

## STAR WARS

### The Sith System

By Brendon J.Wahlberg

In the aftermath of the fall of the Empire, the ancient Orders of the Jedi and the Sith were reborn. Now the new Dark Lords desire a truce with Master Luke Skywalker.

But Luke must not face the Sith alone. At his side stand a rival from his youth, and in his hand will lie a talisman of unfathomed power.

For the Jedi Master, ahead lies the challenge of forging a new peace between ancient enemies, if he can survive the wrath of the vengeful Dark Lady...

## PROLOGUE

The Emperor was dead. Darth Vader was dead. That news took little time to spread across all of Imperial space. It signified something different to all who heard it. To members of the Rebel Alliance to Restore the Republic, it meant victory, revenge, freedom, or hope. To some within the Empire, it meant defeat, or despair. To others, it meant opportunity, relief, or redemption.

To Lord Flint and Lady Lumiya of the new Sith, it meant that the treacherous Emperor who would destroy them was himself destroyed, and that the Dark Lord of the Sith who would rule them was gone forever. It meant that the time of Sith ascendancy had begun again at last.

Piloting their stolen assault shuttle through the acid storm clouds of the barren world of Vjun, Lumiya turned to her gruff companion with a patronizing smile. "You see Flint? It's just as I said. The Dark Lord's troops and guards have deserted his castle, now that they don't have him to fear any more. When the Devastator left orbit, it took everyone from Bast Castle with it."

"Hmm. Perhaps you're right," mused Flint. "I'm not picking up any scanning or tracking signals from the castle. And I don't sense the presence of anybody skilled in the Force, either. It would seem to be safe for us to go in and get what we came for." He placed a gauntleted hand on his cyborg companion's metallic gray shoulder from where he stood behind her, looking out the rain spattered viewport. Lumiya tolerated the contact, and even seemed to draw strength from it.

She turned back to look up at him, her long red hair falling away from her deeply scarred face. "Always the cautious one," she said, slightly mocking. "Even if Bast Castle was full of troops, they couldn't stop us from walking in right under their noses, and back out again, too. Only Lord Vader could, and he's as dead as everyone thought we were for all these months."

"You sound almost pleased that our old Master is dead," Flint said.

"I'm pleased with the freedom this gives us, to start fresh, and recreate the Sith our own way. The passing of a Dark Lord has always meant the rise of a new one, or, in our case, two new ones. That's already one departure from the past. And we have so many plans." Lumiya turned in her seat and put one gleaming finger in the middle of Flint's armored chest. "Plans you dreamed up and made me believe in. Plans we could never have made real if the Emperor hadn't been destroyed. And if Vader had survived the battle of Endor, there might still be an Order of the Sith, but it would be his, not ours. Don't get me wrong, Flint. I know we owe him a great deal, but I also enjoy being in charge."

"It still bothers you, doesn't it, that Vader refused to let you go after Skywalker?" Flint asked, looking steadily into her eyes. He saw a spark there, always burning, flare slightly at the mention of that name. Flint frowned. He had hesitated to bring this up, but now that they had come to an important juncture, he had to know. "Now that you're free of him, is that what you're going to do?"

Lumiya looked away and faced out the wide viewport. She began piloting the shuttle towards the high stone spire on which the Sith castle was perched. She was silent as they approached, until the dark structure, a replica of the lost Sith monastery of Horuz, loomed out of the storm. "I've thought about that..." she said quietly, "and I've decided that my commitment to the Sith is stronger than my need for revenge. Luke Skywalker's death can wait for the day when our order is secure."

Flint knew she could sense his relief at her answer. He simply let the matter drop and sat down next to her in the co-pilot's seat. Without talking, they maneuvered the Gamma class shuttle to a gentle landing on the empty platform next to the deserted looking, helmet shaped complex. After suiting up in protective gear, they crossed the acid lashed landing area and entered the Castle, unobserved and unmolested. The inner halls were equally deserted. It did appear that, after Vader's death, the keepers of his private sanctum had quietly abandoned it, taking anything of value with them. Flint and Lumiya walked the long corridors of durasteel-reinforced stone in silence, haunted by memories of their year-long training in this place. Well-remembered Sith carvings and heavy statues remained, as did the great domed hall with its painted parade of Dark Lords of the distant past. Now, no one would be there to paint Darth Vader's image onto that ceiling. This place would be left behind as a mute testimony to a long history, whose continuation would belong to another future time and place.

Once past the central hall, the Sith climbed a spiral staircase that led to the castle's single high tower. They paused at the sealed entryway to Vader's own private room. Flint keyed in a recognition code on the door's control panel, and it slid smoothly aside. Inside, they crossed to the gleaming black meditation pod, ignoring the brooding Sith statues that inhabited various alcoves around the room. Lumiya opened a panel on the side of the meditation chamber, and entered a code that she and Flint had been entrusted with a year ago by their Dark Lord. She and Flint stood back. There was a deep mechanical groan, and instead of the top and bottom halves of the chamber separating to open it, the entire pod rose towards the ceiling on a black cylindrical column. On the face of the column was a magnetically sealed door, with no visible controls.

Flint looked at Lumiya. "All right, this is it. Are you ready?" She nodded, a hungry expression on her face.

Both of them closed their eyes, and opened themselves to the Force. Through the Eyes of the Force, they could see past the closed door to the opening mechanism behind it. With a combined push from their minds, it grudgingly shifted into position and the door swung smoothly open, revealing a large storage compartment within the column. It was what the Sith had come for.

Lumiya immediately knelt beside the opening and began to pass the contents to Flint. These included a number of thick leather-bound books, obviously of great antiquity, an ornate dagger with a glowing yellow jewel set into the hilt, a collection of scrolls, several medallions, and a purple box made out of crystal and inscribed metal. Flint held up the latter.

"Here's the greatest treasure," he said reverently. "The Holocron of Exar Kun, given to Lord Vader by the spirit of Kun himself."

Lumiya passed him a long gray sword and began to get up. "That's everything," she said. "Not much after so many millennia, but it'll have to do. Then a tiny gleam caught her eye, deep in the shadows of the hidden compartment, where she had almost missed it. "Wait a moment-- there's something else here." She reached in a slim metallic arm and withdrew a small box lined with dark velvet. It was open, and nestled in its soft interior was a deep red crystalline sliver. The fragment glowed softly, a rich light that seemed to dance on the crystal like red sunlight on water. Lumiya handed the box to Flint.

"What's this?" he asked, taking it. "I've never seen it before. Is it new, or did Vader hide it from us?"

"I have no idea," she replied, "but whatever it is, it's attractive. It makes me want to touch it..."

Flint removed one gauntlet and carefully lifted the splinter from its box. He was moving to pass it to Lumiya when a startling shock pulsed through him from his hand. He recoiled and dropped the crystal to the floor.

"What's wrong?" Lumiya demanded. "Did it burn you?"

"No...no, I'm all right," said Flint, recovering. "It isn't hot at all. It was more like...a sudden rush of the Force, pouring into me. I was just surprised, that's all. I think it magnifies the Force, somehow."

Lumiya bent to pick it up. She held it in her prosthetic palm and frowned in disappointment. "I don't feel anything...well, no matter--we'll take it with us for study." She snapped the small box shut with the sliver inside, then swung the compartment door closed. When the secret door's seal was restored, the column descended again, lowering the meditation chamber to the floor.

Flint looked at the tooth-shaped closure of Lord Vader's pod, somehow expecting it to crack open, rise apart, and reveal the Sith Lord glowering at them within. But of course it never would again.

Lumiya was looking at the small pile of Sith artifacts. "This won't be enough," she said thoughtfully. "We'll need more knowledge to accomplish our goals."

"Then we'll just have to find it out there somewhere," said Flint. "We'll sift through what we have here, study the Holocron. Maybe we'll find clues, lost trails to follow to the places of old Sith power..."

"Let's get out of this heap of cold stones and head for space then," said Lumiya impatiently. "It's just full of old ghosts anyway."

The Sith returned to their ship and lifted off without looking back. Behind them, Bast Castle crouched like a crustacean huddling alone in the pounding rain. Darth Vader's lofty house was empty, for now...

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Eleven Years Later...Yavin Four...

Master Skywalker stared disconsolately at the huge, empty chamber at the heart of the decayed Palace of the Woolamander. The ceiling stones had recently caved in and tumbled to the floor, allowing dusty light to invade where it hadn't been welcome for four millennia. The weak sunbeams cast light on the eroded flagstones at the Jedi Master's feet, but they provided no illumination for him. There are no answers here, thought Luke. Exar Kun is gone forever. We destroyed him ourselves. But somehow the Sith live on...and I don't have the slightest idea what to do about it.

A tentative electronic warble reminded the Master of his faithful droid companion, R2-D2. The little blue R2 unit was always able to sense Luke's moods somehow, and like a patient and compassionate pet, listen to

Luke's troubles while offering simple support. This was certainly a time when Luke needed that. He felt overwhelmed by the burden of his choices, weak with indecision, and entirely bereft of the optimism he needed to see this through. Artoo had no idea what he was up against, but Luke appreciated the droid's trying.

"Oh, Artoo..." said Luke, letting his inner despair come out in his forlorn tone, "what am I going to do? Part of me, a crazy part I guess, just wants the dark side to go away forever. For the battle to just be over. But it seems like I can never have that. Even when the Emperor and Vader were gone, there were still the Nightsisters of Dathomir, and then Master C'Baath." Luke snorted. "Then the Emperor reborn, and Exar Kun. Why can't we defeat the dark side once and for all?" Artoo emitted a sympathetic sound.

"And now there's the new Sith," Luke sighed. The new Sith had seemed to come out of nowhere, an order fully formed, to rival the fragile new order of Jedi Knights. Luke was full of anxiety for the survival of the Academy he had worked so hard to build. Another Sith War, like the one fought against Exar Kun so long ago, would most likely destroy the Jedi, so soon after their rebirth. But the specter of war was not what most disturbed the Jedi Master. War was something he could understand. What particularly unbalanced him was that the new Sith claimed to want peace. A truce. Luke couldn't believe it. That simply wasn't how the dark side operated.

"Artoo," said Luke, "play me back the message from the Dark Lords again." Luke didn't know why he asked. He had already seen it a dozen times. From the first time, when the holomessage hyperspace capsule had been delivered into his hands after being picked up near Coruscant, to the most recent, the message continued to bewilder him with its implications. The patient droid's holoprojector lit up, and soon two figures were standing by Luke, flickering in the dusty gloom: Flint and Lumiya, the Dark Lords of the Sith.

After seeing the message for the first time, Luke had been shaken by the sense that he had met both of them before. Somewhere, years ago, he had encountered Flint, the tall, stern man in the black plate armor. And Lumiya, the slim, red-haired woman clad entirely in gleaming, form-fitting silver-gray metal. Luke had used Force-enhanced memory skills to solve the mystery, but what he found only puzzled him more.

He had met Flint on an Imperial industrial world called Belderone, during the galactic civil war. The young man had wanted Luke to train him in the Force, and had accosted Luke in a crowded marketplace. Luke had firmly told Flint that he could be no one's teacher--Luke had not even met Yoda yet--and moved on, putting the encounter out of his thoughts.

As for the other Dark Lord, Luke remembered her as Shira Brie, a Rebel pilot from Kulthis Base when Luke was briefly stationed there. She and Luke had been introduced, and had talked a few times, but that was all. Before he could learn more about her, she had been killed in a raid on Vader's fleet, during the evacuation of the base. Yet, here she was, apparently alive.

None of it added up.

As the holoimage played, Luke heard the rough, deep voice of Lord Flint speak the words that were becoming very familiar to him.

Greetings, Jedi Master Skywalker. We are Lord Flint and Lady Lumiya, Dark Lords of the new Sith. We are aware that you have reestablished the Jedi Order, and we want you to know that the order that gave rise to Darth Vader has also been reborn through our efforts. It thrives in a hidden location far from New Republic space. The Jedi and the Sith have been enemies for countless centuries, and in the most recent conflict, Emperor Palpatine took advantage of this to bring both orders to near extinction. Now, two young new orders have arisen from the ashes of the old. It should be clear to you that a new conflict could wipe out both of us. But we don't have to be slaves of the past. I say we can learn from it instead. We can create a truce between the Jedi and the Sith, and flourish independently. We thought that you, who has walked the line between the dark side and the light, would understand the Force enough to see the importance of this proposal. We invite you to the Sith System, for formal negotiations to establish a truce. Your personal safety, as well as that of any companion you bring, is assured. We will meet on the Sith homeworld on the last day of the third standard galactic month, if you agree to come. The precise location of our world must remain, understandably, a secret until negotiations are concluded. For this reason, we have arranged a rendezvous in the Dagoris system. From there, you will be taken to the Sith System on one of our ships--"

"That's enough, Artoo," said Luke abruptly. "Turn it off." Flint and Lumiya winked out, leaving the Master alone with his thoughts again. Luke simply didn't trust the offer of the message. No darksiders he had ever met before would keep their word once a truce was established. Why should these two be any different? The invitation itself could well be a trap, designed to capture or kill the only Jedi Master left, himself. On the other hand, could he afford to ignore the message? Lord Flint's point about a conflict between the orders was important--it could destroy both. Could a truce really work, Luke wondered? Could he ever trust the dark side enough to make any agreement worth the risk?

Luke had lived with the dark side for a long time now. It had corrupted and killed his father, separated him from his twin sister, and taken his mother away. In the form of his second Master, Emperor Palpatine, the dark side had almost corrupted Luke himself. Only his Jedi sister had saved him from his doom. Luke suspected that his level of conflict with the dark side set him apart from even his Master, Yoda. Had Yoda ever faced so much darkness? On his less charitable days, Luke sometimes thought that Yoda had taken the easy way out by hiding from the conflict on Dagobah. But he knew that wasn't true. The true conflict with the dark side was internal, not external. Luke had faced, and gone beyond, his own darkness, years ago. He shouldn't be so torn up about it at this point. So why was he? Why was it so personal after all this time?

The answer was there, just behind a wall of pain in his mind. Callista. Callista, his lost love, had been taken from him by the dark side. Her powers in the light side had been blocked, and they had been horrified to find out that Callista could only surmount her block by giving herself to dark side. Unable to live with Luke but without the Force, she had left him to search for answers on her own. Alone and miserable, Luke had fallen into a depression, a deep rut in which he still remained. Worse, he had become fatalistic and pessimistic, changes his friends could see were dangerous to him. A few months ago, he had even come close to a kind of suicide. Tortured by the Force-disrupting influence of the crystal star, Luke had faced being consumed by an alien creature called Waru. He had felt such bleakness in his soul that he had whispered, "Yes, take me...", and only Leia had saved him again. Now Luke seriously wondered if he was emotionally fit to go and face the Sith. He might harbor a reckless lack of concern for his own fate, or a desire for vengeance against the dark side itself.

After hearing the message for the first time, Luke had shared it with some of those closest to him, hoping for advice to push him into a decision. Predictably, his sister Leia, the Chief of State of the New Republic, had been skeptical...

"Luke," she had said, "think about who must have trained these people! It could only have been our father, and you know what that means. How can you trust anyone who had Darth Vader as their teacher? Besides..." Leia's face had creased with concern. "I'm worried about you. And I think you know what I'm talking about. Han's worried too. Maybe you shouldn't go on this mission. Could you send someone else to represent you?"

No, Luke couldn't. Because of who he was, Vader's son, he felt responsible for dealing with what his father had left behind.

"At least take lots of Jedi with you," she had said. "Take Kyp, and Kam at least. Promise me."

Luke had promised he would think seriously about everything she said.

Kam Solusar and Kyp Durrion had been all in favor of coming along. Luke had contacted them in their respective systems, where each was acting as a Jedi Guardian. Kyp had been rather agitated at the news. "The Sith!?" he had exclaimed. "I can't believe it! After we went through so much agony with Exar Kun around, suddenly a whole bunch more of them show up? This is ridiculous!"

Kyp had been taken over by Exar Kun and used to nearly kill Master Luke and Han Solo. He had killed his own brother during the destruction of Carida. There was no love lost between him and anything connected with the Sith.

"I say we go in with a New Republic fleet and blow them into little pieces, before they have a chance to come to Yavin and do the same to us. This is one problem we can solve before it gets out of hand."

Kyp's volatile response was of little use to Luke, and while Kam Solusar was more reasonable, his advice ran to the opposite extreme. "I wouldn't worry about it, Luke. They're probably worried about us! Think about it...they're alone out there, somewhere, few in number, and they know we're this no-nonsense Jedi force that can take down people like the Emperor, and wipe out places like Byss. As far as they know, once we find out where they are, they're next. So they send this message, asking for a truce. It really shows that they're weak. Listen, Luke, I say you tell this Flint that he has to come to you. Don't let these posturing pretenders dictate terms to you. And whatever you decide, I'm there if you need me."

But Luke's instincts told him he couldn't do what Kam said. They told him that this truce was too important for the future, and that he had to play it straight. Luke had learned to trust those instincts. He had been right about his father, and he was right about this...or was it his death wish creeping out again, as it had with Waru? How much of that despair on Crseih Station had been due to the crystal star, and how much had come from inside him?

Luke's comlink rudely interrupted his thoughts. He held it up, annoyed. "Luke, this is Tionne," the comlink crackled. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but you have an urgent message. The caller said you would want to hear this right away."

"Well, who is it?" demanded Luke, frowning.

"She says her name is Halla," said Tionne. "She's calling from Tatooine. She says it's not her that needs to talk to you. Something called the Kaiburr Crystal does. Luke, does that make any sense to you?"

Luke couldn't answer for a long moment. His eyes were wide, his body frozen. Finally, he stammered, "I--I don't know. I mean yes. Maybe. I'll be right there!" Luke switched off the comlink. "Come on, Artoo. Things have just gotten a whole lot better...or a whole lot worse!"

Luke ran from the ruined Palace.

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"Come in, come in boy," said Halla, motioning Luke into the doorway of her simple one-story stone dwelling. "You're probably not used to the heat anymore. Come on in and I'll bring you some water. Hey, still got that little droid, I see. Hello, Artoo. You keeping this high and mighty Jedi Master from getting into too much trouble?"



Artoo beeped affirmatively as he rolled in after Luke.

Halla's home was crowded with looms and weaving machines, heaps of fabric and bundles of thread. Luke found a seat among the clutter and relaxed. In a moment, Halla bustled in carrying two glasses of cold water.

"How's business?" asked Luke, taking the glass gratefully.

"Oh, same as usual. Always a demand for quality clothing in a place like this. Do you know I even sell to the Sandpeople? 'Course I have to bring the merchandise out of Anchorhead to the desert, 'cause they won't come anywhere near here, unless it's for a raid. But you should see some of the beautiful crystals they give in trade." The gray haired, tough looking woman eyed Luke critically. "You could use a new set of Jedi robes yourself, you know. That one's looking pretty ragged." She smiled. "And your credit's good with me." Halla took a long drink and sighed. "It's good to see you, boy. Been a few years since the last time, hasn't it?"

"Halla," said Luke gently, "about why I came."

Halla's face fell and she paled slightly. "Yes, yes of course, Luke. I know I made you rush here, and I'm thankful that you did. I was just scared, and I didn't know what to do. All these years, I've taken care of the crystal for you, and nothing's happened. It's been peaceful, and I've been happy here. Got lots of good friends, good people. People stick together out here, but you know that...Then, all of a sudden, the crystal seemed to...to wake up. In the middle of the night, it started blazing away in its hiding place and calling for you! I was so frightened, I thought Pomojema himself might show up. It's been quiet since then, and I've calmed down, too. I suppose you'll want to see it right away...?"

"I think that would be best," said Luke. Halla led him to her small bedroom. She moved the bed to one side, and cleared away a variety of weaving supplies to reveal a small trapdoor in the floor. Her wrinkled fingers lifted it up, and immediately, a warm red glow bathed her time-worn face. She reached in and lifted out a multifaceted crystal as large as her head. The crimson radiance pulsing steadily from the gemstone seemed almost alive. Luke immediately felt the stirring in the Force as Halla's flesh and minor Force sensitivity caused the crystal to react.

"Here it is, Luke," she said reverently. "The Kaiburr Crystal. All that time, I hunted for it on Mimban, thinking it would bring me such power, then I found out it simply wasn't for me...and it ended up hidden here under the bed, just waiting...I wonder if maybe it just got tired of waiting...?"

"I left it here for a reason," said Luke, gazing into the shifting luminescence. "At first, I didn't want it to fall into the hands of Vader, or the Emperor. At the time, I knew that if it came to a fight, I couldn't keep them from taking it. And that would have had some awful

consequences. Things just seemed to come thick and fast, even after the war ended. I never had the time to study it any further. And really, it was just as well. The Emperor wasn't really gone, and I fell into his service for a while...If Palpatine, or even Master C'Baath had possession of the crystal, there might not be a New Republic today. I've been afraid of the crystal, too, I guess. I didn't understand it, and I wanted to be a Master before I dared to use it..."

"Oh!" said a high-pitched, gravelly voice behind Luke. "Master, are you? Hmm? Heh heh heh!"

Luke nearly jumped out of his skin. He spun as Halla recoiled in surprise, her eyes wide. Sitting on the bed was the transparent blue apparition of a wrinkled little alien with long pointed ears and stubby clawed hands and feet. It smiled impishly at Luke and Halla.

"Master Yoda," gasped Luke. "I--I don't believe it!"

The softly glowing figure raised one finger and pointed critically at Luke. "Don't believe it? Taught you these lessons before, I have. Always students forget what they have learned. Obi-Wan told you, always with you would I be."

Luke shook his head and blinked, but Yoda remained. "I'm sorry, Master, it's just that...well, Ben said he could no longer contact me, so I assumed--"

"And yet," Yoda interrupted him, "here I am, with you. The crystal changes matters. Powerful it is. It allowed me to call you. Now, we have much to discuss. Yes, important challenges do you face, young Skywalker."

Luke marveled at how quickly he had gone from Master to student in Yoda's presence. He also felt a pleasure he had missed for a long time. The pain of Callista's loss receded for a while. Luke had his old teacher back. He couldn't help but smile, even as he raised the topic that had troubled him so much. "You mean about the return of the Sith."

"Yes, Luke. In your hands, the future rests. A better future, if you succeed. A long time have the Sith and the Jedi fought...Hmmm. But peace you must achieve, for the Jedi to survive."

"Excuse me," said Halla weakly, "but what's going on here, boy?"

Luke had forgotten Halla. He turned to her apologetically. "Halla, this is Master Yoda, my teacher. Yoda, this is Halla, a good woman who helped Leia and me find the Kaiburr Crystal and guarded it here for years."

Halla stood stiffly, and gave a little nervous bow. "Glad to meet you, Master Yoda." She was startled when the little wizened creature gave her a sly wink and an admiring once-over.

"Good taste in women you have, young Skywalker," Yoda said matter-of-factly to Luke.

"What?" said Luke. "No, she isn't--Halla is just a friend," he protested, amused. This was a side of Yoda he hadn't seen before, but years ago, an old woman named Mother Rell had warned him about it on Dathomir.

"About the Sith," said Luke, changing the subject. "Am I doing the right thing in going alone to create a truce with them?"

Yoda turned serious. "Many challenges have you faced, Luke. Often have you defeated the dark side. This time, your struggle is not for victory." Yoda leaned intently towards Luke. "Luke, the dark side and the light side are both part of the Force. Necessary are they. Both sides need expression in living beings. And find it they will. The dark side hungers for domination, but the Force will find a balance. Between the Sith and the Jedi, a balance there was. But, a balance of creation and destruction it is. Both the Jedi and the Sith were nearly destroyed. Then grew the power of the Emperor. Destroyed the balance, did he. And so, strong was your destiny to restore it. And recreate the Jedi you did. But now, a new balance must be found, with the Sith."

"I think I understand," said Luke. "But Master Yoda, can I trust the Sith? I know avoiding war is something to strive for, but what if this is all a lie, or a trap?"

"Decide you must for yourself, what the truth is," said Yoda calmly. "Already know you, that which you need--the Force is your ally. And so is the crystal. Its master are you...use it well, Luke. Help you it can!"

"Its master?" Luke protested. "I don't even understand it!"

"That matters not. Tested you, it has. Now, it is yours. It answers your need, in the dark time ahead. Need it you will, to succeed."

"Tested me?" Luke asked. "What do you mean?"

"In the Temple of Pomojema," said Yoda patiently.

"In the Temple..." Luke frowned, remembering. "Master Yoda, there are things I still don't understand about that day. The strangest thing about it was that I faced Vader in that Temple, and...I won. I beat him. Later, I interrupted my training and left you to confront him so confidently because I'd beaten him before. But when I faced him again on Cloud City, he seemed almost like a different person. He was too strong for me. He could have killed me, like he tried to do on Mimban, but he didn't. Instead, he told me he was my father, and asked me to join him. I've never been able to reconcile those two times we met..."

"The cave," Yoda prompted. "Remember your failure at the cave on Dagobah."

Luke turned his thoughts inward. Finally, his face filled with understanding. "In the cave..." he said softly, "I let my aggression take

over and I fought Vader...and killed him. But it wasn't real. It was a test. So the fight at the Temple of Pomojema wasn't real either? It was another test? The crystal's test?"

Yoda only nodded.

Luke looked at the crystal, pulsing in Halla's hands. "The crystal tested me. It created Vader out of my own mind to test my strength. That's why Vader was so different. He was just the way I imagined him at the time. Wanting revenge for the Death Star, arrogant, ready to kill me, but in the end, weaker than I was. So I beat him. I conquered my own dark side."

"No, Luke," Yoda corrected him. "That challenge came later. In the Temple, you mastered the crystal. Mastering yourself was the greater task."

"So," Luke said, "I'm to take the crystal with me, to face the Sith? Well, at least I'll have a way to defend myself, alone among my enemies."

"You will not be alone," said Yoda, smiling slightly. "Two people will you take with you. Confronted the new Dark Lords have they, in the past. Much can they tell you. You will need them to succeed as well. Find them you must."

"Who are they, Master Yoda?"

"Already do you know them, hmmm...Tank and Shally Boma are their names..."

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Luke looked glumly at the neatly kept little house on the orderly residential street, so typical of the peaceful planet Balfor. Seeing the evidence of Tank's domestic bliss merely reinforced his depressed mood. Suddenly, his own ascetic lifestyle on Yavin, living in a stone temple in the jungle without a wife, seemed empty and primitive. Tank and Shally had a good marriage and a happy life--why couldn't he? Luke opened the front gate and went reluctantly up the path to the house. His feet seemed to drag; the momentary joy he had found in contacting Yoda's spirit had left him as soon as the sprightly ghost had faded away. Luke had said his good-byes, and taken the crystal from a bewildered Halla, who was relieved to see it go. Hiding the gem inside Artoo Detoo's storage compartment, he had flown his X-wing to Balfor, thinking all the while that he couldn't have an unlikelier ally in this than Tank Boma.

Sure, they had grown up knowing each other on Tatooine, but they hadn't been friends. Tank's possessiveness of Biggs had led to a lot of friction between Tank and Luke. It was only made worse by their different backgrounds and value systems. Tank had grown up on his own as a street

thief, taking on Biggs as a reluctant, belated father figure, while Luke was strictly raised by Owen Lars as a hard-working moisture farmer. By a strange twist of fate, both Luke and Tank had flown in the Battle of Yavin. Tank's grief at Biggs' death had been evilly manipulated by a dark spirit, almost certainly Exar Kun, and Tank had blamed the loss on Luke. Accusing Luke of betraying Biggs to his death, Tank had kidnapped Luke and tried to take him to Darth Vader, a potential disaster that was narrowly avoided.

In the aftermath, Luke and Tank had come to understand one another enough, if not to become friends, then to cease being enemies. They had gone their separate ways to fight for the Rebellion, and Tank soon fell in love with his pilot partner, Shally Edrin. At her invitation, Luke had officiated at their wedding. He knew that both of them had gone on to accomplish brave missions for General Cracken's Intelligence team, including the discovery of an AT-AT factory, and the liberation of three Mon Calamari Star Cruisers from an Imperial blockade. They had even flown their Y-wing in the Battle of Endor. After the formation of the New Republic, they had continued to serve NRI, both rising to the rank of Commander while ferreting out the schemes of the remnants of the Empire. All that was very impressive, and Luke knew Tank and Shally must be highly competent, but he just couldn't imagine what use they would be against the Sith.

Luke pressed the signal key next to the door and waited. It slid open, revealing a tall, serious looking woman in her late thirties. Her long brown hair had an odd streak of white to one side, adding an unusual touch to her mature beauty. The woman's gray eyes widened in surprise, and her thin lips parted in a small gasp.

"Tank, honey?" she called. "You'll never in a million years guess who's here."

A short, thin man who looked a little over thirty came up behind her. He had large dark eyes below a thick mop of black hair, and a nose like a hawk's. His jaw dropped as he saw Luke. "You're right," he said. "I see it, and I still don't believe it!"

Tank's credulity was strained even further when he learned why Luke was there, and saw the message from the Sith Lords.

"You want us to do what ?!" Tank shouted, as Shally cringed. "I don't believe it! Luke, you've got to believe me when I say I never wanted to see those two again. That woman tortured me! She came this close to killing the both of us. I'd be crazy to go anywhere near her! And how did you find out you needed our help again? A little Jedi ghost told you? Shally, we're going to have to have our names taken out of the afterlife directory. That's the second mission from beyond we've gotten this week--"

"Calm down!" Shally said firmly, glaring at her husband. "Luke knows what he's talking about. Remember, this is the man who defeated Darth Vader and the Emperor, and who brought back the Jedi."

"Okay," said Tank. "Luke, I'm sorry. Seeing that image of Lumiya really did something to me. I just overreacted."

"Then I did come to the right place," said Luke. "ot;You have encountered both of the new Dark Lords before. You have to realize that you two may be the only ones who have. I need to know what you know about them. I know it's a lot to ask, but I really need you to come along with me on this mission."

"Luke, we've been on dangerous missions before," said Tank seriously, "but never anything like the time we ran into these Sith. The Empire, I can handle, but the dark side of the Force? I don't know how you manage. It's like the worst times in my life were because of the Sith. The Dark Lord of the Sith, Darth Vader, killed Biggs. And you told me it was a Sith spirit that took over my mind at Yavin. And during the siege of Calamari, these new Sith tortured us and tried to kill us."

"Don't forget, Tank," said Shally, "one of them saved our lives and let us go free."

"Maybe you'd better tell the story then," said Tank. "I'm a little too worked up over this."

Shally put a comforting hand on his shoulder and related their meeting with Flint and Lumiya. Eight months before the Battle of Endor, Shally and Tank had infiltrated an Imperial blockade of the Mon Calamari shipyards, in an attempt to sabotage the Imperial ships and let the newly constructed Rebel Star Cruisers escape. Their mission had seemed to fail when they were captured, but the worst was yet to come. Commanding the blockade were the mysterious Lord Flint and Lady Lumiya. They interrogated Tank and Shally with drugs and torture, and discovered information in Shally's R2 unit that exposed weaknesses in the Rebel shipyards' defenses. But the information had been planted for the Imperials to find. The shipyards were a trap, complete with decoy cruisers whose detonation destroyed the Imperial blockade. The real cruisers, constructed in an undersea shipyards, escaped into space, but Shally and Tank had to face the wrath of their captors. The deadly cyborg, Lumiya, had tracked and cornered them in a section of the crippled Star Destroyer.

"It was awful," Shally said quietly. "She used some kind of power on us, reducing us to helpless terror. We were at her mercy, and she had none. Just before she could kill us, Flint came and stopped her..."

"Flint," Lumiya called out uncertainly. "I have the Rebels that escaped. The ones that caused this to happen to us."

"No, Lumiya," said Flint. "We did it to ourselves. They simply gave us the means to defeat ourselves. I can't let you kill them. You have to let them go, and give up your hatred of the Rebellion. They're not the ones who destroyed your life. I did that. But I can save your life, if you let them go, and come with me now."

"Are you going to fight me to stop me from killing these two?" Lumiya demanded angrily.

"If you force me to, Lumiya," came his calm reply.

"So be it, Flint."

"The two of them fought like they could have killed each other, but suddenly Flint got the upper hand. He told us to get in the escape pod and go. That was the last we saw of them. I guess, seeing the message, that she decided to go with him. At the time, I remember I almost felt sorry for her, if you can believe it. Tank told me what made her the way she was, and I found I understood. I guess Slaughter, the person I used to be, and Lumiya had something in common. She and I both almost died in Starfighters, and we both wanted to use what was left of our lives for revenge. Fortunately, I had Tank to help me find something better."

"Shally, I can remember who she used to be, too," said Luke. "She served at Kulthis base as a pilot when you and Tank were there. When I was there with Wedge and Rogue Squadron, I spent some time with her. Her name was Shira Brie, wasn't it?" Shally nodded. "So how did she get to be this Lady Lumiya?"

"She told me, Luke," Tank spoke up. "And this is something you really ought to know before you go on this mission-" Shally gave him a kick under the table. "-before we go on this mission, all right. Don't kick me," he sulked. "She told that you destroyed her life, Luke. She said you shot down her TIE fighter during the evacuation of Kulthis Base. The Empire saved her body and turned her into a cyborg, but she hated herself from then on. She used to be an undercover agent for Imperial Intelligence, and she blamed you for taking it all from her. I'd watch out for her, Luke. She really wants you dead. Maybe that's why they invited you there in the first place."

Luke sat silently, digesting this troubling news. The story of Lumiya reminded him of his experience with Mara Jade, and he certainly didn't want to go through that again. "I had no idea," Luke said softly. "I remember that battle. We were in stolen TIE fighters, attacking Vader's strike fleet. We were using a special frequency to tell our own pilots from the Imperial ones, but they caught on to that and jammed us. Most of our pilots decided to jump for hyperspace at that point, and there was a moment..." Luke paused, trying to remember. "There was a moment when a TIE fighter was coming for me, and the only way I could decide whether to fire on it or not, was to use the Force. I wasn't a Jedi yet, but I was able to sense the other pilot's mind--an Imperial, an enemy. I fired, and the other ship spun away, shattered. It must have been Shira. If she was really a spy, then that explains it...And now she wants revenge..."

"Don't be too hasty in judging her, Luke," said Shally. "Remember, it's not just Lumiya waiting for you. Flint is with her, and he's had twelve years to moderate her. I think, as Dark Lords go, he can be

trusted to do the right thing. He wants this truce, not your death starting a war with the New Republic. Besides, twelve years is a long time. Maybe her hatred has faded by now."

"You see, that's what I need you there for," said Luke, taking Shally's hand. "I need you both to evaluate Flint and Lumiya. Help me decide if they can be trusted to keep the truce." Luke put a hand on Tank's shoulder as well. "And I need you to watch my back." Luke looked steadily at each of them in turn. "Master Yoda said I would need you. I trust him, and I hope you'll both trust me."

"I'm with you, Luke," said Shally, smiling at the Jedi Master. She looked at her husband.

Tank sighed, and nodded. "Biggs would never forgive me if I didn't watch your back. But I have to say, I've got a bad feeling about this..."

\* \* \*

An X-wing and a Y-wing drifted in space, alone, at the coordinates specified by the Sith message. Luke, Tank, and Shally had been waiting for about four hours for someone to meet them. There was little to do except talk, and Luke was glad to do so in order to take his mind off their mission and his doubts about it. Not that his doubts weren't valid. There they were, one Jedi, depressed, and two civilians, both reluctant to face the Sith they feared, sitting in two snub fighters in deep space with no idea what was coming. It just didn't help to dwell on it. However, when the conversation somehow turned to Luke's relationships, he began to wish for the wait to end quickly. But Tank had been so curious, and Shally so supportive, that piece by piece, the story had come out.

"Let me get this straight," said Tank over the comm. "You actually fell in love with a disembodied spirit, living in a computer. But she was able to enter the body of a student of yours who wanted to die, so she could be with you. Then you found out her Jedi abilities were completely blocked. And there was no way to fix it, but she couldn't live with that. Then she realized she could use the Force, but only the dark side. She felt she just couldn't be close to you, so she left you with only a good-bye note, even though you told her you loved her the way she was...Damn it, Luke, that really burns! I don't blame you for being upset. I'd be biting blaster bolts if it was me. I mean, what does she want? How many Jedi Masters will she find out there? Who does she think she is, dumping the hero of the Rebellion?"

"Luke," Shally stepped in hastily, "From what you've told me, Callista must truly love you. Through the Force, you were as close as two people could ever be. She knew how wonderful you are, and she knew you deserved the best. She must have felt she couldn't give you the best part of herself until she overcame her problems. She said she'd come back to you, and I believe she will. If I were her, I'd want to come back as soon as I could. Have faith, Luke..."



Luke sighed. He was beginning to feel somewhat better, thanks to the distinctively masculine and feminine support of his companions. He was grateful to have them with him...until Tank broke the spell.

"Wouldn't it be horrible," Tank asked, "if we found Callista out there with the Sith?"

An uncomfortable silence settled over them all.

The X-wing's long range sensors picked up an approaching vessel. Artoo emitted an excited warning and brought up the data on Luke's onboard computer. It was an old Imperial Star Galleon, a large, boxy ship well adapted for both cargo hauling and battle. The new arrival came up slowly alongside the two fighters. Abruptly, Luke's and Shally's cockpit comm units boomed with a deep voice.

"Master Skywalker. This is Savuud Thimram of the Sith. You may land your ships in our Star Galleon. Then we will jump to hyperspace and proceed to Tharn. I will await your company in my quarters. We have much to discuss..." the voice concluded with a trace of dark humor, "former Supreme Commander Skywalker."

Luke shuddered at the blunt reminder of his service to the Emperor. So, the Sith had at least one of the Emperor's adepts among them. He set his jaw grimly. There was no turning back now. For good or ill, the Sith had arrived.

\* \* \*

"Tell me, Savuud Thimram," said Luke, "why you're here with the Sith now." The Jedi Master leaned back in his chair, regarding the powerful adept across the table.

The adept's long eyes narrowed in hostility above his pug nose and stiff, tiny mouth. Thimram also leaned back and placed a leathery four fingered hand on his pointed chin. "You have some curiosity as to my poor fate, I take it? Well then. Perhaps we can exchange information of interest to each of us."

Luke nodded, his expression neutral. "What is it you want to know?"

"It's been a long time since the days on Byss when we were both in service to the Emperor," said Thimram. "I had the Master's trust, then, no small thing to accomplish. He was a great teacher, wasn't he, Master Skywalker? He taught you much about the dark side, didn't he? Do you share these things with your own students?"

Luke didn't answer.

"No? What a waste. Perhaps some of them would find them...interesting." Thimram leaned forward, clasping his hands together, his brown triangular face shadowed in the dimly lit cabin. "I understand you were there when he died at the hands of your small group of Jedi. I want to know how he died."

"There's not much to tell," said Luke, his discomfort growing. "He came for my sister's child, wanting to live in his body. He would have been defenseless as an infant, I thought, but he was insane, suffering from clone madness, and he was dying. Han and Leia were desperate to stop him in any case. Your Master was shot with a blaster...his energy form was released from his last clone, and a dying Jedi took it into himself. That Jedi died in the light, and took your Master with him, forever."

"An ignominious end, for the Master and for Byss," said Thimram, looking away. "I was off planet when it was destroyed by the Master's own weapon. When I returned...there was nothing to return to. We lost a great deal, that day. Most of the Emperor's adepts, his Sovereign Protectors and Sentinels, the Citadel, countless Imperial forces, many of the Emperor's books, his laboratories and creatures, even his Grand Vizier. And, I should add, the entire resident population of the planet, innocents all. The Rebels took a terrible toll in lives for the light side, did they not?" Thimram watched, pleased, as Luke's discomfort showed. "The survivors, such as myself, were beaten and close to hopeless. Some of us held out hope for Palpatine's miraculous return, but I suspected it was not to be. Once, he needed physical proximity to his clones to transfer to them, but as his power grew, he was able to enter them from across the galaxy. If he was going to return, he would have done it quickly. But now I know why he could not, and that he never will. Now, I can leave the past behind."

"How did you become part of the Sith?" Luke asked again.

"Lord Flint and Lady Lumiya came to us," replied Thimram, "ready to pick up the shattered pieces of the Dark Empire and build them into the new order of the Sith. They were to be the Dark Lords, of course, but by then, most of us didn't care about who had the most power. We only wanted shelter from the storm. And Flint and Lumiya were strong. They were Vader's students, heirs to the Sith way. We joined them willingly. But we were still few in number, and without a home. That was when I remembered Thaarn."

"That's where we're going now?" asked Luke, his pulse quickening. "The world of the Sith?"

"The homeworld of the Thaarnian race," said Thimram, "but being part of the Sith suits them. They've always been prone to strong aggression, quick anger, and deep fear. They have a long history of wars, mistrust, and struggling for survival. At some point, Force sensitivity manifested in them, but their racial tendencies led them to tap into the dark side exclusively. They believed that talismans and magic books were needed to release their powers. Very primitive, don't you think? But the Magian tyrants, the adepts among them, organized and civilized the people. Their harsh laws kept whole populations in line. They still had

wars, but they resolved them through contests between the Magians themselves."

"What kind of contests?" asked Luke.

"Force battles, one on one, often to the death," replied Thimram, smiling darkly. "The winner extended his or her rule over the loser's territory, and the loser was killed or exiled from Thaarn."

Luke had the distinct impression that the adept wanted to engage him in just such a contest.

"It was because of one such exiled Magian," Thimram continued, "that the Emperor discovered the Thaarnian homeworld. His name was Urn Zelotes."

"I remember that name," said Luke, "from when I was...on Byss. People said it in fear, as if he had done something horrible."

Thimram grimaced. "Four years before your arrival, Zelotes and ten other adepts nearly succeeded in murdering the Master. Their punishment was...memorable. Because of his exile, Zelotes was consumed by a need to restore his power. He sought out the Master's teaching in hopes of going back to Thaarn and retaking his territory from Jarra Latinek, the Magian who beat him. But he never returned to challenge her. Once he saw how powerful he could be in the Dark Empire to come, he abandoned such petty plans. It was the failure of that dream to become reality that pushed him over the edge. So, Zelotes became infamous back on Thaarn, when his assassination attempt was cited as the reason for a ban on any subsequent Thaarnian emigration. Any of their race was to be killed on sight within Imperial space. Their whole world was exiled from the Empire.

"But after the fall of Byss, I realized that Thaarnian beliefs about the Force could be easily blended with the Sith way. The Sith, too, used artifacts like swords and medallions, books and scrolls, to access and amplify their power. Flint and Lumiya agreed with me, and I gave them the location of Thaarn. They contacted the Thaarnians with the news that the Emperor was dead, and offered the remaining Magians partnership in creating the new Sith Order. It would be a new era of Sith knowledge, created out of Darth Vader's heritage, the lore of Byss, and Thaarnian magic alike."

"With Lumiya and Flint in charge of it all. Not a bad arrangement for them," Luke observed.

"They created the new Sith," said Thimram firmly. "The right to rule is theirs."

"No wonder the Emperor liked having you around," said Luke.

"Just so," replied Thimram. A call came over the cabin's comlink, the thin raspy voice of a Thaarnian announcing their arrival in the Sith System. "Come to the bridge and join your companions as we approach Thaarn," Thimram said, standing.

"One thing, before we go," said Luke, still sitting. "I'm wondering why one of the Emperor's most powerful adepts is sitting here talking with me rather than taking his chance at revenge for the Emperor's death?"

Thimram's eyes were cold as he looked steadily down at Luke. "Lord Flint wants this truce to happen. Don't delude yourself concerning the depth of my goodwill. Another time, another place, and we would see, you and I...but for now..."

Luke's eyes were equally hard as he met Savuud Thimram's stare and slowly nodded.

The creepy Thaarnians running the ship around them were making Tank and Shally very nervous. To the humans, the lizard skinned aliens looked cold and cruel. They generally had wedge shaped faces with wide, bald, bony heads tapering to grim pointed chins below lipless mouths. Their eyes were the most chilling thing about them. These were heavy lidded and set within deep folds of flesh, a pair of milky orbs that seemed to perpetually squint in an evil glare. Each Thaarnian wore distinctive flowing robes in a variety of colors and styles, from which their grayish arms emerged. They worked the Star Galleon's controls with long claw like fingers, saying few words not necessary to pilot the ship. Tank and Shally were deeply relieved when Luke came to the bridge, safe and sound after his encounter with Thimram. Tank had been sure he wouldn't see Luke alive again. He forced aside his fears as he saw the Jedi Master enter, and tried to revise his beliefs about the Sith. So far, they hadn't been hurt. Unless, of course, a suitably sadistic death was prepared for them on the Sith homeworld. Tank held close to Shally and smiled a little to show Luke that they were all right. Behind Luke, Savuud Thimram entered and began checking the navicomputer. The adept was apparently satisfied, and he faced the three humans.

"Esteemed guests," he said in his deep hollow voice, "Welcome to the Sith system." The main viewport behind him now displayed the vast curve of a planet. Also visible was a distant orange star. "It's not a very pleasant world, compared to what you're used to," commented Thimram as the ship descended. "Most of the surface is an arid wasteland, barren, cracked, uninhabitable. Those bodies of water you can see are concentrated salt seas. The Thaarnians live in the fertile valleys of the seven major mountain ranges. It's not a lot of habitable land and resources, so as you might guess, there have been a lot of wars to control it over the centuries. In the beginning, it was valley against valley, but the Magians were able to conquer larger territories...until the deserts stopped them from ruling over more than one mountain range. Below us now is the mountain State of the Magian Orl Lettow. You'll met all the Magian rulers once we dock at Sky City. There the Sith rule the planet from on high, above all the former mountain States, part of no single territory. That's important to the Thaarnian Sith. They're very competitive to say the least."

Tank carefully observed the Thaarnians as Thimram talked on. They seemed to ignore the adept standing in their midst discussing them. From their subtly subservient body language, Tank decided that they were probably afraid of the adept, and didn't dare to comment or interrupt him. As a race, they certainly seemed to know their place. Were they just tools of the Sith, to be used for whatever Flint and Lumiya were plotting? The thought of this grim race as an army in the hands of someone with the ambitions of an Exar Kun disturbed Tank a great deal.

The appearance of the majestic Sky City in the viewport did little to calm him. The orbiting atmospheric Sith sanctum was enormous, and was shaped like a trapezoidal solid. It looked too massive to be up in the air at all; if there were any propulsion systems, they were cunningly hidden, giving the impression that the structure had been lifted up by magic and set in the sky to rule those below. The top of Sky City was equipped as a modern spaceport. Each sloping side of the building, however, was designed like a great temple, with row upon row of heavy columns parading past recessed corridors open to the air.

Tank imagined that the interior was crowded with torture chambers and prison cells. As the Star Galleon moved in to dock, he wondered if he'd ever see the outside of the Sith stronghold again. His best guess was that truce or no truce, Lumiya wouldn't let him and his wife out of her hands a second time. But he was doing this for Luke, and he had to trust Luke to make things come out all right. Tank would have to do his best to evaluate the Sith for the Jedi Master who trusted him, even if every instinct cried out to start shooting his way out of this place. He felt he owed it to Luke, for all the things Luke had done to help the New Republic come to be. If a hero like that needed help, you had to give it to him. Besides, somewhere, Biggs was watching, and if Luke went in where Tank feared to tread, the old King of Beggar's Canyon would never let him live it down.

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Lumiya watched as Luke Skywalker entered the negotiating chamber, keeping her expression calm, but seething inside. There he was, after all those years. The one who had taken her old life and left her with a painful existence as a cyborg, half a woman and half a cold, shining droid form. She felt Flint's eyes on her, but she showed no sign of her turmoil. She had hidden it from him for long years, and now was not the time to betray herself, not when her revenge was so close. At one time, she had almost believed Flint that her need for vengeance would naturally fade over time, but it hadn't happened. Every day, she suffered a constant stress, an eternal, low pain from the flawed interface between her cyborg systems and what remained of her flesh. When it inevitably became too much for her, and she had to slump in pain alone in her quarters, her thoughts were inexorably drawn to the one she held responsible. Luke Skywalker. Even the name filled her with hatred. It had been a challenge to hide her feelings from Flint as the truce drew near. She did love the gruff, handsome Dark Lord, and it was hard to fool him

like that. It made her feel terrible to destroy the plans he had worked so hard on, but if the truce depended on Skywalker living, the truce would have to go.

The need to kill the Jedi Master was like a living thing inside her. At times, she worried that that part of her might not be entirely sane when it whispered that if she ever wanted her pain to go away, she had to return it to the one who gave it to her. She knew that sounded mad, but after all this time, she desperately wanted it to be true. After Luke was dead, at least some of the pain would surely go away; whether the mental or the physical, she didn't care.

Lumiya wondered if Flint would still love her after she did what she had to. She hoped he would. Over the years, as they worked together to rebuild the Sith, she had come to value his companionship greatly. In time, she had even overcome her physical self-loathing. Flint's patient support had carried her past her sorrow that no physical relationship was possible between them, and shown her that a deeper bond was possible through the Force. Even now, Flint must be probing along that bond, concerned for what I might do, she thought. Thankfully, Vader taught me the same mind-screening techniques he used on the Emperor. Let him wonder. Let him suspect. I'm sorry, Flint, but there's nothing you can do. The scales must be balanced. Pain for pain, a life for a life...

Luke walked solemnly down the wide steps to the large stone table, trying to take in all the details he could before the talks began. The decor of the great hall revealed much about the new Sith order. Like the rest of Sky City, it was primitive and warlike in style, with an emphasis on majesty. Thick columns lined the walls, and ornate weapons hung between them. Tapestries depicting the violent history of Thaarn were prominently hung. Clearly, the Thaarnian heritage was allowed to take center stage instead of the old Sith history. Flint and Lumiya evidently did want to start over with a fusion of the old and the new, and because this was the Thaarnian homeworld, it was only fair to honor their culture in this fashion. Seated at the table were the living embodiments of that culture, the ruling Thaarnian Magians. With their colorful, many layered robes and tall staves topped with glass globes, the stony faced leaders looked like they belonged in the fantastic setting. Luke recalled their alien names as told to him by Savuud Thimram: Ahz Granicus, Tuster Monduth, Jarra Latinek, Serl Chathos, Orl Lettow, Mov Ondos, and Jeth Sandage. He suppressed a shiver as their sunken eyes turned slowly to study him with reptilian coldness.

The legacy of Palpatine was not found in the decor, but in the persons sitting with the Magians at the giant table. Luke saw Savuud Thimram next to his old rival, Gwellib, an alien adept with a porcine nose set in a withered face below milky, pupil-less eyes. He also recognized Jappi Qaff, a dwarf darksider with a tall cylindrical hat, and Zenick Fesi, a tall, skeletal being with an impossibly long face crowned by a black skullcap. There were a few others he recalled from Byss, like Wim Joct, Deg Zorze, and perhaps a dozen more of the Emperor's former students in the dark side. Thimram had been correct. It was a pitiful

remnant, compared to what had flourished on Byss. But they're still dangerous, Luke reminded himself. Especially against just one of me.

At the head of the table stood the new Sith rulers, Flint and Lumiya, the disciples of Darth Vader and the heirs to the secrets of Exar Kun and all the other Dark Lords of the past. Flint was wearing his black plate armor and blue cape, with his mirrored helm on the table in front of him. A long sword was belted to one side of his belt, a lightsaber to the other. Luke met the man's somber blue eyes and found himself surprisingly reassured by the big warrior's rough-hewn, open visage. His strong first impression was that Flint was unusual. There was something almost noble about him. Suddenly, Luke's expectations realigned themselves. Perhaps there was hope for this meeting, after all.

Then Luke shifted his gaze to Lumiya, and he felt his hopes sink. She met his stare with a look of piercing hate. Luke almost stumbled when he saw it. So, he decided, it's to be vengeance after all, and Flint doesn't know it. Luke forced himself to look steadily back at Lumiya, taking the opportunity to study her. She wore no mask, and her long red-brown hair fell free around her beautiful but arrogant face. The left side of her face was marred by a network of deep scars, running from her high forehead to her proudly defiant, jutting chin. Lumiya's cyborg body was composed of sleekly shaped sections of gleaming durasteel, cunningly fitted to blend into a smooth yet stark representation of the female form. The area of her stomach and thighs displayed complex circuits and controls, destroying the illusion that she might simply be wearing armor. From her modular belt hung a device Luke didn't recognize, a long cylinder, larger than his lightsaber, from which emerged a number of coiled metallic strands.

Luke looked into her eyes, and sent out a mental message through the Force. Lumiya, he said silently, I don't want to fight you. I know you blame me for what happened to you, but I never did it on purpose. I didn't know it was you in that fighter. I couldn't have known what would happen to you later. Whatever happens here between us, I wanted you to know that.

There was no reply.

Flint watched Luke Skywalker and his companions file in, followed by their two R2 units, one green, one blue. He was impressed by how calm Luke seemed, walking steadily in his long brown Jedi robe, surrounded by the Sith. Flint wondered if he could be so calm if he was walking alone into a Jedi stronghold. Flint met Luke's eyes and held them for a moment of understanding, perceiving that the Jedi Master was committed to this mission. Flint breathed a sigh of relief. If Luke was going to cooperate, then all he had worked for was worth it. All the favors and persuasion to convince the survivors of Byss, all the promises made to the Thaarnians, and all the delicate work of winning over Lumiya. With this Jedi Master's help, a new and better future could be created for both of the orders to survive in.

Flint turned his gaze to Luke's companions. He was startled to find that he knew them. These were the very same Rebels that he had stopped Lumiya from killing twelve years ago, on the Star Destroyer Guardian. He couldn't recall their names, but he was certain of who they were. Yet, their presence puzzled Flint. He had expected Luke to bring powerful Jedi with him, not two normal humans. It was good for Flint that Luke had not brought Jedi, for no doubt his fellow Sith would feel less threatened and more cooperative. But why this particular choice? Flint wondered if it might be for some kind of subtle psychological advantage. These humans had handed Flint and Lumiya a humiliating defeat back then. Perhaps they were here to remind the Dark Lords of their own fallibility.

Luke and his friends sat down at the table, with their droids close by, and Flint decided it was time to begin. He rested one gauntleted hand on the hilt of his ancient Sith sword and raised the other high in the air. All eyes turned to him. "My fellow Sith," said Flint, "I ask you to welcome Master Skywalker to our assembly. He comes at my request to negotiate a truce between the Jedi and the Sith."

Luke stood up from his chair. "Thank you. These are my companions," he said. "Representing the New Republic, Commanders Tank and Shally Boma, from the planet Balfor. They're here to evaluate the Sith to determine if the New Republic needs to be concerned about you. Even though I am a Jedi Master, I cannot speak for my government. These Commanders are authorized to create a report for the Chief of State, Leia Organa, on whether the Sith are a military threat."

Flint saw the dark-haired man, Tank, give Luke a perplexed look, then Luke continued. "I am here to speak for the Jedi. I'm ready to hear your terms of peace."

Flint glanced at Lumiya. She seemed withdrawn, self-absorbed. That was good. At least she wasn't trying to kill the Jedi or his companions. When they had come to sit down, Flint had caught a flash of hate from Lumiya like a sliver of ice in his gut. He had almost expected her to leap over the table and tear into the Rebels who had shamed her and move on to finish off Luke as well. Flint resolved to watch her carefully throughout this whole thing. He loved her, but he knew he'd be lying to himself if he said he fully trusted her.

Facing the Jedi Master, Flint began his rehearsed speech. "The terms I propose are simple, and will not require long and detailed negotiations, because the issue at stake is simple. Survival. The great Sith War of four thousand years ago has had grievous effects on the Sith. Exar Kun's few followers who survived the Jedi retribution managed to form a small monastic order on the planet Horuz. There they lived up until the last century, no longer a threat to the Jedi, preserving their lore in secret, so that an invaluable body of knowledge of the Force would not be lost forever. Emperor Palpatine brought all that to an end. He raised up Darth Vader as the Dark Lord of the Sith, and convinced them that their lost glory had returned. Then he sacrificed the Sith to the last man, in order to weaken the Jedi, his enemy. He made the last Dark Lord his servant, and Vader lived with that shame for years. Finally, the spirit of Exar Kun contacted him and convinced him to train a new



generation of the Sith. Lumiya and I were his students. We kept the legacy of the Sith alive. But it is not a legacy we blindly follow. We do not embrace the rapacious nature of Exar Kun, or the Imperial Warlord's power of Darth Vader. We do not plot the destruction of the Jedi or the New Republic. Instead, we wish to coexist, independent, but at peace. It was my initiative to create a truce. I knew that if the Jedi and the Sith were to encounter each other unexpectedly, there could be misunderstandings, leading to destructive conflict, and our mutual downfall. It would be like the Emperor's purge all over again. I decided to make us known to you before that could happen, and appeal to the Jedi code. The Jedi have always claimed to favor peace over conflict. I propose a simple mutual non-aggression pact. The Sith will remain localized to this system, and the Jedi will not interfere with the development of our order. What do you say to this, Master Skywalker?"

Luke seemed to pause in thought, then gave a steely reply. "So the Sith pledge to forgo aggression. The Jedi have no need to pledge that. Violence on our part is always defensive. We need no formal agreement to express our commitment to peace. On the other hand, the dark side has a poor record for trustworthiness. What assurances are there that the Sith will keep their word?"

"Always defensive?" said Lumiya sharply. "What hypocrisy is this? The Jedi have been infamously destructive of followers of the dark side. Need I remind the great, pacifist Jedi Master about the Emperor? And the last Dark Lord of the Sith, his own father? And the Darkside Warriors of Byss? And Master C'Baath? And the entire planet of Byss itself? Do you call that non-aggression? There is a great deal of death on your hands, and on those of your followers. And you ask for assurances of our good behavior. It is you who should assure us of your changed ways, Master Skywalker!"

Flint stepped in to calm things down. "Very well," he said loudly. "It is obvious that neither the Sith nor the Jedi can prove that they will honor the truce in the future. But think about this. The reason I called for the truce still exists. We still hold each other's destruction in our hands. If we only follow common sense, neither of us will break our agreement."

"Do the Magians favor this truce?" Luke asked abruptly.

In response, one of the Thaarnians stood. He was gaunt and robed in the color of dried blood. His bald head had a cloth covering, from which two long strips hung past his perpetual frown. His eyes glared out from beneath his shadowing brow, giving the unmistakable impression of power, ready to lash out at any time. "I am Orl Lettow," he rasped, just loud enough for Luke to hear. "The people of Thaarn joined with the Sith for their own betterment, not to attract destruction from the fleets and the Force users of the outer Galaxy. We favor this agreement if it will allow our world to go on as it has, unmolested."

Luke gave a small bow to Lettow, and the Thaarnian sat back down. Then the Jedi Master faced the Dark Lords. "I need to have a few minutes alone with my companions, before I give you my answer," Luke said.

"Of course," replied Flint. "Take all the time you need."

"What was that about Leia Organa and our report?" asked Tank once they were alone.

"I thought if I made you official," said Luke, "they'd be less likely to harm you."

"I can tell this situation has really got you rattled," said Shally, "but you're holding up really well."

"Thanks," said Luke. "Now what are your impressions about Flint and Lumiya?"

"Flint is just like I remember him," she said. "Despite what side he's on, I think you can trust him to keep his word."

"I agree," said Luke.

"But Lumiya's a different story," Shally continued. "I had hopes that she'd have changed, but I have to say, when I saw the way she looked at you, I knew she'd only gotten worse. She doesn't seem to care about Tank and me any more, but I think she wants to kill you."

"I know, Shally. And with the two Dark Lords divided against each other, no agreement we make will be worth anything. I need time to think about this, time to try to work things out..."

"Okay, Luke," said Tank. "I have an excuse we can offer to buy some time. It's something that's been genuinely bothering me, anyway. The Dark Lords and the Emperor's old cronies, they're kind of a known quantity. We know what we can expect from them. The real unknown here is the Thaarnians. We don't know much about them, and they're half of the Sith. I've been wondering where they really stand in this order. Are their people really being helped by the Sith? Or are they just tools? Maybe dangerous ones that can be used against us..."

"I see your point, Tank," said Luke. "What can we do?"

"Well, the only way to find out the answers is to go down to the surface and look around. That should give you the time you need, too."

"I knew there was a good reason I brought you along," Luke smiled.

Back in the great hall, Luke addressed Flint and Lumiya once more. "Dark Lords of the Sith," he began, "as it stands right now, I'm in favor of the truce. But," he said, raising one hand, "before I make my final decision, I need to satisfy myself about something. You've pledged that aggressive Sith rule wouldn't be extended to other parts of the Galaxy, but I need to see that Sith rule isn't aggressively destroying this system. I need to see that the Thaarnians really benefit from this

arrangement. Unless I know that, I cannot, in good conscience, create a treaty with potential oppressors." Luke turned to Orl Lettow. "I request that I be given a tour of your state, Lord Lettow, so I can see your people where they live, and put my concerns to rest."

Luke saw Lumiya begin to form an angry retort, then inexplicably refrain from commenting. She did continue to glare at him.

"Is this acceptable, Lord Lettow?" asked Flint.

"I will tolerate it," said the Thaarnian dismissively.

"Then we will make arrangements for a tour," said the Dark Lord.

"Thank you, Lord Flint," said Luke, bowing.

Lumiya watched Luke from her chair, staring at him obsessively. She was memorizing his face and imagining how it would look bloodied in death, lacerated by her light whip. The Jedi Master's plan to go down to Thaarn served her well. She knew a place there where she could trap Luke away from anyone else. Then he would be hers, and hers alone. Right up to the end. Smiling coldly, she began to construct her plan...

\* \* \*

The next morning, Luke gathered early with his companions on the landing platform of Sky City. The morning sun bathed the clouds in delicate orange as the three humans conferred alone, before the arrival of their guides.

"Tank, Shally, I'll need you to help me watch Lumiya while we're down there," Luke said. "I think she'll try something today. If that happens, I'm going to need Artoo Detoo by my side. I have something hidden inside him that Yoda told me I'd need to see this through."

The little blue droid rolled over and softly bumped his Master on the leg.

"No, not yet, Artoo, but thanks," Luke said, patting Artoo's dome.

"We'll do our best, Luke," said Tank, "you know that." Both he and Shally put a hand on Luke's shoulders.

Artoo Beesix chirped and rolled over to the little group as well. Shally smiled down at her droid. "Of course we'll need you, too," she reassured him.

"Here come our hosts," said Tank. Walking towards them were Lord Flint and Lady Lumiya, followed by the dignified Magian, Orl Lettow. Flint's deep blue cape and Lettow's rust robes billowed softly in the

morning wind. The Sith leaders greeted their guests formally. Tank watched Lumiya carefully, but the cyborg seemed calm. If she was planning anything, it didn't show.

They all boarded a shuttle, and lifted off from Sky City. Soon, they were descending towards the high mountain peaks of the State of Lettow. They flew over sparkling mountain lakes and shadowy valleys. The closely populated lowlands seemed clogged with the evidence of civilization. The lower mountain slopes appeared to be used for terrace farming, but the highest areas remained a cold wilderness. High on the slopes of the tallest mountain was a complex of impressively large buildings. As they passed over what looked like a palace, Orl Lettow informed them that this was his former seat of government before the Sith came. It was fitting to the Thaarnians to have their rulers literally above them. Now, however, it was a mere household, as Lettow ruled from Sky City as part of the Sith.

The shuttle dropped smoothly down into a dimly lit valley that contained an apparently typical Thaarnian community. They disembarked into the steamy air and were immediately assaulted by the sounds and movement of a bustling crowd streaming around the simple landing area. Everywhere they looked, the streets were thronged. Thaarnians hurried in all directions, their long robes turning the scene into a riot of color. One odd thing Tank noticed was that, unlike in cities like Mos Eisley, there was no jostling or colliding. Every Thaarnian seemed to keep his distance from every other, despite the crowded conditions. That would, he reflected, make it hard to be a street thief around here. The buildings Tank saw were primitive, made mostly of wood and stone, with an occasional metal structure. Transportation seemed to be strictly on foot, so the group stepped out into the flow of pedestrians. Tank wasn't surprised that Lord Lettow was given an extra wide berth by the common people as he strolled along carrying a tall staff with a smoky glass ball on top. Magians were evidently well respected, or at least feared, by the populace. Even so, Tank's instincts were on edge. He sensed an undercurrent of contained hostility in the seeming order of the teeming aliens. It was not long before he was proven correct.

As they walked, Tank was suddenly distracted by the beginning of a conflict on the other side of the square they were in. He grabbed Luke and pointed as the crowd instinctively recoiled from the center of the disturbance. One running Thaarnian had slammed into another, seemingly by accident, sending them both into a humiliating crash as they fell into a fruit stand, collapsing it. One of the aliens clambered out of the wreckage, wiping at the smeared fruit on his clothes. As far as Tank could tell, he was loudly proclaiming that it was a mistake, but the second alien wasn't listening. He struggled to his feet with an unreasoning anger contorting his face. He lunged at the clumsy offender, who managed to duck away. Surprisingly, the first Thaarnian didn't fight back; facing his attacker with his arms at his sides, he backed slowly away. But the second Thaarnian had taken up a heavy piece of wood from the fruit stand, and was using it as a club. It whistled through the air, barely missing the head of the first alien, who ducked and fell to the ground. As the enraged Thaarnian moved in to smash his victim, he was suddenly stopped in his tracks. His arms were lifted up and pinned to the

air as the club flew from his wrenched open fingers. A wild fear filled his eyes as he struggled, hanging on nothing, while his victim scrambled away. Four yellow-uniformed Thaarnians ran up to him and secured his arms behind him. The desperate alien fought crazily against them, twisting and kicking in an attempt to get free.

Then Tank saw Orl Lettow step forward, raising his hands toward the violent captive. The prisoner seemed to go slack suddenly, hanging loosely in his captors' arms. Without further disturbance, the four Thaarnians in yellow held up their left hands to Orl Lettow in a kind of salute, and hustled the criminal from the square.

Luke was staring at the Magian in angry surprise. "You stole his life energy, didn't you? I felt it. It was what the Emperor's adepts used to do on Byss!" he accused.

Flint quickly faced Luke and hastened to explain. "Don't judge too quickly, Master Skywalker. We haven't recreated the Emperor's world here. Yes, the adepts of Byss taught the Magians how to take life energy from others, but they only use it to calm the aggression of those who cannot follow the law. It serves a purpose here, not like on Byss, where they leeches the life from the population just to feed their own dark side power and prolong their own lives."

Luke was silent for a moment, then he nodded, and reluctantly faced Orl Lettow. The Magian was glaring at him, irritated at his outburst. "My apologies, Lord Lettow. I'm the alien here, and I don't understand your ways yet. It won't happen again."

"Very well," said Lettow after a long moment of discomfort.

"I imagine it must be difficult to keep order, with such a concentrated population," Luke said, trying to change the subject. "Savuud Thimram told me earlier that you have a history full of wars, but you seem to have overcome that. Despite what we just saw, it seems to be under control here..."

Lettow's face showed a flicker of pride. "You were told the truth. Our history has been a bloody one. But even before the Sith arrived, we had instituted rule by the Magians, and overcome many of our more unfortunate traits. Without the order brought by rule through the Force, my people would still be uncivilized and brutal, engaged in war or murder. But now you have seen our Force-sensitive police, as well as the effectiveness of our law."

"What are your laws like, Lord Lettow?" asked Luke.

"You can see them written in many places. Here, over on this stone pillar, for example. Constant reminders of the law help to keep the people in line."

The group clustered around a tall obelisk with lines of writing chiseled into the polished surface. "Here are the basic commandments of our society," said Lettow, translating the alien script for the Jedi

Master. "These things shall be punished by death: committing murder, intentionally committing or inciting violence outside the arenas, committing theft or destruction of property leading to violence, the possession or use of any weapons outside the arenas-"

"Pardon me, Lord Lettow, but these laws seem rather harsh to me," interrupted Tank.

"You, too, have the perspective of an alien, human," said Lettow. "The common people must fear the law more than they fear one another, for there to be any order here. If this were not so, the incident you just witnessed would have resulted in two executions, instead of just one."

"Lord Lettow," said Luke, "I see you have a functional system here...but how has the coming of the Sith improved things?"

"I can answer that, Skywalker," Lumiya spoke up, "since you're so concerned about the welfare of the Thaarnians. Sith rule is better than rule by individual Magians because when the Magians used to kill each other over who ruled which States, the loser's people were usually made into slaves. Now that the Magians are part of one order as equals, they don't have to try to do away with one another to keep their power. Lord Lettow here killed seven rival Force users to win his State. Now, instead of such waste, all those who show Force sensitivity are trained in an academy. The most powerful ones can become part of the Sith. The rest are used throughout society in useful roles like the police. I mean no offense, Lord Lettow," said Lumiya with a hint of condescension, "but your race still had a long way to go when we got here. There was still a lot of uncontrolled aggression and deadly violence, even with your great laws."

Lettow gazed with subtle menace at the Dark Lord. "Let us move on to an important aspect of our society," he said, giving Lumiya one last hard look before turning away. "The arenas."

As they walked, Lettow explained that when wars were eliminated, the soldiers and their combative natures were channeled into violent games and team sports. These took place in enclosed arenas, where the fighters could duel to the death singly or in groups, for the benefit of a large audience. These contests soon became an important part of the culture, focusing and venting the aggression that would otherwise savage the cities. The ultimate expression of these contests was the maze combat between two opposing Magians. To determine who would be the victor, and who would be killed or exiled, the dark side rulers hunted each other through a labyrinth of death traps, trying to slay each other with all of the Force powers at their command. Lettow led the group to one of the giant buildings constructed for this purpose, unused in recent years since the maze combat was phased out by the arrival of the Sith. A great stone archway covered an open tunnel leading into the towering vault like structure.

Tank peered into the darkness inside the tunnel. "Can't see much," he muttered. "I wonder what kind of death traps they have in there...?" But Orl Lettow was already leading the group away to take them to a

public fighting arena several blocks away. Reluctantly, Tank turned his back on the intriguing old building and hurried to catch up. Dodging the crowding aliens in his way, he rejoined his wife. Then Tank noticed two things in the same instant. One was that both Luke and Lumiya were gone. The other was that a massive door had dropped down into the giant archway behind him with a thundering boom. Luke's R2 unit let out an electronic wail and raced to the door, only to smack into it with a pitiful clang. The droid began beeping frantically as it drew back and rolled into the door, again and again. Tank and Shally raced to the door and held the droid back while Orl Lettow stood his ground in confusion. The door looked immovable and impregnable. Tank and Shally beat on it in frustration. "Blast it! Luke was afraid this was going to happen," Tank grated, "and now Lumiya's got him trapped in there!"

Flint ran up to them, his own face full of anger. "I knew she was going to do something like this! But I wasn't able to stop it! Don't waste your energy trying to get past this door. Lumiya chose her battleground well. The only way to get to Luke is from the other side of the maze."

"The other side of this building?" demanded Shally.

"No, the other side of the city," said Flint, scowling. "The maze goes underground for miles. There's a system of natural tunnels down there. They open out way over at the central plaza, where the winner used to come out and claim his new slaves. We'll never get there in time to stop Lumiya."

"Wait a second," said Tank, "you're going to help us?"

"Of course," said the Dark Lord, glaring down at Tank. "I want a successful truce with the Jedi, not a dead Jedi Master and a war on my hands. Do you think Luke's sister would take kindly to that? We'd have the New Republic sending Sky City down in flames before you could say 'Exar Kun'."

Tank nodded slowly in amazement. Flint, he decided, really was sincere, against all his expectations. With the Dark Lord's help, they just might be able to save Luke. After all, Flint had beaten Lumiya once before to save Tank. If he could just pull it off one more time...Tank looked around hurriedly, and was dismayed at the futility of fighting the imposing crowds milling all around. Then his eyes rose a little higher, to the rooftops. Of course! When he was a boy in Mos Eisley, the fastest way to escape the police was always the roofs. "Can't we go over the buildings?" he demanded. "Use the rooftops to get over the crowds?"

Flint and Shally both lit up at the idea. "That could work!" said Flint. "Who's going with me?"

"Tank, you go with him," said Shally. "Watch Luke's back, remember? I'll stay here with Lord Lettow. He knows this maze. Maybe there's a way to get this door open somehow..."

"All right," said Tank, looking at her longingly. "You just be careful, do you hear me?"

"I'll be careful? You be careful. You're the one going after that crazy cyborg. Promise me you'll come back in one piece."

He stepped into her arms and held her fiercely. "I promise."

Lord Flint was removing a small box from a compartment on his belt. He opened it carefully and removed a bright crimson crystalline splinter. He removed his left gauntlet and put the shard onto his naked palm, closing his fist on it so tightly that the sharp ends had to be piercing his flesh.

"What's that?" asked Tank.

"Something I've been saving for an emergency," Flint said through gritted teeth. He seemed to hunch over with pain for a moment, then he grimly straightened. The Dark Lord raised his left fist and shouted to Orl Lettow. "Do what you can to help this woman. I'm going after Lumiya!" Then, Tank and Flint rose slowly into the air, leaving Shally and the droids gaping at them in astonishment. The Dark Lord brought them to roof level and set them down.

Below them, Artoo Detoo was shrilly whistling, and Tank suddenly remembered something important. "Luke's R2 unit, the blue one--we need it!"

Flint looked skeptically at Tank.

"I'm serious! He said he'd need it to beat Lumiya! We have to bring it with us!"

Flint's expression seemed to say he knew there wasn't time to argue. He raised his left fist again, and Artoo Detoo rose up to join them, whistling excitedly. Artoo Beesix warbled a good-bye and good luck from the ground below, then turned his attention back to scanning the giant door. Tank waved once to Shally, then turned with Flint and began to race across the rooftops. He turned to look for Artoo Detoo, and was surprised to see him sailing along in the air behind the Dark Lord, keeping pace with them through the Force. Grinning like a kid again, Tank gathered himself for the leap to the next building. Hang on, Luke, he thought as he flew across the gap. If you can hear me, help is on the way!

\* \* \*

Luke had been about to turn and leave the entrance to the Magian maze, when he was halted by a clear voice in his mind. The tormented tones of the cyborg, Lumiya, were meant for his hearing alone. Luke, she said, come to me.



He turned and saw her standing deep inside the tunnel behind the arch, waiting. Luke hesitated. The moment was upon him, but it was his choice to make. Suddenly, Luke wasn't afraid. He felt as he had when he had gone to meet his father on Endor, certain inside that he was doing what he must. The Force had ordained that moment, years ago, and it had ordained this one, too. Yes, the Force was with him, as Yoda had said. He was a Jedi Master, and facing Lumiya was part of what he had come to Thaarn to do. His clinging depression and doubt fell away from him and vanished. He had something important to do, something that would shape the future of the Jedi and the Sith. Next to that, he realized, his own sorrow over lost love was insignificant. Losing Callista hadn't changed who he was. He was still Luke Skywalker, the man who had walked unafraid into the hands of Darth Vader. Strange that it had taken Lumiya to remind him of that.

Calmly, Luke walked beneath the arch and into the shadows where the Dark Lord waited to kill him. He looked back once, out into the light, and called Artoo to join him. Yoda had said he would need the Kaiburr Crystal to succeed, and it was hidden inside the little droid. Bringing it into the midst of the Sith had been a risk from the beginning. He couldn't touch it without creating a huge disturbance in the Force that the entire Order of the Sith would perceive. Then it would be a struggle over the possession of the crystal, with Luke alone against all the Sith. Luke wasn't sure he could survive that...but then, what if the 'success' Yoda referred to, and survival, were not the same thing?

Responding to his summons, Artoo rolled towards Luke. That was when the unbelievably thick and heavy door crashed down between them, leaving Artoo and the crystal out of reach. Luke stood in the pitch blackness that followed, dismayed. He suddenly wondered where Lumiya was. He concentrated on all his other senses besides sight, trying to detect her. He couldn't hear her, or sense her through the Force; perhaps she was screening herself. Thinking furiously, he stared into the inky nothingness all around. He needed some light, that was obvious, but would a light merely pinpoint his position to Lumiya? She definitely had the advantage here. She could lie in wait for him anywhere; she probably knew the layout of the maze very well. But Luke didn't. And Orl Lettow had said the place was full of death traps. Luke had no choice. He ignited his green-white lightsaber blade, starkly illuminating the stone corridor around him. Luke considered trying to cut his way back out the door, but he had glimpsed its thickness. He would have to tunnel his way through it, leaving himself vulnerable to Lumiya's attack. The only way to go was straight ahead. Luke began to walk carefully down the tunnel.

Deeper inside the maze, Lumiya heard the faint sound of the lightsaber being activated. So, he was coming, just as she had predicted. And all she'd had to do was call to him. She had judged his personality correctly. He was the kind of man who lived up to his own responsibilities. Skywalker was responsible for creating her, and now he was dutifully marching forwards to deal with his mistakes.

Let him come. She was ready. Lumiya placed a gold jeweled medallion in the shape of a blazing sun over her head, to hang from its chain upon her breast. The Sith artifact would multiply her power, making her more than a match for poor Luke. Next, she took a small dagger, extensively carved with Sith letters, from its sheath. A yellow gem glowed softly from the end of its hilt. Cradling it in her hands, she moved off silently into the darkness. If an organic heart had remained to her, it would have been hammering in excitement.

Luke walked warily through the descending corridors, hugging the walls as he went. He picked his path at random, hoping that chance would delay his confrontation with Lumiya until he could retrieve the crystal. So far, he had survived three primitive death traps. The first had been a giant blade that suddenly swept out of the wall at the level of his stomach. Luke had been grateful for his lightsaber, for one swift blocking stroke had severed the blade near the wall, sending it harmlessly clattering to the stone floor. The second trap had been in a stretch of natural tunnels. The floor had unexpectedly dropped off into a steep slope strewn with small rounded pebbles. Luke had begun to slide helplessly towards a deep crevasse, but his Jedi agility had saved him. Switching off his lightsaber, he had leaped ten feet into the air to clasp onto a stalactite. From there, he had swung over the chasm to land on the other side. The most recent trap had been back in the halls of carved stone. Only a tiny grating sound had alerted him to it in time. Luke had rolled out of the way as an immense block of stone fell down into the corridor behind him, raising a choking cloud of dust and shaking the floor under his feet. Luke had gazed at the block with an odd satisfaction. If Lumiya had been following him, she'd just have to find another way around.

Now Luke was moving steadily down a long, straight corridor, by the light of his Jedi weapon. He hadn't seen a trace of Lumiya since he had entered the maze. Perhaps she was content to let the traps take care of him for her. Well, he wouldn't give her the satisfaction of taking the easy way out.

His strained ears picked up a sound in the distance. It was a barking sound, very faint. No, a lot of barking sounds. Some sort of dogs? He hesitated as the sound of the unknown creatures drew nearer. What kind of animals were they? Should he run, or stand his ground? The ferocious barking reverberated from the stone walls, making it sound as if it was coming from all directions. Luke fought to calm his instinctive fear. Then he saw them. A pack of huge, razor toothed Dire Wolves, surging down the corridor from where he had come. The shaggy lead animal was four feet tall at the shoulder, and its red eyes shone in the dark above its slavering wide open jaws. Behind it, Luke guessed that there might be a dozen more.

He ran.

But even as he sped down the corridor, he seized on a sudden doubt. What would a pack of Dire Wolves be doing in a place like this? How could they live? Lettow had said the maze had been unused for years. The

Wolves, he decided, must not be real. And if they were an illusion created by Sith magic, what was the point of the attack? Illusions couldn't hurt him. But, he realized suddenly, barreling down the halls of a maze full of death traps could. Luke suddenly halted, spinning to face the creatures. He held his lightsaber defensively in front of him as the first of the Dire Wolves leaped, seemingly ignoring the blazing bar of light.

To Luke's immense relief, the animal passed right through him, as did the rest of the pack, vanishing into the darkness behind him, yapping wildly as they went. Now Luke proceeded carefully after them, step by step. He found it had been a close thing. A few meters down the corridor, his probing foot encountered a pit, hidden by an illusion of the floor. He scooped up some dirt from the filthy stones, and cast it ahead of him. It vanished into the floor. But ten feet away, another handful of dirt and pebbles clattered on solid ground. Luke smiled grimly, and gathered himself for the leap. Gracefully, he sailed over the hidden drop and continued on his way.

Tank and Flint continued their frantic run across the low stone buildings of the Thaarnian city. Tank was winded, but Flint seemed unaffected, despite his heavy armor. It must be a Force thing, Tank decided, panting. "Flint," he gasped, as they pelted across a long, flat roof, "how tough is Lumiya? Is Luke in trouble?"

The Dark Lord spared him a glance. "I'd say they were evenly matched in power. The problem is Lumiya's light whip."

A sudden memory of being helpless in front of Lumiya came to Tank. She had been wielding a devastating weapon that had looked like long supple bolts of lightning, striking like a fistful of venomous snakes. "You mean that energy weapon she had? With the long strands all blazing away?"

"That's the one," Flint replied. "It was designed by the Sith a long time ago, just for the purpose of defeating a Jedi lightsaber."

"Luke's in trouble," said Tank, running even faster.

The cyborg Dark Lord of the Sith waited in the darkness for Luke to approach. In her hands was the dagger, which she called Heart Seeker. Its blade was full of Sith poison. She meant to use it to paralyze the Jedi Master and torture him to death at her leisure. Standing silent and motionless, she waited as the hum of Luke's lightsaber drew closer. Concentrating on the Force, she channeled her will into the yellow jewel on the weapon, so that it would be unerringly guided on its flight. The gem pulsed softly in response, filling with power.

Now she could hear Luke's footsteps. He didn't suspect she was there. Good. Crouching, she held the dagger's blade in her metallic fingers, readying the throw. The footsteps slowed, then stopped. Abruptly, the green glow of the lightsaber vanished as the blade was

turned off. Lumiya frowned. Something was wrong...did he suspect? She strained, listening, but heard no retreating footsteps. So, he was waiting for her to make a move. Her frown became a cold smile. No matter. Heart Seeker would find its target just as easily in the dark.

Lumiya crept forward, exerting all the control of her cyborg systems not to make a sound. She drew back her arm. Here's a little gift for you, Luke, she thought. It's payback time. With a powerful thrust of her machine arm, she threw the Sith dagger.

Luke had been alerted by a minute yellow gleam in the distance, and so he extinguished his light and froze, waiting to see what would happen next, closely attuned to the Force. The attack came in the form of a small rush of air, some projectile aimed straight at him. Reacting on pure instinct, Luke's fingers brushed the activation stud of his lightsaber. The pure green blade returned in an instant, held vertically in front of his heart. The Sith dagger's blade struck the energy blade squarely, melting against it in a shower of sparks. The hilt struck an instant later, bringing the ancient yellow jewel into contact with the burning green Jedi weapon. The Sith jewel exploded, releasing its power into the air. Luke was knocked from his feet and dazzled. He sat up groggily, and heard the sound of running feet, moving away down the corridor. It had to be Lumiya. Suddenly Luke was tired of this game of evasion. Shaking his head and blinking his eyes, he stood up and called after her. "I'm coming, Lumiya! It's time to finish this." His lightsaber held firmly in his hand, but a little unsteady on his feet, Luke went down the corridor after his opponent.

Flint and Tank dropped from the last rooftop into the crowded central plaza. Thaarnians pointed at them in surprise, as Flint levitated Artoo Detoo to the ground beside them. Just ahead was another towering stone vault with an arched entryway, the twin of the building Luke had vanished into. Flint led Tank through the press of aliens to the stone tunnel opening. Beyond the arch, the corridor angled down into blackness.

"We have to go in there, huh?" asked Tank, his earlier enthusiasm fading rapidly.

Flint looked impatiently at Tank and firmly gestured towards the maze. "Do you want to save your friend?" he demanded.

Tank swallowed hard. Now that he actually faced going into the dark after Lumiya, he hesitated. But there was truth in Flint's words. Tank really did think of Luke as a friend after their adventure in the Sith system together. A long time ago, he and Luke had been enemies, but the past was the past. It was over and done. Now it was time to make sure they had a future to start over in. "Wait just a second," he said to the Dark Lord. "I've been thinking about Lumiya's weapon." Tank hastily scanned the crowd until he spotted a wealthy looking Thaarnian with a tall, sturdy walking staff. He ran up to the alien and placed his hands on the wood. "Excuse me, Sir, but the Dark Lord of the Sith over there needs this. Would you mind letting him borrow it?" Not waiting for an

answer, he yanked the staff out of the Thaarnian's clawed hands and hustled back to Flint. The Thaarnian started to protest, enraged, but one glance at the Dark Lord made him turn away in a pragmatic retreat.

"What the hell are you going to do with that?" demanded Flint scornfully, as Tank went past him with the staff.

"I'm going to save Luke's Jedi skin," Tank shouted back as he jogged down into the dark. Artoo rolled quickly down the smooth slope after him, activating a brilliant spotlight that lit up their way.

Lord Flint rolled his eyes and followed them.

"You're right, Luke," said Lumiya as the Jedi Master came out of the tunnels and into the big dead-end cavern. "It's time to finish this. But maybe not in the way you'd like."

Luke glanced around the room. He could dimly see that they were in a large open space with a high roof and a level floor. Some twenty feet from the entrance, the cavern was bisected by a huge crack running from one wall to the other. It appeared to be a rather deep chasm, yawning hungrily after its long fast alone in the dark. "You don't have to kill me, Lumiya," said Luke reasonably. "I didn't follow you to try to kill you. I wanted to resolve this another way. Isn't the truce more important to you than your revenge? Think about what Flint would want. He loves you. I could feel it. Don't destroy his dream. There must be something I can give you, besides my life, to make up for what I did so many years ago, in self defense."

Luke was surprised to see that Lumiya was crying. But they were tears of rage at his words.

"Yes, there's something you can give me, besides your life," she choked. "There's your pain!" The cyborg clasped her hand around her jeweled golden medallion and shut her eyes.

Luke staggered as a wave of emotion not his own swept over him. He felt overwhelming fear and confusion as the dim cavern around him wavered and vanished, to be replaced by the cramped cockpit of a TIE fighter. He was caught up in a perfect illusion, all his senses deceived. Though he was aware of that fact, there seemed to be no way to break free of it. He looked around in a panic, peering out the viewport into the midst of a chaotic space battle. It was the Battle of Kulthis all over again. He was in a stolen Imperial fighter, wreaking havoc amidst Darth Vader's strike fleet to give Kulthis base time to evacuate. Explosions and laser flak burst all around him as he gripped the controls. His fear made it hard to concentrate on piloting. Suddenly another TIE fighter loomed up in front of him, its weapons ready to blow him into a fiery cloud. Luke's hands scrambled instinctively over his firing buttons, trying to get a lock on the enemy ship. It was too late. Searing green bursts of energy flew at his face across the void, and his world shattered. The heavy transparisteel window broke into large shards that sliced into his chest and arms. Below his feet, the weapons systems exploded, buckling the hull

in and crushing his legs. The pain was all-consuming, taking thought far, far away, leaving only a pulsing terror. His only release would come with death...and Luke realized he would die, illusion or no illusion, if he could not make it stop. But instead, it just went on and on.

Yet, a small part of him remained stubborn, unwilling to accept the reality of his injuries. He hadn't died in the Battle of Kulthis. He had gone on to defeat the Emperor and redeem his father. He realized he was experiencing the death of Shira Brie, but even that was not being truly recreated as it happened. In reality, Luke had been in the other TIE fighter, and Shira had tried to kill him first. His sensors had detected her firing lock, he remembered, and his Force probe had identified her as an Imperial enemy. If he hadn't fired on her, he would have been shot down himself.

Luke began to fight back, filling his mind with images of his loved ones...Leia...Han...Callista...Jacen...Jaina...Anakin...even Tank and Shally. For their sakes, he couldn't give up. You can't do this, Lumiya, he screamed in his thoughts, fighting the agony. It isn't real! It's all a lie. You can't do this to me...

Gradually, the pain began to fade, and to Luke's immense relief, the cockpit of the ruined fighter faded away as well. He was still standing in the cavern, holding his lightsaber. Lumiya was on her knees, shaking, with her head in her hands. Luke started to go towards her, when she stood up suddenly and unhitched the long cylinder from her belt, letting the metal coils unravel from it.

"I don't know how you broke free, Skywalker," she said in a hollow, gasping voice, "but I'm not finished yet. Only one of us gets out of here alive!" Lumiya activated the mysterious weapon and swept the coils through the air over her head. It was like a whip with multiple lashes. Burning white energy poured out into the cords, arcing and snapping with raw force.

With a merciless grimace, she swept the fiery coils at the weary Jedi Master. Luke barely lifted his lightsaber in time to defend himself. But there were too many strands to deflect at once. Some of the lashes of the light whip sliced through his robe and cut deeply into his chest and arms. One lash bit into his forehead, sending a stream of blood pouring down into his eyes. The rest, he deflected with the lightsaber, forcing them away as he staggered in pain and surprise. The strands weren't cut by his light blade, but merely slid crackling off of it.

Luke was half blinded by his own blood. He wiped at his eyes and forehead as Lumiya, her stance wide, drew back the whip with inhuman speed and lashed out again. Luke stumbled back, desperate to avoid it, holding his lightsaber overextended to protect himself. The energy lashes struck the hand and arm holding the saber, wrapping around the green blade with uncanny precision. With a skill honed by years of practice, Lumiya swept Luke's lightsaber from his hand. It clattered onto the stone floor and deactivated, leaving only the hellish glare of the light whip to illuminate the cyborg's victory. Luke huddled over his slashed arm, backed to the edge of the chasm.

Lumiya drew back to strike a third and final blow, when a bright light appeared across the chasm. On the other side, from another tunnel, emerged Luke's Artoo unit, followed by Tank, then Flint.

Oh no, not this time, Flint, she thought. No last minute rescues. She swept the light whip up over her fiery red hair.

Flint immediately saw what he had to do. He ran to the edge of the chasm that divided him from Lumiya and drew the long gray Sith Sword. He clutched tightly to the red crystal shard, feeling the surge of the Force flow through him. Flint drew back the sword and struck with it, just as if Lumiya was standing next to him. A powerful telekinetic blow drove Lumiya back and away from Luke. Flint swung again, and she staggered against the cavern wall.

Then Lumiya looked up and across at Flint, clutching her sun-shaped medallion. Flint felt the full force of her anger hit him like a fireball. It was too much. The sword fell from his hand, and he went to his knees, stunned.

But Tank was already moving. He ran up to the chasm's edge, crying "Luke! Catch!" He hurled the wooden staff like a javelin across the gap.

The stricken Jedi Master looked up and caught it, gaping in amazement at Tank and Flint. Then, a crackling sound alerted Luke to his renewed danger, and he turned to see Lumiya coming after him in a murderous run, the light whip sweeping grandly towards his battered body.

"The staff!" shouted Tank. "Use the staff!"

For a moment, Luke seemed too tired to do anything. But he was marshaling his last strength. In one continuous, smooth move that Tank would remember for the rest of his life, the Jedi Master reached out with the staff of wood and caught the lashes of the light whip around it. Then he dodged aside and heaved on the strands, forcing the charging Lumiya off balance from her own momentum. Luke continued to turn with the staff as Lumiya fell past him, bringing the other end of it completely around to crack against the back of her head. The light whip flew from her fingers, and with a look of horror, she pitched forward into the chasm and fell screaming into the darkness. A moment later, there was a metallic crash, then silence.

Luke shook the coils of the whip free of the staff and used it to keep himself from collapsing.

Flint staggered to his feet and looked around. Tank was staring into the chasm where Lumiya had fallen. The little R2 unit rolled over to Tank and aimed his bright light down into the crevasse. Flint peered down into it and was crushed by what he saw. Lumiya...his Lumiya, was lying some fifty feet below on a bed of jagged rocks, unmoving. Her slim cyborg body was twisted in several places, and her red hair mingled on the rocks with a spreading pool of crimson blood.

Luke looked down as well, and his face filled with despair. "No..." he murmured. "It wasn't supposed to end this way..." He looked at the grieving Dark Lord across the chasm. One glimpse of Flint's stunned and miserable face brought back vivid memories of how Luke had felt when he thought Callista was dead. "It can't end this way," Luke said firmly. He reached inside himself for a little more energy. He held out his hand, palm down, and shut his eyes. He felt the Force flow into his wounded frame, lending him the strength to do what he needed to do. To succeed.

Beeping in surprise, his dome spinning around, Artoo Detoo rose into the air and floated across the crevasse to land gently at Luke's side. Then, the broken body of Lumiya rose slowly out of the chasm, hanging limply in the air, cradled by the light side of the Force. She, too, settled gently on the stone at Luke's feet.

"Come here, Artoo," Luke said, reaching to open a panel on the droid's back. As he moved aside the small white door, a rich red light immediately spilled out and dispelled the shadows around the cyborg's still form. Luke drew out the Kaiburr Crystal. It felt so warm to his touch that he smiled. The glow from the crystal intensified, bathing the entire chamber in its living luminescence. Then the light was in motion, running swiftly up and down Luke's limbs and over his face. Where it caressed him, his wounds healed, sealing and vanishing as if they had never been there. A vast feeling of refreshment came over Luke, giving him a sense of peace and control. Then, leaving Luke, the crystal's radiance shrank down again, to dance closely around the crystal's facets.

Luke looked at Lumiya in sorrow, wincing at the sight of her shattered face. He closed his eyes, and the red glow emerged from the crystal once again, climbing up his arms to halt at his elbows. With the fantastic light shimmering on his hands, the Jedi Master gently touched Lumiya's mortal wounds. The glow seemed to be absorbed into her, penetrating her body to search out deep, hidden injuries. For long moments, Luke was poised motionless with his hands blazing brightly over the cyborg, channeling the crystal's power into her. Lumiya's form flared brightly, her body lost in the glorious radiance, then just as suddenly, the living light receded back into the gemstone, dimming the cavern once more. Luke sat back, breathed deeply, and set the crystal down. For the second time in his life, he had the strange sensation that he had just been reborn. He looked at Lumiya, gratified to see that she was restored and breathing. With a shock, he realized that even her scars were gone, leaving her beauty untarnished. The cyborg Dark Lord slept peacefully at his side.

Luke looked across at Flint, who was staring back at him in unabashed wonderment. "She's alive," Luke said to the armored Sith Lord. "The Kaiburr Crystal brought her back to you. It's a powerful talisman for healing."

Flint opened his left palm and held up the glowing crystal sliver. "All this time, I've had a piece of it, Luke. It amplifies the Force, doesn't it? The dark side, the light side, it doesn't matter which, does it?"



"It's true," Luke admitted. "I didn't want to reveal its existence, because I was afraid the Sith would try to take it by force."

"But you gave up your secret to me in order to save Lumiya," said Flint, wondering. "You're a very interesting man, Master Skywalker. It's too bad we're not on the same side. But you don't have to worry about me. I owe you a debt, for saving her. Consider this the repayment...your crystal is safe." Flint gazed at Lumiya with profound relief. "If she had died, I'm not sure if I would have let you leave here alive..." He met Luke's eyes. "That would have been a shame, because I still think the truce can work out between our orders. I wouldn't want to destroy that for the sake of stealing your talisman."

Luke let out a long sigh of relief, smiling at the honorable darksider, something he once thought was an impossibility.

Tank Boma, who had been uncharacteristically quiet and subdued, spoke up softly, "Now that that's all over with, what do you say we all get out of this miserable pit. Shall we?"

\* \* \*

Luke, Tank, and Shally gave the final checks to their fighter craft as the setting sun painted the Sky City spaceport in warm tones. The two R2 units were lowered into their respective sockets, as Tank wandered over to Luke.

"That's it," said Tank. "We're ready to go home. And I, for one, have no regrets about leaving."

Luke looked up, closing an access panel on his X-wing, and smiled with satisfaction. "We can go home proud, Tank. The truce has been formalized, and the Jedi and the Sith can look forward to a new era without strife."

"Yeah, until the next time it all falls apart," said Tank cynically. "Uh oh, here comes trouble..."

Flint and Lumiya approached the fighters, walking side by side. Neither one appeared to be armed.

"Relax," said Luke. "They're just here to see us off."

The Dark Lords of the Sith stopped in front of the Jedi Master. Flint smiled slightly. "Have a safe journey home, Master Skywalker. You've done the right thing here, and I promise you won't regret it." He turned to Tank and Shally. "Commanders, I hope your report to your Chief of State will be a favorable one."

"I think so," said Tank smoothly. "The system you have here does seem to work for the Thaarnians. The New Republic doesn't have to worry...for the present."

"I'm glad to hear that," said Flint. "It would seem that I've been more than amply repaid for that time I saved your lives."

"You remember that, huh?" said Tank. "Listen, speaking of saving lives, does Luke have to worry about...um..." Tank faltered under Lumiya's sharp stare.

"If you're attempting to ask if I'm going to try to kill Luke again," she said sternly, "then no, you don't have to worry about that." She faced Luke. "You can go free, Master Skywalker, without fear. The scales are balanced between us. Once, you took my life away. Now, you gave it back to me. And more," she said, touching her smooth face where the network of scars had vanished. "For a long time, I lived with constant pain. It kept my hate alive, almost drove me mad. But now it's gone. That crystal of yours seems to have healed the interface between my organic and bionic parts. I...I'm grateful for that. I don't think I'll ever understand why you did what you did, but..."

"If it helps, Lumiya," said Luke, "I did it for the sake of the balance. It's something my teacher told me. The dark side and the light side both need expression in living beings. I'd rather it be through you and Flint, than someone like the Emperor. Of course, I know things can change...the dark side has its price, and it can change people, even destroy them."

Flint spoke up. "I'm willing to pay that price, Luke. The Sith can be more than what they once were. I won't change so much that I won't be able to guide them in the necessary direction. I want to be around to groom my successor. We both know what could happen if someone with more...ambitious tendencies takes over."

"I know that if the Sith decide to move out into the rest of the Galaxy, the Jedi will be ready," Luke said seriously.

Flint simply nodded, knowing what Luke meant. The Jedi would have the Kaiburr Crystal for their defense.

"If it was up to me," said Lumiya, "You might not walk out of here with that crystal so easily. But Flint promised, didn't he...You're lucky the Magians don't know about it. We told them the huge disturbance in the Force they felt when you used it to heal me, was really from our battle. They think we fought to a standstill, and are parting as respected enemies. The Thaarnians tend to be impressed by that kind of thing."

"Thanks," said Luke, "I think. Anyhow, it's not far from the truth. I do respect you...as an enemy." Luke paused, then looked to Flint. "It's time to get back to my students," he said. "But I just wanted you to know, I remember that time on Belderone, and I'm sorry I turned you away. You would have made a good Jedi."

"Hmmm. Is that a compliment?" asked Flint gruffly. "I tend to believe in destiny, don't you? I think it was probably necessary to bring all this about...Good-bye, Master Skywalker. And...may the Force be with you."

With that, the Dark Lords of the Sith turned and walked away together, Lord Flint's hand resting comfortably on Lady Lumiya's shoulder.

Good-bye, Flint, Luke thought. I wish you luck. You're a darksider who treads close to the light, as I have walked close to the darkness...

"It probably makes a big difference that they have each other," said Shally, watching them go. "This could all work out."

"It made a big difference to me that I had you both with me, that's for sure," said Luke, stepping between Tank and Shally and putting an arm around each of them. "Tank here even saved my life. I guess that evens things up for that time you kidnapped me, right?" Tank started to sputter, but Luke continued over him. "Listen, what would you say to a nice vacation on Yavin Four? I have to go back there, but I don't want to say good-bye to you both so soon."

"Are you okay, Luke?" asked Shally. "About Callista, I mean."

"I think so," he said. "I still miss her, but I know I have my life to live while she's gone. I know when she comes back, I want to be the kind of person worth coming back to. But that's not why I want you to come back to the Jedi Academy. You've done a great service to the Jedi. You deserve a hero's welcome, both of you."

"Yeah, Tank is a hero, isn't he?" teased Shally. "And a good husband. He's come a long way from the selfish kid you used to know."

Tank shot her a defensive look. "Hey, I wasn't so bad. Luke, tell her about the time when I saved Biggs from those Tusken Raiders when he was too injured to fly his Skyhopper home--"

"Oh, yes," Luke said to Shally, "Biggs told me about that one. Tank did save his life. I'll admit that the hero in Tank did occasionally show through back then."

"Occasionally!" Tank challenged, and Shally smiled, enjoying the setting sunlight of the Sith System.

\* \* \*

A week later, Luke took the crystal from its new hiding place in an upper floor of the Great Temple on Yavin Four. Carrying it wrapped in a soft cloth, he rode the turbolift to the uppermost level, where, years ago, the victory of the Battle of Yavin had been celebrated. The vast

open room with its tall, vine covered pillars and beautiful shafts of sunlight, was Luke's favorite place to meditate. Peacefully, he sat down on the ancient stone steps and unwrapped the Kaiburr Crystal. Bathed in its warm glow, the Jedi Master closed his eyes and opened himself to the Force.

"Master Yoda," he called softly. Luke felt the presence of the old spirit, and opened his eyes. He smiled to see the wizened, gnomish image, glowing softly with bluish radiance upon the steps at his side.

Yoda's face was weary, as if he had been exerting himself mightily. "Luke... difficult it is to return, once I have joined with all that is," he said, looking with gentle sadness at his former student. "It may be that speak again we do not."

Luke gazed at his mentor with infinite affection. "I'll miss you, Master. It's been so hard, sometimes, trying to bring back the Jedi when I knew so little. Seeing you again really made it easier."

"Luke, you are the Master now. Great success have you had, with the Jedi, and the Sith. You will not need me. Already know you--"

"--that which I require," Luke finished. "I know. And with the crystal to study, the Academy will grow and prosper, calling in Jedi students from all over the Galaxy. I've got a lot of work ahead of me."

"Hmm. When for eight hundred years you have taught Jedi, then you may speak to me of work. Humph."

"Master Yoda," Luke asked hesitantly, "Will the truce with the Sith endure?"

"Oh--the future. So certain are you that you wish to know? Enough of a miracle it is, that it came to be at all. A narrow path did you walk, to make it so."

Luke looked speculatively into the crystal's aura. "If I had died, or if Lumiya had died, things would have been very different. I suppose I don't want to know the future, even if I could see it for certain. There's more than enough trouble to go around for the present."

"Taught you something I have, then," said Yoda with a wrinkled smile, "for that is the wisdom of a Master."