes, we mustn't forget this," he chuckled.

The Dark Lord waved his hand. It appeared as if a massive fist flattened the regal seat, splinters of black metal flying in all directions. Luke's spirits fell. As far as he knew, the only controls for the Death Star's shields was on that throne. Without it, there would be no way to drop the shields. Vader turned back to Luke, his eyes fierce.

"And now, I'll deal with you, my son."

Seven's eyes opened with a gasp. Leia immediately whirled around, concerned. For most of the two hours, Seven had remained silent, in quiet communication with Luke over the light-years. This sudden outburst took her by complete surprise.

"What is it?" she prompted.

"Vader," Seven gasped, staggering slightly. "He has destroyed the command circuits. We are unable to lower the shields....."

Leia turned toward the intercom panel, hoping that she could get a message to Ackbar. Maybe she could warn Ackbar in time so the fleet could regroup and come up with a last-minute plan.

Her warning died in her throat. She watched in horror as the ship reverted to real space. Her eyes darted to the viewport, where the Death Star and its escorts loomed menacingly. Her stomach began churning violently. It would take a miracle for them to survive.

Corran watched as the brilliant hyperspace tunnel reverted to streaking stars which slowly turned to separate points. He immediately flipped the switch that locked his wings into attack position.

"All Rogues, report in," Wedge's voice ordered calmly.

Corran listened as the other nine X-Wing pilots sounded off, chiming in with "Rogue Nine, standing by." A lengthy silence followed Gavin's voice, the last of the pilots. Corran tensed, a feeling of dread growing within him. Finally, Wedge's shaky voice came over the comm channel.

"Rogues, we have a problem. The shield is still up, and they don't know when it'll be down," he explained.

"What are our orders, Rogue Leader?" Paris asked anxiously.

"Engage the nearest fighters and keep on vapping them until the capital ships can deal with the Death Star's shields," Wedge replied coolly. "Stay with your wingman. We're vastly outnumbered here, so be careful."

Corran nodded. "Ten, on me."

"As ordered, Nine," was Ooryl Qrygg's calm reply.

For a split second, Corran wondered if anything could shake the insect-like Gand. He quickly focused, however, and called up the nearest TIE Fighters. A squadron of Interceptors were already screaming towards them, green laser bolts slicing through the vacuum around the X-Wings.

"Whistler, select the closest TIE and his wingman," he instructed his astromech. "I'll take the lead and send Ooryl the data on the other. Let's try and take them together."

Whistler hooted a quiet confirmation and Corran dropped his fighter into a tight roll. He gritted his teeth. This was not going to be easy.

With the assistance of the Force, Luke was able to leap effortlessly over Vader's slashing lightsaber. With a quick flip, he landed on his feet and brought his own green blade around in a vicious arc. Vader managed to spin and parry the blow, the strength of which almost ripped Luke's arm from its socket. Luke winced, trying to concentrate. It wasn't easy. Not only was the current battle occupying his full attention, he could also sense Seven's desperation on how the battle was progressing. Trying to separate the two was proving difficult.

"You may as well surrender, Luke," Vader taunted harshly. "You will never defeat me. I am invincible!"

As if to illustrate the point, Vader struck Luke's lightsaber so hard that it slipped from his hand. The weapon clattered across the floor, being propelled by Vader's command of the Force. Luke tried to call it back to him, but he couldn't get a firm enough grip on it. His brow furrowed in frustration. Without his lightsaber, he was a sitting duck.

Suddenly, though, he felt instructions coming across the Collective from Seven. Something about the nanoprobes that were swarming in his blood stream, how they could be used to reconfigure the implants in his hand....

With a single thought, Luke propelled his body up onto an overhead catwalk, crouching down low in the shadows. He pulled the Force around him like a cloak, trying desperately to hide himself from Vader's mind. He could probably disappear from the Dark Lord for a few minutes. Hopefully, that would be enough time for whatever Seven had in mind.

He could sense the millions of nanoprobes begin to congregate in his right hand, beginning to quickly modify the Borg implants. Luke watched in hushed fascination as small crystals began to appear on the surface of his skin. After five minutes, he could sense them begin to return to his blood stream. Whatever they had done, he hoped it would work.

Luke clenched his right hand into a fist and, much to his surprise, a new lightsaber blade sprung from his empty fingers. He leapt down from the catwalk, bringing the blade into a defensive position. Vader took a step back in surprise as Luke swung his newfound weapon around menacingly.

"Impressive," Vader rumbled. "Very impressive."

Luke quickly went on the offensive, driving Vader back. The Dark Lord quickly turned and dashed beneath the throne's platform, cackling the whole way. Luke shuddered slightly as he dropped down to the lower level. Every other time he had faced his father, Vader had been silent. The Dark Changeling had merely attacked his only son viciously without a word. Now, Vader was talkative, more human. Luke wasn't sure if he should be grateful for the change.

He carefully crept into the darkness, glancing around the shadowy pillars cautiously. Vader was nowhere to be seen. He could see at least twenty pillars in the semidarkness, but that was all. He slowly stepped forward, his eyes darting around frantically. He reached out with the Force, hoping to catch some hint where Vader was hiding. His Borg implants were scanning his surroundings as well. There was no sign of the Dark Lord. Luke frowned. As far as he knew, Dark Jedi normally didn't use the Force for stealth. They used it to attack, usually brutal. Not only that, but Luke knew his father's tactics well. Running and hiding wasn't his style.

The most frustrating part of this battle was Luke's confusion over his new condition. It was so disorienting to share a common mind with another person. True, the Borg implants were helping him, but he wasn't sure if the confusion was worth it. They couldn't even help him locate Vader underneath the throne, much less show him how to defeat him.

Suddenly, Vader's orange blade erupted from one of the supporting pillars. Luke barely had time to raise his own weapon to parry the blow. The pillar quickly assumed the shape of Vader. Luke cursed his slowness. He hadn't seen this coming at all. He was lucky that Vader didn't take off his head this time. Vader slowly beat Luke back and Luke realized he had to take time to regroup. He summoned the Force and focused on Vader's eyes. He pictured an intense beam of light stabbing through Vader's pupils and, sure enough, Vader instinctively threw a protective arm over his face, crying out in shock. Luke immediately raced out from under the platform, stopping only when he was sure he was a safe distance from his father.

Vader chuckled from under the platform. "A nice Jedi trick, my son. I would be resorting only to attacks through the Force, only my scope is not so limited anymore."

The evil chuckle echoed around the throne room, then silence dominated. Then, without warning, an intense metal shriek tore through the room. The platform the throne had rested on buckled and, much to Luke's horror, split in two. The leathery form of a massive rancor burst free, roaring in fury. Luke's defensive posture faltered for a second as the beast rose to its full height. The creature regarded Luke with, insanely enough, a look of amusement.

"You see?" it rumbled with Vader's voice. "I can become anything."

The rancor lunged forward, swiping at Luke with a massive clawed hand. Luke barely managed to tumble out of the way, running the minute his feet touched the floor. The rancor bellowed with rage and continued after him, clawing the floor after him. He barely managed to stay a few steps ahead of the beast before knocking open a ventilation shaft and diving through. He took a few moments to collect himself and allowed his heart to slow. He stared out of the vent, waiting for the next attack. Vader, apparently, decided to wait for him. Luke closed his eyes, allowing the Force to flow through him. The aches and pains from the battle slowly disappeared and invigorated his weary body. He examined his arms and chest, noting the Borg implants with disdain. So much for

them. They had merely given him a new lightsaber, that was all. If he was going to defeat Vader, it would be through the Force.

Paris watched as his laser bolts sliced through yet another TIE Fighter, reducing it to a cloud of ionized gases. By his tally, he had personally taken out fifteen TIEs. Unfortunately, though, more were on their way. It was almost as if the Dominion fleet had an endless supply.

He craned his neck around to take a brief look at the rest of the battle. Surprisingly, the United Republic, although the Dominion fleet outnumbered and outgunned them, was holding their own. The Mon Calamari cruisers had broken off to take on the Super Star Destroyers and had done a remarkable job. One had been disabled within the first ten minutes of the battle. The other was slowly beginning to break apart, debris flying in all directions. Captain Picard had taken command of the other ships in the fleet, engaging the Star Destroyers at point blank range. So far, they had managed to eliminate five of the menacing vessels. Even still, the United Republic was suffering major losses. Gavin Darklighter and Nog were dead, blown to pieces by some TIE Interceptors. Paris had lost track of several other Rogues and assumed they had been destroyed as well. The fleet had lost five capital ships, including a Mon Cal cruiser, and things were beginning to look worse. The *Indomitable*, the sole surviving Super Star Destroyer, had managed to stay out of the fray. According to Paris' sensors, its shields were fully intact and it was hammering away at the United Republic's fleet. Whoever was in command of that ship appeared to be a tactical genius. Paris suspected it was Thrawn, but the Grand Admiral was likely back in Cardassian space. For a second, Paris thanked God for small favors. Whoever the commander was, he definitely needed to be eliminated.

Another TIE exploded outside his cockpit. His head jerked around in time to see Corran Horn's green and white X-Wing flash through the expanding cloud of debris.

"How are you doing, Nine?" Paris called over the comm.

"Can't complain," Corran replied facetiously. "I've vaped seventeen TIEs. You?"

Paris muttered a curse under his breath. "Uh....eighteen," he lied.

Corran snorted. "Yeah, right."

"So now what? It looks like most of the TIEs are over by the *Excelsior*. You want to join them?"

"No, I've been thinking. The battle would probably go a lot easier if we got rid of the *Indomitable*, right?"

"Of course, but it's still shielded and staying out of the range of the Mon Cal cruisers. It's not like two snub fighters will help that much."

"Oh, yes we will," Corran countered. "Whistler's been able to isolate the frequency for the *Indomitable's* shields. He's also managed to reconfigure the shape of my deflector shields so my X-Wing will be able to punch through. I'll have him send it over to Mustang."

Paris nodded, beginning to catch on. "We'll penetrate their shields and then go after the shield generator on the superstructure. How many torpedoes do you have left?"

"Four," Corran replied proudly.

Paris was impressed. He only had two left, but they should have enough. Once the globular shield generator was taken out, the shields on the SSD would fail. Even though it would still have all of its weaponry, without its shields, it would be easy pickings for the rest of the fleet. He was already nodding.

"Send over the data. Let's go kill a Super Star Destroyer!"

Leia was pacing back and forth, glancing at the viewport occasionally when an explosion lit up the space outside *Home One*. She could see the *Indomitable* off in the distance, engaging a United Republic Dreadnaught in a fire fight. Although the Dreadnaught fought valiantly, it couldn't take on a Super Star Destroyer alone. Within seconds, the *Indomitable's* green turbolasers had obliterated the Dreadnaught's shields and stabbed deep within the other ship. It immediately blew apart in a million directions, a fireball the only indication a ship had been there. Leia closed her eyes. Through her rudimentary command of the Force, she could feel the crew die.

She turned to Seven of Nine. The other woman was still standing in her corner, her face contorted in concentration. She had been as still as a statue for the entire battle, occasionally gasping in fear or surprise.

"How is he?" Leia whispered.

Seven's frown grew more intense. "He is undamaged. The fight, however, is not going well. Darth Vader is proving more difficult to defeat than he anticipated."

Leia nodded to herself, finally saying, "Let him know that my thoughts are with him."

Seven nodded, replying, "He is aware of your presence. And he thanks you."

Luke closed his eyes and forced himself to concentrate. By his reckoning, he had been hiding in the ventilation shaft for ten minutes, and Vader still hadn't made a move against him. For a brief second, he was thankful that his father hadn't morphed into a smaller form to come after him, but that was little comfort. He still had to defeat him somehow and he had to find a way to lower the shields. Unfortunately, he couldn't do that here.

He snorted in annoyance. He could hear Seven's thoughts at the back of his mind, trying to communicate something to him. He brushed her aside, continuing his preparations. He needed to be completely focused on facing Vader and couldn't be distracted. Finally, when he felt as ready as he could be, he leapt out of the shaft, his new lightsaber ignited and ready.

Luke landed on his feet and bellowed a vicious war cry, which boomed and echoed throughout the throne room. There was no sign of Vader. Luke was immediately on guard. His father could now make himself look like anything within the room, and Luke didn't want to be taken by surprise again.

Without warning, Vader dropped out of the shadows, swinging his lightsaber like a scythe. Luke ducked out of the way, twisting around and knocking the orange blade to one side. He countered, his green blade slashing off one of Vader's hands. The Dark Lord's weapon clattered into the darkness. Vader glanced at his severed limb and, not surprisingly, a new hand formed itself. Vader smiled cruelly.

"I can regenerate myself. Can you?"

Vader stabbed his hand forward and white hot lightning danced from his fingers, coursing through Luke's body. Luke writhed in agony, feeling as if every fiber of his being were on fire. He managed to raise his lightsaber to block the barrage. It neatly wrapped around the blade and Luke managed to breathe easier. Vader's hand dropped to his side and the throne room was enveloped by shadows again.

"Very good, my son," Vader growled. "You can defend yourself against just me. Can you do the same with two?"

Luke watched in horror as Vader's head split down the middle. The break continued down through his chest until the two halves of his body flopped to the floor. For a split second, they turned to liquid, but then began to rise again, each one taking on a humanoid form. Two Darth

Vaders rose from the ground before Luke's startled eyes. Both wore the same maniacal grin that chilled Luke to the bone. They simultaneously raised their hands and....

Luke's mind reeled in agony as both Vaders hurled lightning bolts from their hands. He stumbled backward, trying to fend off the attack but failing miserably. There was no way that he could block both of their attacks. After a few seconds of the devastating barrage, it ceased. The Vaders smiled as Luke staggered, falling to one knee and breathing raggedly.

"If you thought that was impressive, you should try four."

Both Vaders split in half. Now four Darth Vaders stood before Luke. They slowly began to circle around the fallen Jedi, like wild animals stalking a wounded animal. Luke tried to stand, but the pain was too much for him. He fell back to one knee, his head hanging limp. He prayed that the pain would all be over soon.

The Vaders once again lashed out as one. Four distinct lightning bolts slammed into his body and he screamed in spite of himself. He could see starbursts begin to play along the sides of his vision as his head thrashed back and forth violently. He wished there was some way....any way for the pain to end.

He was vaguely aware of Seven's thoughts once again. She tried to reassure him across the Collective, that the nanoprobes were working on the problem and would protect him soon. Sure enough, force fields suddenly appeared around Luke's body, blocking the lightning. The Vaders gasped, startled, but intensified their efforts. More lightning cascaded over the shields, but it was no use. The Borg force fields had effectively adapted to the assault and was keeping it at bay. Luke breathed a sigh of relief and called on the Force to soothe and heal the worst of his injuries. Once he had regained some of his strength, he propelled himself forward, his natural speed augmented by the Force. He raced from the throne room and into a small antechamber where he collapsed in the shadows. He was barely able to close the door before his eyes closed and he lapsed into unconsciousness.

Paris ducked as more laser bolts from the *Indomitable* flashed by his cockpit. He and Corran had just entered the Super Star Destroyer's weapons range, and the gunners were desperately trying to shoot down the two fighters. Paris began to breathe slowly, trying desperately to calm his nerves. Two X-Wings taking on a Super Star Destroyer was suicide. Everyone in the United Republic and Dominion would agree on that.

*But we're not just ordinary pilots,* Paris thought to himself with a grim smile. *We're Rogue Squadron. We specialize in the impossible.*

"Paris, you still back there?" Corran's voice crackled over the comm channel. Static from the laser fire was interfering with Rogue Squadron's tactical frequency, but that was fine. Corran and he didn't need to communicate with the rest of the Squadron, just each other.

Tom glanced out of the cockpit at Corran's X-Wing, which was ducking and weaving between the green laser bolts at least four ship-lengths ahead of him. "Yeah, I'm still on your tail." Paris grinned to himself mischievously. "You know, if we were back on the holosuite, I could have killed you three minutes ago."

"Yeah, right," Corran snorted. "In your dreams."

Paris chuckled to himself and ducked another blast that splashed harmlessly on his shields.

"Have you reconfigured your shields for penetration yet?" Corran asked. "Whistler just finished the modifications over here."

"Mustang is still crunching the numbers. I'll be surprised if this works, Horn. I'll even give Whistler a big kiss if it does."

Corran laughed and said, "He say's he'll pass."

Paris smiled. Whistler's shield configuration was completely insane, given the current situation. According to the astromech's plans, Paris was to switch his shields to full forward, leaving his aft completely unshielded. Mustang, Paris' astromech, would then modify the X-Wing's shields to not only match the frequency of the Super Star Destroyer's, but also to force the shape into a wedge. That configuration would be useless against any sort of attack, but it would probably work to penetrate the shields.

"Okay, Mustang almost has the shields reconfigured....."

Paris' voice trailed off as a blur of grey flashed in front of his ship. He immediately switched on his targeting sensors and blinked in surprise. A TIE Interceptor had managed to catch up with them and drop behind Corran. Paris' blood went cold. With Corran's current configuration, he was completely undefended from any shots the TIE might fire. He quickly locked on to the TIE with his targeting sensors and as he did, he accidentally switched from lasers to proton torpedoes. Just as he brought his nose up, causing the TIE to fall within the targeting reticle on his heads-up display, the Dominion fighter fired. Green laser blasts raked the rear of Corran's X-Wing. The other Rogue pilot juked to one side and Paris' finger tightened on the trigger.

He blinked in shock as two proton torpedoes rocketed from his fighter on tongues of blue flame. At this distance, they didn't need to lock on. They easily smashed through the cockpit of the TIE Interceptor, blowing it to microscopic pieces. He gaped at the expanding cloud of fire and glanced at his weapons control. Sure enough, he had somehow switched to his proton torpedo launchers, which were set to dual fire. Worse than that, his launchers were empty. He had no more torpedoes.

"Paris!" Corran's voice came frantically over the comm channel. "Are there any more TIEs in the area?"

Paris glanced at his sensors. "No. Are you badly damaged?"

"I don't think so. Whistler's doing the check now and...." Corran's voice trailed off. When he spoke again, his voice was quiet and full of dread. "My weapons are completely disabled. Whistler can't by-pass the damage." Corran began to giggle, an unbalanced laugh that worried Tom. "I have torpedoes, and I can't fire them."

"Perfect. I could fire torpedoes, but I don't have any," Tom muttered under his breath. "So now what? Do we wait for the others?"

"There's not enough time. If we wait, the *Indomitable* will have more time to pound the fleet. They've already taken out three Corvettes, two Excelsior class cruisers, and a Dreadnaught. In another three minutes, they could take out one of the Mon Cals. No. We have to finish this now."

"But we don't have the torpedoes! How are we going to...." Paris started to protest, but then he realized what Corran had in mind. He blinked once, then set his jaw. He nodded.

"All right," he breathed. "Mustang, finish reconfiguring the shields."

After a few tense seconds, the astromech droid warbled that it had completed the assigned task. Tom swallowed hard and closed his eyes.

"One last thing, Mustang. You know that message I recorded for my father?"

Mustang hooted quietly.

"Make sure he gets it."

Before the droid could protest, Paris punched a button in front of him. In a cloud of gas, Mustang was ejected from the astromech docking ring. The droid drifted away from the fighter quickly. Up ahead of him, Tom saw Whistler burst free from Corran's X-Wing as well.

"You ready?" Corran asked.

"Let's do it," Paris replied.

The two X-Wings surged forward, ducking and dodging through the anti-fighter lasers easily. Within seconds, Paris' fighter was bucking violently as it punctured the Super Star Destroyer's shields. As soon as it started, though, it ended, and Tom and Corran were through. Paris quickly flipped a series of switches, returning the shields to their original configuration. He simultaneously dumped all the power from his lasers to his engines. He wouldn't need his weapons anymore.

Corran and Tom quickly circled around the bulk of the massive Dominion vessel and were skimming its surface towards the bridge's superstructure. At the last possible second, Tom hauled back on the stick and pointed his nose towards the globular shield generator. He glanced toward Corran's fighter and noticed that the other pilot was aiming toward the other generator.

"Corran, it was a pleasure serving with you," Paris breathed.

"Same here, Tom," Corran returned. "And....you're at least as good a pilot as me."

Paris smiled as the shield generator loomed before him. Tom's breathing became ragged as he realized what was about to happen. A fierce anger at his whole situation welled up inside him. A scream of rage erupted from his throat, a shriek that filled his cockpit as the fighter slammed into the shield generator, pushing deep within the metal globe. The fuel in the X-Wing's engines ignited, blowing the metallic sphere to pieces. The fire was the last thing that Paris saw, reaching up to embrace him, before his world quickly descended into darkness.

Admiral Ackbar watched in personal agony as the two shield generators on the *Indomitable* blew apart in an unholy inferno. Part of the Super Star Destroyer's superstructure was demolished as well and ugly, burned hunks of metal spinning off into space. He closed his large eyes and leaned back in his command chair. The *Indomitable's* shields were down, but at the cost of two excellent X-Wing pilots. He hoped their sacrifice wouldn't be in vain.

"Order the *Independence*, the *Resilient*, and the *Enterprise* to attack the *Indomitable*," he called out to one of the bridge officers. "Bring the other Mon Calamari and Dauntless cruisers to way point theta. We'll begin an attack run on the Death Star itself."

Ackbar watched as his orders were carried out. He shook his head sadly. How he longed to swim in the waters of Mon Calamari once again. He was tired of this strife and conflict. Maybe, once these two dimensions had split in half (if Q really was telling the truth. Ackbar had his doubts), he would find himself at home and at peace.

He glanced at the tactical holo that dominated the middle of the bridge. He could see the status and position of every ship, both United Republic and Dominion. His eyes twitched as he noted some of the movements of the remaining Star Destroyers.

"Signal the *Reliant* and *Valiant* to move after this Star Destroyer," he said, indicating one with his flipper-like hand. "Have them watch for...."

"Sir!" a human lieutenant shouted in fear. "There are ships decloaking!"

"The Klingons?" Ackbar asked hopefully.

"I don't think so."

Ackbar swiveled in his chair and stared out the viewport as large sections of space began to waver and fluctuate. The familiar gray wedges of nine Dominion Star Destroyers shimmered into existence. That wasn't what commanded Ackbar's attention.

In the center of the Star Destroyers was another Super Star Destroyer.

"The SSD is the *Executor*...." the human lieutenant whispered in fear. "Under the command of Grand Admiral Thrawn."

Luke's eyes slowly fluttered open. Strange sights and sounds assaulted his senses in a random, meaningless way. He frowned, focusing his mind to filter out all the extraneous information. His vision slowly came into focus, revealing the interior of a Borg ship.

He blinked in surprise, trying to examine his immediate surroundings. It felt as if parts of his body were strapped to the bulkhead. He finally managed to crane his neck around and looked to his right. Luke jumped, startled, when he found Seven of Nine staring back at him.

The lovely young woman sensed his fright and replied, "You are safe. You are in the Collective."

"What about my body?" Luke asked hesitantly. "Won't Vader find it?"

"He will not," she replied firmly. "The implants are effectively masking your presence from him. You are safe for the time being."

Luke nodded, soaking up the information. He glanced around the Borg ship once again. He could see a myriad of Borg drones lining the corridor, each one plugged in to the Collective as he was. For a split second, he wondered if this was how a Borg ship appeared in Seven's universe. He shook off such musings and concentrated on his fight with Vader. It was not going well, that much was clear. Vader had clearly learned how to blend the powers of the Dark Side with his abilities as a Changeling. Luke was still groping on how to deal with his new Borg identity and failing miserably.

"So what must I do?" he asked forlornly.

"You must unlearn what you know, Luke," a familiar voice, one with the faintest trace of an accent, admonished.

Luke painfully turned his head to the left and was surprised to see Obi-Wan Kenobi standing next to him, also plugged in to the Collective. His old friend was surrounded by a faint blue aura that seemed to shimmer and dance with every movement Ben made.

"What do you mean?" Luke asked, straining to move to his mentor.

Ben sighed, a good-natured sigh that Luke had heard many times, and said, "Luke, you are no longer just a Jedi. You are also a Borg, but right now, you are treating your two natures as opposites. You keep the Force on one side of you...."

"And your abilities as a Borg on the other," Seven finished, stepping away from her slot.

Ben also moved. Both moved to the front of Luke and stepped into each other. Their two distinct images blurred together until only one person stood before Luke. Obi-Wan Kenobi stood before him, but Ben was now covered with Borg implants. A flashing sensor replaced one eye, a massive club his right arm. When Ben spoke again, Luke could hear both his voice and Seven's in his mind.

"You must learn to join the two together," Ben/Seven said carefully. "Only then can you defeat Darth Vader."

"But how can I do that?" Luke protested. He realized that, for a split second, he sounded like the whiny farm boy that Ben had found on Tatooine. He forced himself to calm down and continued. "My father can imitate anything and everything. How can I fight someone who can blend in with the environment so perfectly?"

"Remember, a Jedi Master is always in control of his environment," Ben's voice said clearly.

"As are the Borg," Seven chimed in.

The image of Ben/Seven started to fade away. Luke once again fought against his restraints, hoping to ask more questions of his mentor. Instead, a painfully intense flash of light began to build from deep within the Borg ship. It crashed over Luke with the light of a thousand suns.....

.....and Luke sat up in the antechamber, looking around desperately. The Borg implants immediately registered his elevated pulse and quickly brought his body under control. As they did, Luke collapsed against one wall. What did they mean, he was in control of his environment? Vader seemed to control everything about the throne room. How could he wrest control from him?

Luke idly scratched the back of his hand, mulling it over, when two tubules sprung out from his fingers. He jumped, startled, and stared at them in shock. For a split second, he wasn't sure what they were, but then remembered that they were his assimilation tubules. Seven had used ones similar to these to make him a Borg just twenty-four hours ago.

Suddenly, an idea occurred to him. He stared at the tubules, a smile beginning to pull at the sides of his mouth.

"A Jedi Master is the master of his environment," he whispered. "As are the Borg."

Without hesitating, Luke slammed his fist into the floor. The tubules easily sliced through the metal, pushing deep into the mechanics beneath the floor. He could feel his Borg nanoprobes surge into the Death Star, quickly beginning to reconstruct and reorganize everything they found, bringing the machinery completely under the control of the Collective. Luke could already feel his mind absorbing new sensory perceptions as the nanoprobes worked, spreading quickly from the antechamber into the throne room itself. For a few seconds, he sat in the small room, chuckling to himself, and quickly set the nanoprobes to work constructing a special piece of equipment for him. They acknowledged his orders, informing him that they would complete their task within minutes.

Luke smiled to himself. If his calculations were correct, his battle with Vader would be over in less than fifteen minutes.

Seven smiled and looked to Leia. "We will have defeated Darth Vader within minutes, your highness. The shields will be down soon."

Leia shook her head. "That might not be quick enough, Seven. Look."

The former Borg drone glanced out the window. The *Executor* and its nine Star Destroyers had rallied the survivors of the original Dominion fleet and were punishing the United Republic. They had already lost two Mon Calamari cruisers within minutes of the *Executor's* sudden appearance, and it was clear that Thrawn wasn't done yet. The massive Super Star Destroyer was slowly beginning to pick apart the smaller ships, using the Star Destroyers as bait. Leia had heard about how cunning Thrawn was. She had never believed the reports. No one could be that crafty, she had convinced herself. Seeing was believing, though. She closed her eyes as the engines of a small Dreadnaught exploded, careening into an already badly damaged Galaxy class vessel. The two ships immediately exploded, sending the nearby United Republic ships fleeing from the destruction.

"Hurry, Luke," she whispered.

Damar watched the battle with giddy triumph. As the Grand Admiral had predicted, the United Republic wasn't ready for their arrival. Thrawn's forces were making short work of the Rebels, and it would only take the Death Star another fifteen minutes to arrive in orbit of Earth. After that, the Terran system would be destroyed, and the Dominion would be the supreme power in the Galaxy once again. It was a heady, almost intoxicating feeling.

"You're not celebrating prematurely, are you, Gul Damar?" Thrawn asked in a hushed tone. Before Damar could answer, the Grand Admiral turned and snapped, "Warn the *Chimaera* that it is too close to the *Enterprise*. Captain Picard is not to be trifled with....."

Thrawn's voice trailed off as the United Republic ship opened fire on the *Chimaera*. The Star Destroyer tried to return fire, but the *Enterprise's* weapons were too precise. They easily sliced through the shields, piercing the larger ship. Within seconds, explosions tore the *Chimaera* to pieces. Damar gaped at the destruction in surprise. Thrawn, on the other hand, merely took it all in stride.

"They obviously have a Klingon at tactical," he observed, returning to his command chair. "Order the fleet to give the *Enterprise* a wide berth. We'll save Picard and his motley crew for later." Thrawn fixed his glowing red eyes on Damar. The Gul visibly squirmed beneath the Grand Admiral's gaze. "Do you see what I mean about celebrating prematurely, Damar? Captain Pellaeon assumed an easy victory, and it cost him dearly."

Damar nodded sagely and turned back to the viewport. For a second, he tried to put himself in Thrawn's position. True, he wasn't a tactical genius, certainly not worthy of the title Grand Admiral, but Damar fancied himself a decent strategist. His years serving with Grand Admiral Thrawn had taught him much. Perhaps he could find something to contribute. He noticed the movement of several United Republic ships. He noticed immediately how they were converging around the Harpax, one of the original Star Destroyers. Damar assessed the situation and quickly realized that the Harpax was easily out-gunned three-to-one.

"Sir, perhaps we should send the *Eradicator* and *Iron Fist* to help the *Harpax*," he suggested quietly.

There was no answer. For a few nervous moments, Damar worried that he had angered Thrawn. He had seen the results of the Grand Admiral's anger before, and they hadn't been pretty. He tensed, expecting a verbal reprimand or worse. When none came, Damar relaxed. Perhaps Thrawn was testing him.

"You see, the *Defiant*, the *Valiant*, and the *Katana* are performing a classic pincer maneuver. Easily countered, one would think, but that is Commander Goshen's ship. Goshen, as we both know, has no creativity and little competence. If we were to...."

Thrawn still hadn't replied. Now Damar was worried. By now, Thrawn would have confirmed or countered Damar's observations. The Grand Admiral was still strangely silent. Damar turned from the viewport to see what occupied Thrawn's attention.

What met his eyes shocked him. Thrawn was slumped in his command chair, a vicious looking dagger buried deep within his chest. Damar immediately was at his side, looking over Thrawn with a growing sense of panic. No matter how many times he said his name or tried to rouse him, Thrawn remained silent. There was no waking him. Grand Admiral Thrawn was dead.

Damar looked at the dagger and almost vomited. He recognized it immediately. The style of the hilt, the shape of the blade, it was so familiar. Damar had seen daggers like this before. It was the favorite weapon of one particular agent of the Obsidian Order. One who, by some bizarre twist of logic, was obviously on the *Executor*.

He was immediately on his feet, his eyes scanning the people on the bridge. He scrutinized the Cardassian officers closely. They were all engaged in their assigned duties. All, that is, except one. Damar saw one Cardassian step into a turbolift. Damar started after him, but the doors to the lift closed before he could get there. Damar cursed and called for another lift. The assassin wouldn't get away with this.

Luke carefully stepped into the newly assimilated throne room cautiously. He glanced around the room, although he really didn't have to. The Borg Collective now controlled the throne room

completely. Luke was aware of every corner, where every component was located and what it was doing. He and Seven were in complete command.

Once again, there was no sign of Vader. The Dark Changeling had assumed the shape of something in the room. This time, though, Luke wouldn't be taken by surprise. He was aware of everything in the throne room. Everything, that is, except for one column on the side of the room. It was obviously Vader. He turned and focused on it with the Force. He gave it a slight shove.

It fell away, reverting to Vader's form.

"A nice trick, my son," Vader growled. "How did you do it?"

Luke smiled. He had specifically ordered the nanoprobes not to alter the physical appearance of the throne room. Obviously they had done their job well. Vader had no idea what had happened. But then, he was about to find out.

He clenched his fist, his Borg-created lightsaber springing into existence. Vader snarled in reply, igniting his own orange blade. The Dark Changeling charged, letting loose a fierce cry that seemed to originate from the depths of hell itself. Luke counted down the seconds and, at the last possible moment, ordered the trap to be strung.

As Vader sprinted over a certain section of the floor, four black pylons erupted upwards, surrounding the Dark Changeling. Before he could react, there was a flash of light, and force fields surrounded Vader. The Dark Lord skidded to a halt, examining the fields carefully. Finally, he threw himself against one and reeled back as the force field flashed, parts of his body turning slightly liquid.

"Those force fields are made of phased energy, Father," Luke explained coolly. "Specifically designed to contain a Changeling."

Vader backed away from the field and glowered angrily at Luke. The Jedi Borg assumed his father was trying to strangle him. He crossed his arms triumphantly.

"Not only that, but the Borg nanoprobes also managed to modulate the field so it would contain the Force as well. There is no way for you to harm me," Luke said. "Resistance is futile."

Luke turned from his trapped father and ascended towards the throne. His assimilation tubules sprung from his hand and he stabbed them into the wreckage of the throne. The nanoprobes surged into the rubble, tracing the pathways of the destroyed shield command circuits. Luke sucked in a nervous breath. It would only be a matter of minutes now.

Damar dashed out of the turbolift, his eyes desperately scanning the corridor. According to the ship's internal sensors, the assassin had exited on this level. Damar's mind raced as he tried to anticipate what the assassin was trying to do. This level led to one of the many turbolaser batteries, two shuttle bays, enlisted crew quarters, and one of ten mess halls. Was the assassin trying to escape?

"I'm right back here, Damar," an almost jovial voice taunted.

Damar froze in mid-stride and carefully turned, expecting to be staring down a blaster's barrel. Instead, he saw the assassin leaning casually against a wall, a small container tucked under his arm. Damar seethed at the sight of the other Cardassian.

"How did you get on board, Garrick?" Damar demanded.

The "tailor's" intense blue eyes danced in amusement. He took a step forward, still carrying the odd looking canister. "It's really quite simple, Damar, but I won't bore you with the details. I assume you were in charge of security before Thrawn left Cardassian space?"

The look on the Gul's face was all the confirmation Garrick really needed.

"You won't escape, you know that," Damar countered, regaining some of his composure.

Garrick laughed, a sinister sound that chilled Damar to the bone.

"Escape? The thought never crossed my mind," Garrick said. "Once I realized that Thrawn was still in the Alpha Quadrant, I knew he had to be eliminated. As would his fleet."

"So you snuck on board and murdered him?" Damar thundered. "You traitor!"

"Traitor? Me?" Garrick snorted. "Hardly the case. It's people like you and your dearly departed Grand Admiral who are the traitors. You betrayed everyone in the Galaxy by following Palpatine and his corrupt Dominion. I just realized it sooner than you."

"So you snuck on board and killed Thrawn?"

"Of course. But don't feel bad, Damar, I didn't forget you."

With that, Garrick tossed Damar the container. Damar caught it and stared at it dumbly.

"What is this?" he asked, turning it over in his hands to examine its surface.

"It's a container of trilitium resin," Garrick replied calmly.

Damar almost dropped the canister in fright. Trilitium resin was one of the most unstable compounds in the Galaxy. Due to its volatile nature, it had to be stored in extremely stable containers with special control rods and other devices. Damar likely had enough of the substance to take out most of the *Executor*.

"Now, I know what you're thinking," Garrick said, chuckling. "I gave you such a precious gift, and you didn't bring anything for me. Not to worry, though. That container isn't of the highest quality."

"What do you mean?" Damar asked, sweat running down his face and coating his hands. He had frozen in place, afraid to so much as breathe lest he set off an explosion.

Garrick smiled cruelly and pulled out a small rod, flashing it before Damar's startled eyes.

"I removed the control rod."

Picard clutched the sides of the *Enterprise's* command chair as the ship rocked violently.

"Report!" he called.

"*Home One* and the *Dauntless* are still taking damage from the *Executor*. Admiral Ackbar reports that they won't be able to sustain the attack long enough for us to complete the maneuver," Commander Worf reported from his position at tactical.

Riker grunted next to the Captain in frustration. Picard could sympathize. With the arrival of Grand Admiral Thrawn's forces, the battle had been skewed strongly to the side of the Dominion. In the past ten minutes, the surviving twenty United Republic ships had been culled to ten. The Dominion, on the other hand, had a fully functional Super Star Destroyer and twenty-four Star Destroyers. Thankfully, the Death Star hadn't joined the fray yet, but after it destroyed Earth in less than ten minutes, Picard had no doubt that the massive battle station would join in enthusiastically.

Thrawn was an excellent tactician, but then again, so was Picard. He wasn't that surprised when the Star Destroyers gave him a wide berth after the destruction of the *Chimaera*. Because of this, Picard had devised a bold, yet extremely risky maneuver that would slowly drive the *Executor* into a trap. Unfortunately, it called for *Home One* and the *Dauntless*, the two most powerful ships left in the United Republic fleet to act as bait. More unfortunate was the fact that Thrawn wasn't falling for it. Picard's mind was racing, trying to devise a new strategy that would not only neutralize the *Executor*, but would rescue the *Dauntless* and *Home One*.

"Orders, Captain?" Riker asked.

Picard was about to reply when a brilliant flash of light caught his attention. Something had just exploded on board the *Executor*, flames punching through its hull.

"Magnify!" Picard breathed.

The viewscreen blinked to show a more detailed view of the Super Star Destroyer. Flames belched from a jagged hole in the side of the Dominion ship. There were more explosions, and the superstructure blew to pieces. The massive vessel began to drift, its lights flickering and then going out. It started to glide towards the Death Star, and Picard readied himself as the *Executor* approached the Death Star's shields. It would undoubtedly break up on the invisible screen.

Instead, the *Executor* passed through the unseen barrier. Picard gasped in surprise as the Super Star Destroyer collided with the Death Star. It was immediately engulfed in a massive explosion that ripped apart the surface of the immense battle station.

"The shields are down," he breathed, although that fact was obvious to everyone on the bridge.

Riker let out a triumphant whoop and was on his feet, calling out orders.

"Ensign Parsons, bring us to heading 127 mark 329, full impulse. Signal the fighters to begin their run. We'll cover for them," Riker barked.

Lando Calrissian cried out in triumph as well. For the past forty-five minutes, he had been ducking and weaving between the capital ships, trying desperately to take out as many TIE Fighters as possible. It wasn't easy. Most of them were a little more maneuverable and faster than the *Falcon*, but he had managed to take out his fair share.

"Let's go," he called over the command channels. "All fighters, on me. Let's go kill a Death Star."

The fighters reported in. Only four X-Wings from Rogue Squadron remained, plus a handful of A-Wings, B-Wings, and Y-Wings. Lando hoped it would be enough. He quickly tapped the controls, his Sullustan co-pilot blubbering out the data about the Death Star's defenses.

"Save it," he snapped. "Lock on to the access port and let's go."

The co-pilot was about to reply when angry green laser fire began to splash across the *Falcon*'s shields. Lando's attention returned to the battle. He glanced at the rear sensors and noticed that three TIE Bombers were suddenly on his tail, each one trying to lock on with proton torpedoes. He snarled at them and sent the *Falcon* into a complex set of twists and turns, trying to shake them. Surprisingly, the sluggish bombers were able to stay on his tail. Two more joined in the chase. Within seconds, the tactical computer shrieked a warning that two of the TIEs had launched their torpedoes. Lando immediately brought the *Falcon* into a steep climb that pinned him to his chair and the torpedoes sailed by beneath him.

The computer buzzed again, warning him this time that the other three had fired. Lando froze for a split second, unsure of what to do. The first two torpedoes wouldn't be tricked for long. They would turn back and reacquire within seconds. The other three had been programmed to pen him in, giving him few options on how to maneuver. That indecision cost him dearly.

While Lando hesitated, the three torpedoes locked on to the *Falcon* and exploded against the shields. They failed immediately, overwhelmed. The other two torpedoes did indeed circle back, easily locking on to the unshielded *Falcon*. Lando managed to begin an evasive maneuver, but it was too late. The torpedoes sliced through the freighter's body, exploding.

Sisko watched the *Falcon* blow apart with a sinking feeling from his seat on the *Defiant*'s bridge. This seriously jeopardized their mission. The Death Star's main reactor was too well armored for mere proton torpedoes to do any good. They needed to use quantum torpedoes against it, but no fighter could carry them. That was why the *Falcon* was selected. It was big enough for a launching system to be installed. Without the *Falcon*, though, all the United

Republic would do is disrupt the power system on the battle station. The Death Star would still be able to make it to Earth, maybe even destroy it. Sisko thought of his son in New Zealand and his father in New Orleans.

"Sisko to Admiral Ackbar...." he started to say.

"We saw it," Ackbar's gravelly voice cut him off. "We're preparing to retreat now."

"We won't get another chance at this, Admiral," Sisko countered.

"We have no choice, Captain Sisko," Ackbar returned hotly. "We don't have another ship small enough that can make the run that is armed with quantum torpedoes."

Sisko stood and began to pace the bridge in frustration. There had to be a way. Maybe if they modified their quantum torpedoes to make it down the shaft.... No, that wouldn't work. They didn't have entirely accurate blueprints for the Death Star and reprogramming the torpedoes would take too long. There had to be a way.

He finally turned to Chief O'Brien, who was stationed at the CONN. "Chief, could the *Defiant* fit down the shaft?"

O'Brien frowned and replied, "I don't think so. Not with our shields up, anyway."

"How about unshielded?" Sisko asked.

O'Brien considered it and called up some of the data. His eyes widened and replied quietly, "We'd have a quarter of a meter clearance on all sides, but that could...."

"Admiral, the *Defiant* will make the run," Sisko said, cutting off O'Brien. "We'll go in first and have the X-Wings cover us from behind. Sisko out."

"Sir!" O'Brien protested. "Going in unshielded is suicide! We won't be protected from radiation, the shaft could suddenly close in and...."

"Your objections are noted, Chief. We don't have much choice," Sisko said, returning to his seat. "Bring us in."

Ackbar clutched the sides of his command chair as the *Home One* swung around violently. While it was phenomenal that the Death Star's shields had been lowered, it created a whole new set of problems. Most of the fighters had left for the run on the main reactor, leaving the TIE Fighters free to harass the United Republic's capital ships, which were still outnumbered by the Dominion. It seemed as if the remaining Star Destroyers were able to destroy the United Republic's ships at will while they were untouchable.

"Order the *Enterprise* to come to the aid of the *Dauntless*...." he started, but the words died in his throat as the large ship exploded, three Star Destroyers darting away quickly. If something didn't happen to help them soon....

"Sir!" his tactical officer called. "We have ships decloaking all around us!"

Ackbar's spirits fell. Apparently Thrawn had kept some ships in reserve, ready to spring at a moment's notice. "Dominion?" he asked, and waited for his worst fears to be confirmed.

The tactical officer actually laughed and said, "No, sir! Klingon Birds of Prey and Romulan Warbirds! Twenty of them! We're being hailed by Chancellor Gowron."

"On screen!" Ackbar breathed.

The leader of the Klingon Empire appeared on the main screen.

"Admiral Ackbar, we're sorry we were detained, but we wished to surprise the Dominion," Gowron explained, grinning wickedly.

"It certainly worked, Chancellor," Ackbar returned, smiling as well.

"We will take the Imperial II Star Destroyers," Gowron said, his tone clear that it wasn't a suggestion. The Klingon disappeared from the viewscreen and Ackbar turned back to his tactical display. Things were definitely looking up.

Luke stood by one of the throne room's massive windows and watched as the battle unfolded before him. The arrival of the Romulan and Klingon ships took him by surprise, and Seven registered Leia's astonishment as well. For the first time, the United Republic had the Dominion outgunned and outnumbered. Luke was also aware of the *Defiant* and the small group of fighters that were making a mad dash down the access shaft towards the main reactor. It would only be a matter of time now.

He turned away from the window and turned to the cage his father was trapped in. He about to make a glib remark about the demise of the Dominion fleet, but the words died in his throat. The cage was empty! A gaping hole had been drilled into the center of the floor. Luke chided himself for the careless mistake.

He immediately reached out with the Force, trying desperately to locate the Dark Changeling. To help his search, he ordered the lights in the throne room to come to full intensity. Bright light poured through the room, whisking away all of the shadows. Luke frowned, the Collective feeding him information about the room. Unfortunately, Vader had severed some of the internal sensor feeds when he burrowed free from the cage, so much of the room remained unknown to the Borg. He immediately sent the nanoprobes to the damage, hoping that they could repair the circuits.

Suddenly, a brutal scream of rage erupted behind him. Luke whirled in time to see Vader appear from the floor in front of the cage. The Dark Lord ignited his lightsaber and charged. Without thinking, Luke shoved him through the Force and Vader fell backwards, landing in the force field. Brutal sparks of pure energy danced through the Dark Changeling's body. Vader writhed in agony as the force field burned through his body, twisting and contorting it in horrendous shapes. Finally, Vader's mouth opened as if to scream, but black, acrid smoke poured out. His body blackened and crumbled to ash.

Luke watched the entire scene in horror. He finally reached out through the Collective and deactivated the forcefields. He had won. He turned and started for the turbolift. He would return to the shuttle and then flee before the fighters could...

His steps slowed as something occurred to him. The dimensions weren't pulling apart as Q had predicted. Yes, he had destroyed the anchor that Vader had created but now, by being a Borg himself, he had become a second anchor. As long as he lived, the realities would remain merged, and soon, they would destroy each other and all other dimensions with them.

Luke turned and slowly walked back to the steps. He quickly subdued the lights, allowing the throne room to darken. He slowly sank on the steps leading up to the throne and waited.

Sisko clutched the side of his command chair as the *Defiant* rocked slightly. He could hear the distant sound of the hull scraping against the sides of the shaft. O'Brien had been right. It was a tight fit, but they had made it this far. Sisko wasn't about to turn back now.

"Sisko to Antilles," he called out. "How are things going back there?"

"Not so good," Wedge's tense voice replied. "Several TIEs followed us down the shaft. They've managed to pick off most of our fighters. I've had Tycho and the rest of the Rogues split off and lead them towards the surface.... I'm the only X-Wing left."

Sisko nodded grimly. He hoped it would be enough.

"We're coming up on the main reactor chamber...." O'Brien breathed, his hands trembling as he fed course corrections into the CONN.

The *Defiant* sailed free into a massive chamber. The main reactor loomed before them, its massive circular form the size of a small planetoid itself. Sisko watched as Wedge's X-Wing darted in front of the *Defiant*.

"Take out the power regulator, Wedge," Sisko ordered, then turned to the lieutenant at tactical. "Lock quantum torpedoes on the main reactor."

"Aye, sir," the lieutenant breathed.

Sisko watched as Wedge's X-Wing spat two proton torpedoes at the power regulator. They crossed the distance quickly, exploding against the strange, needle-like protrusion. It burst into flames and the energy field around the main reactor began to fluctuate wildly. Sisko sucked in a nervous breath. It was now or never.

"Fire!" he barked. "Chief, bring us around and get us the hell out of here!"

"Gladly," O'Brien mumbled.

The quantum torpedoes raced away from the *Defiant* and tore into the spherical power generator almost immediately. Although the *Defiant* was facing the wrong way, Sisko could see how the massive explosion lit up the chamber. He squinted, automatically bringing up his right arm to shield his eyes. O'Brien squinted but still managed to dive into the access shaft, following behind Wedge's X-Wing while a massive fire ball tore after through the chamber, scant meters behind them.

Luke felt the deck plates vibrate beneath his feet and looked up. He slowly crossed over to a large shaft that led deep within the Death Star's core and looked down it. At first, all he could see was a pale light that barely illuminated the shaft. Soon, though, a massive ball of flame came shooting up the shaft. The vibrating deck plates soon began trembling, then shaking violently. Luke clutched the railing around the shaft as the explosion tore through the walls.

He closed his eyes, stretching out with the Force. He could already feel the two realities beginning to pull free of each other. He chuckled to himself. They had done it!

Leia watched as parts of the Death Star's surface blackened and disintegrated, being blown away by tongues of fire. It seemed to swell for a split second before it exploded, turning into a large cloud of incandescent gas and debris. Leia immediately turned to Seven.

"Is Luke...." she asked desperately.

Her voice caught in her throat. The other woman was slowly fading from the observation room. Leia took a step forward, ready to call her name, when she suddenly realized she didn't know who this woman was. Eventually, the blond woman with the strange cybernetic implants had vanished completely, leaving Leia alone.

The same thing was happening all over the fleet. Entire ships would simply disappear without a trace from sensors. Crew members were shocked as their friends and family faded from view and memory. Entire planets disappeared. The inhabitants of Vulcan and Tatooine were at first shocked when they realized that their near neighbor had disappeared, then were perplexed, because they couldn't remember why they thought they had a sister planet in the first place.

The two disparate realities withdrew from each other, returning to their rightful places. The last few tendrils of space and time unwound themselves and....

....and Commander Pellaeon picked himself up from the floor of the lab, looking around in desperation. Black, acrid smoke filled the room, small fires burning in exploded consoles. He coughed, feeling the grit in his throat. He stumbled slightly. It felt as if he had bruised a few ribs.

"Dr. Reja!" he shouted hoarsely.

There was no answer. Stormtroopers rattled around the lab, spraying fire suppression foam everywhere. Pellaeon shouted again, but he was largely ignored. Finally, he managed to snare a fleeing scientist and spun him around.

"Where is Dr. Reja?" he demanded.

"He's....he's dead, sir," the other man sputtered.

Pellaeon didn't let the scientist go. Instead, he forced him towards one of the working computer terminals and forced him to sit down.

"What happened?" Pellaeon demanded.

The scientist nervously looked over the information on the terminal.

"I'm not sure, sir. There appears to have been a feed-back surge in the anti-tachyon beam and it completely fused the power generators. It looks like it destroyed that inter-dimensional flotsam as well. It's not registering on any of the sensors."

Pellaeon closed his eyes in pain. His dreams and ambitions for restoring the Empire had fallen out of his grasp once again. The entire experiment had been a disaster.

"Very well," Pellaeon whispered. "Carry on."

The scientist stared at the commander for a long time, not entirely sure what he should do. Without saying another word, Pellaeon turned and started for the exit, contemplating what he should do next.

*Maybe this upstart, Admiral Daala, is looking for commanders, he mused.*

The Founder stood in the middle of the chaos and fought to remain calm. Within seconds of the experiments beginning, the consoles around the lab started exploding and sparking. She had almost been caught in one of the energy discharges, which would have killed her, but a Jem'Hadar soldier had saved her, sacrificing his life in the process.

Borchan, her lackey Vorta, rose from the floor, his face covered with grime. He looked around in fear and shock. The disastrous experiment had taken him by surprise as well.

"What happened?" Borchan whimpered.

"Perhaps we should ask Karidom," the Founder observed coldly.

The Cardassian scientist was looking over the data frantically when they found him, his normally well-kept hair in complete disarray.

"Doctor, I think you had better explain yourself," Borchan said, trying to sound angry. Instead, he came across even more pathetic than before.

"I don't know!" Karidom shot back hotly. "I'm still trying to figure it out. There was some unknown interference in the subspace pocket...."

"Did you know that there could be this type of interference?" Borchan cut him off.

The Cardassian stared at the Vorta indignantly and replied, "Of course. It was a possibility...."

"And you didn't feel you had to warn the Founder of the danger?" Borchan demanded.

Karidom's mouth hung open in shock. "Well, I.... I didn't expect...." he sputtered.

"You are an ignorant fool, Karidom," the Founder said icily.

"You put the Founder in danger, Doctor. That sort of mistake is unforgivable," Borchan added, snapping his fingers.

Two Jem'Hadar raised their weapons to their shoulders. Karidom looked at the soldiers in fear. Without hesitation, the Jem'Hadar fired. The Founder watched the execution without passion. While the soldiers dragged Karidom's corpse away, she turned and started for the exit.

"Perhaps we should consider other possibilities for getting to the Gamma Quadrant," the Founder observed to Borchan.

Borchan nodded, bowing low. Of course, the Founder was correct. She was a god, and a god could never be wrong.

For a split second, Jadzia Dax faltered. Her opponent's batleth almost took off her head, but thankfully, she ducked in time. Her parry wasn't quick enough, however, and her weapon was knocked from her hands. Her adversary immediately had his blade near her throat.

"Surrender," Worf growled.

Dax smiled coyly at her husband and raised her hands. Worf stepped away, looking at her with disappointment spread across his face.

"I was able to beat you in thirty seconds, Jadzia," he observed sourly. "What is wrong?"

Dax frowned, not sure of what to say. For a split second, the face of a young woman with luxurious brown hair and warm brown eyes floated before her mind's eye. She seemed so familiar, as if this woman was related to her. A sister or maybe....a daughter? The image was quickly fading, almost like a half-remember dream. She finally shook her head, clearing it.

"Sorry," Dax said. "I was just a bit preoccupied."

Worf nodded, dropping into a ready position. It was obvious he wanted to continue, but Dax's heart wasn't into it. She was suddenly brooding over the children she had in previous lives. That woman she had seen....she wasn't Trill. Who was she?

"What's wrong?" Worf asked, suddenly by her side and concerned.

Dax smiled up to him. She loved him so much. He was gruff and coarse only when he wanted to be, but when she needed him most, he could be quite compassionate.

"I don't know, Worf," she whispered, caressing his cheek. "I was just wondering....do you think we're ready to have children?"

On the other side of the galaxy, Harry Kim suddenly frowned and looked around the bridge. For some odd reason, he was experiencing déjà vu. Everything was the way it should be, and yet, it was wrong. Harry looked at the back of Tom Paris' head and felt that he should be somewhere else. Piloting a fighter of some kind, he imagined. And in his place....

Harry's face contorted in pain for a second, and he didn't know why. The image of a beautiful young woman flashed before him and his heart welled up with a sense of loss.

"Are you okay?" a gruff voice asked him.

"I'm fine, Commander Katarn," Harry mumbled.

"What did you call me?"

Harry looked up at Chakotay sheepishly.

"Sorry, Commander, I....I didn't get enough sleep last night."

"Maybe you should take some time off," Chakotay observed dryly.

"Maybe I should," Harry agreed, leaving his station.

Within seconds, Harry was in the turbolift and headed for his quarters. He shook his head, feeling the cobwebs slowly disappear from his mind. Finally, he sighed and smiled. Maybe he would go visit Seven of Nine down in astrometrics. Maybe he could finally work up enough nerve to ask the Borg woman out.

Jedi Master Luke Skywalker sat up in bed and looked around his quarters desperately. For a split second, he expected Darth Vader to stride out of the shadows, his lightsaber blazing. Realizing that his fears were unfounded, Luke ran through Jedi techniques that would bring his nerves back under control. He frowned and shook his head, wondering where those odd, intense dreams had come from.

"Master, are you all right?" a voice asked from the hallway.

Luke turned to his student and frowned, suddenly not sure of who this young man was. The student's name was on the tip of his tongue, and Luke knew he should know him. Finally, he smiled.

"I'm fine, Kyp. Go back to your quarters and try to get some sleep."

Kyp Durrton smiled and left the doorway. Luke frowned. How could he have forgotten Kyp, his most promising student? He shrugged and decided to see what was wrong.

He closed his eyes in concentration and stretched out with the Force. He quickly assured himself that nothing was wrong with any of his students, so he reached beyond the confines of Yavin. His mind sped through the Galaxy to Coruscant, where Leia was sitting up with Jacen and Jaina, her son and daughter. For a brief moment, he brushed against her mind, getting her attention. She returned the mental caress, and Luke knew that things were fine with her as well. Finally, he allowed his mind to touch the fabric of the space/time continuum. For a split second, he felt the presence of a powerful being, one who regarded this small Jedi Master with amusement.

"You have done well, Luke," a voice said. "Very well indeed."

With that, the presence was gone, and Luke opened his eyes, satisfied. Everything was as it should be.

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The idea was mine, so there.

E-mail me at j\*\*\*\*\*u and let me know what you think of the story

God bless!