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THE TRUCE AT BAKURA



KATHY TYERS

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Kathy Tyers

STAR WARS.

THE TRUCE AT BAKURA



BANTAM BOOKS

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NOT ONE WORD HAS BEEN OMITTED.

STAR WARS: THE TRUCE AT BAKURA

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DEDICATION

I can't think of *Star Wars* without remembering the opening fanfare from its soundtrack. I can't imagine an Imperial Star Destroyer's long, triangular silhouette without hearing its ominous triplet rhythms. And who can picture the Mos Eisley cantina without that inimitable jazz band?

It is with grateful admiration that I dedicate this novel to the man who composed the musical scores for the three *Star Wars* movies:

John Williams

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Star Wars Novels Timeline

Above a dead world, one habitable moon hung suspended like a cloud-veiled turquoise jewel. The eternal hand that held the chain of its orbit had dusted its velvet backdrop with brilliant stars, and cosmic energies danced on the wrinkles of space-time, singing the timeless music, neither noticing nor caring for the Empire, the Rebel Alliance, or their brief petty wars.

But on that petty human scale of perspective, a fleet of starships orbited the moon's primary. Carbon streaks scored the sides of several ships. Droids swarmed around some performing repairs. Metal shards that had been critical spaceship components, and human and alien bodies, orbited with the ships. The battle to destroy Emperor Palpatine's second Death Star had cost the Rebel Alliance heavily.

Luke Skywalker hustled across one cruiser's landing bay, red-eyed but still suffused with victory after the Ewoks' celebration. Passing a huddle of droids, he caught a whiff of coolant and lubricants. He ached, a dull gnawing in all his bones from the longest day of his life. Today—no, it was yesterday—he had met the Emperor. Yesterday, he had almost paid with his life for his faith in his father. Yet a passenger sharing his shuttle up to the cruiser from the Ewok village had already asked if Luke really killed the Emperor—and Darth Vader—single-handed.

Luke wasn't ready to announce the fact that "Darth Vader" had been Anakin Skywalker, his father. Still, he'd answered firmly: *Vader* killed Emperor Palpatine. Vader had flung him into the second Death Star's core. Luke would be explaining that for weeks, he guessed. For now he merely wanted to check on his X-wing fighter.

To his surprise, it was overrun by service crew. Behind and above it, a magnacran lowered Artoo-Detoo into the cylindrical droid socket behind his cockpit. "What's up?" Luke asked, standing to catch his breath.

"Oh. Sir," answered a khaki-suited crewman, disengaging a collapsible fuel hose, "your relief pilot's going out. Captain Antilles came back on the first shuttle and went on patrol immediately. He intercepted an Imperial drone ship—one of those antiques they used for carrying messages back before the Clone Wars. Incoming from deep space."

Incoming. Someone had sent a message to the Emperor. Luke smiled. "Guess they haven't heard yet. Wedge wants company? I'm not that tired. I could go."

The crewman didn't smile back. "Unfortunately, Captain Antilles touched off a self-destruct cycle while trying to release its message codes. He is manually blocking a critical gap—"

"Cancel the relief pilot," Luke exclaimed. Wedge Antilles had been his friend since the day of the first Death Star, where they'd flown in the final attack together. Without waiting to hear more, Luke spun toward the ready-room. A minute later, he was hopping back and pulling up one leg of an orange pressure suit.

Crewers scattered. He sprang up the ladder and into his inclined, padded seat, yanked off his helmet, then touched on the ship's fusion generator. A familiar high-energy whine built around him.

The man who'd spoken climbed up behind him. "But, sir, I think Admiral Ackbar wanted to debrief you."

"I'll be right back." Luke closed his cockpit canopy and ran an Alliance-record speed check of his systems and instruments. Nothing flagged his attention.

He switched on his comlink. "Rogue Leader, ready for takeoff."

"Opening hatch, sir."

He punched in the drive. An instant later, the dull ache in his body turned to ferocious pain. All the stars in his field of vision split into binaries and spun around each other. Crewers' voices babbled in his ears. Dizzily, he reached down inside himself for the quiet center Master Yoda had taught him to touch ...

To touch ...

There.

Exhaling one trembling breath, he measured his mastery of the pain. Stars shrank into singular gleams again. Whatever had caused that, he'd deal with it later. Through the Force he quested outward and found Wedge's presence. His hands moved on the X-wing's controls almost effortlessly as he steered toward that end of the Fleet.

On his way, he got his first good look at the battle damage, the swarming repair droids and tow vessels. Mon Calamari Star Cruisers were plated and shielded to withstand multiple direct hits, but he thought he remembered several more of the huge, lumpy crafts. Fighting for his life, his father, and his integrity in the Emperor's throne room, he hadn't even felt the gut-wrenching Force disturbances from all those deaths. He hoped he wasn't getting used to them.

"Wedge, do you copy?" Luke asked over the subspace radio. He vectored out among the big ships of the Fleet. Scanners indicated that the nearest heavy transport was cautiously moving away from something much smaller. Four A-wings swooped along behind Luke. "Wedge, are you out there?"

"Sorry," he heard faintly. "Almost out of range of my ship's pickup. You see, I've got to go." Wedge trailed off, grunting. "I've got to keep these two crystals apart. It's a self-destruct of some sort."

"Crystals?" Luke asked, to keep Wedge talking. There was pain under that voice.

"Electrite crystal leads. Leftovers from the old 'elegance' days. The mechanism's trying to push them together. Let 'em touch ... poof. The whole fusion engine."

Tumbling slowly above the blue glimmer of Endor, Luke spotted Wedge's X-wing. Alongside it drifted a nine-meter-long cylinder bearing Imperial markings, fully as long as the X-wing and almost all engine, a type of drone ship the Alliance still couldn't afford. For some reason, the drone gave him an eerie foreboding. The Empire never used such antiques anymore. Why hadn't the sender been able to use standard Imperial channels?

Luke whistled. "No, we don't want to blow that big of an engine." No wonder the transport was moving away.

"Right." Wedge clung to one end of the cylinder, wearing a pressure suit and connected to the X-wing by a life-support tether. He must have blown his cockpit air and dove for the cylinder's master control the moment he realized he'd accidentally armed it to detonate. In space pilot's lightweight pressure suit and closed-face emergency helmet, he could survive vacuum for several minutes.

“How long’ve you been out here, Wedge?”

“I don’t know. Doesn’t matter. The view’s terrific.”

Closing in, Luke reversed engines with care. Wedge held one hand inside a hinged panel. His head swiveled to follow Luke’s X-wing as Luke used short, delicate engine bursts to match his momentum with the cylinder.

“Sure could use another hand.” Wedge’s words sounded cocky but the tone betrayed his strain. That hand must be half crushed. “What are you doing out here?”

“Enjoying the view.” Luke considered his options. The A-wing pilots decelerated and hurried back, probably assuming Luke knew what he was doing. “Artoo,” he called, “what’s the readout on your manipulator arm? If I got in close enough, could you help him?”

No—2.76 meters short at optimum angle, appeared on his head-up display.

Luke frowned. Sweat trickled on his forehead. Anything small, solid, and disposable would help. If he didn’t hurry, his friend was dead. Already Wedge’s sense in the Force wobbled dizzily.

Luke glanced at his lightsaber. He wasn’t about to dispose of *that*.

Not even to save Wedge’s life? Besides, he’d be able to get it back. Cautiously he slipped the lightsaber into the flare ejection port’s feed tube. He launched it out, then extended a hand toward it across ten meters of vacuum. He sent it gliding toward Wedge. Once near the target, he twisted his wrist.

The green-white blade appeared, silent in the vacuum of space. Wedge’s wide brown eyes blinked behind his faceplate.

“On my signal,” Luke said, “jump free.”

“Luke, I’ll lose fingers.”

“Way free,” Luke repeated. “You’ll lose more than fingers if you stay there.”

“What’s the chance you could Jedi me a little nerve blockage? This hurts like crazy.” Wedge’s voice sounded weaker. He pulled in his knees and braced to push off.

At moments like these, moisture farming for Uncle Owen back on Tatooine didn’t sound too bad. “I’ll try,” said Luke. “Show me the crystals. Look at them closely.”

“Ho-kay.” Wedge pulled around to stare into the hatchway. Letting the lightsaber drift, Luke felt for Wedge’s friendly presence. He trusted Wedge not to resist this, to let him ...

Through Wedge’s eyes, and fighting the excruciating pain in Wedge’s hand, Luke glimpsed a pair of round, multifaceted jewels—one inside his palm, the other crushing inward at the end of a spring mechanism from the back of his hand. Fist-sized, they reflected pale golden sparks of saber light out the hatch onto Wedge’s orange suit. Luke didn’t think the flight glove alone would keep them apart, or he’d’ve simply told Wedge to slip out of it. Brief depressurization didn’t damage extremities much.

If Wedge jumped, Luke would have a second at most to slice one crystal free, and only a little longer before Wedge fainted. Wedge was tethered and he’d be able to keep breathing, but he could lose a lot of blood. The glimpse blurred at the edges.

Luke tweaked Wedge’s pain perception.

Too much to juggle. Luke’s own aches began to ooze up from under control. “Got it,” he grunted.

“Got what?” Wedge asked dreamily.

“The view,” Luke said. “Jump on the count of three. Jump *hard*. One.” Wedge didn’t object.

Clenching his teeth, Luke eased into a closer accord with the saber. So long as he focused on the saber, he could maintain control. "Two." Keeping up a steady count, he felt the saber, the crystals, and the critical gap, all as parts of the universe's wholeness.

"Three." Nothing happened. "Jump, Wedge!" Luke cried.

Weakly, Wedge launched himself. Luke swept in. One crystal soared free, reflecting a whirling green kaleidoscope onto the X-wing's upper S-foil.

"Ooh," crooned Wedge's voice in his ear. "Pretty." He spun, clutching his right hand.

"Wedge, reel in!"

No response. Luke bit his lip. He stabilized the tumbling saber and deactivated its blade. Wedge's tether stretched taut, high above the other X-wing. His limbs wobbled randomly.

Luke slapped his distress beacon. "Rogue Leader to Home One. Explosives disarmed. Request medical pickup. Now!"

From behind the A-wings, hanging back out of the danger zone, a med runner swooped into sight.

Wedge's body rose and sank with each breath as he floated upright in the Fleet's clear tanks of healing bacta fluid. Much to Luke's relief, they'd saved all his fingers. Surgical droid Too-Onebee set the control board and then swiveled to face Luke. Slender, jointed limbs waved in front of his gleaming midsection. "Now you, sir. Please step behind the scanner."

"I'm all right." Luke leaned his stool against the bulkhead. "Just tired." Artoo-Detoo bleeped softly beside him, sounding concerned.

"Please, sir. This will only take a moment."

Luke sighed and shuffled around a man-high rectangular panel. "Okay?" he called out through it. "May I go now?"

"One moment more," came the mechanical voice, then clicking sounds. "One moment," the droid repeated. "Have you experienced double vision recently?"

"Well ..." Luke scratched his head. "Yes. But just for a minute." Surely that little speck wasn't significant.

As the diagnostic panel retracted into the bulkhead, a medical flotation bed extended itself from the wall beside Too-Onebee. Luke backstepped. "What's that for?"

"You're not well, sir."

"I'm just tired."

"Sir, my diagnosis is sudden and massive calcification of your skeletal structure, of the rare type brought on by severely conductive exposure to electrical and other energy fields."

Energy fields. Yesterday. Emperor Palpatine, leering as blue-white sparks leaped off his fingertips while Luke writhed on the deck. Luke broke a sweat, the memory was so fresh. He'd thought he was dying. He *was* dying.

"The abrupt drop in blood minerals is causing muscular microseizures all over your body, sir."

So that was why he ached. Until an hour ago, he hadn't had a chance to sit still and notice. Deflated, he stared up at Too-Onebee. "But it's not permanent damage, is it? You don't have to replace bones?" He shuddered at the thought.

"The condition will become chronic unless you rest and allow me to treat you," answered the mechanical voice. "The alternative is bacta immersion."

Luke glanced at the tank. *Not that, again.* He'd tasted bacta on his breath for a week afterward. Reluctantly he pulled off his boots and stretched out on the flotation bed.

He awakened, squirming, some time later.

Too-Onebee's metal-grate face appeared at his bedside. "Painkiller, sir?"

Luke had always read that humans had three bones in each ear. Now he believed it. He could count them. "I feel worse, not better," he complained. "Didn't you do anything?"

"Treatment is complete, sir. Now you must rest. May I offer you a painkiller?" he repeated patiently.

"No thanks," Luke grunted. As a Jedi Knight, he must learn to control sensations, and better sooner than later. Pain was an occupational hazard.

Artoo beeped a query.

Guessing at a translation, Luke said, "All right, Artoo. You stand watch. I'll take another nap." He rolled over. Slowly, his weight pushed a new furrow into the bed's flexible contour. This was the down side of being called a hero. It'd been worse when he lost his right hand.

Come to think of it, the bionic hand didn't ache.

One bright spot.

It was time to re-create the ancient Jedi art of self-healing. Yoda's sketchy lessons left much to be imagined.

"I'll leave you, sir." Too-Onebee swiveled away. "Please attempt to sleep. Call if you require assistance."

One last question brought Luke's head up. "How's Wedge?"

"Healing well, sir. He should be ready for release within a day."

Luke shut his eyes and tried to remember Yoda's lessons. Booted feet pounded rapidly past the open hatchway. Already focused deep into the Force, he felt an alarmed presence hurry up the hall. As carefully as he listened, he couldn't recognize the individual. Yoda had said fine discernment—even of strangers—would come in time, as he learned the deep silence of self that let a Jedi distinguish others' ripples in the Force.

Luke rolled over, wanting to sleep. He was ordered to sleep.

And he was still Luke Skywalker, and he had to know what had alarmed that trooper. Cautiously he sat up and gingerly slipped down onto his feet. With the ache localized at one end of his body, he could diminish it by willing his feet not to exist ... or something like that. The Force wasn't something you explained. It was something you used ... when it let you. Not even Yoda had seen everything.

Artoo whistled an alarm. Too-Onebee rolled toward him, limb-pipes flailing. "Sir, lie back down, please."

"In a minute." He poked his head out into the long corridor and shouted, "Stop!"

The Rebel trooper spun to a halt.

"Did they decode that drone ship's message yet?"

"Still working on it, sir."

Then the war room was the place to be. Luke backed into Artoo and steadied himself with a hand on the little droid's blue dome. "Sir," insisted the medical droid, "please lie down. This condition will rapidly become chronic unless you rest."

Imagining himself pain-racked for the rest of his life, and the alternative—another spell in the sticky tank—Luke sat down on the squishy edge of the flotation bed and fidgeted.

Then a thought struck him. “Too-Onebee, I bet you’ve got—”

Large enough to hold a hundred, the flagship’s war room was almost empty. A servidroid slid along the curve of an inner bench, passing between a light tube and glimmering while bulkheads. Down near the circular projection table that dominated the war room center, near a single tech on duty, Mon Mothma—the woman who’d founded and who now led the Rebel Alliance—stood with General Crix Madine. Mon Mothma’s presence gleamed visibly in her long white robes and invisibly through the Force, and the bearded Madine’s confidence had grown since the Battle of Endor.

They both looked in Luke’s direction and frowned. Luke smiled halfheartedly and gripped the handrests of the repulsor chair he’d commandeered out of the medical suite, steering down over the steps toward them.

“You’ll never learn, will you?” General Madine’s frown got flatter. “You belong in sick bay. This time we’ll have Too-Onebee knock you out.”

Luke’s cheek twitched. “What about that message? Some Imperial commander burned a quarter million credits on that antique drone.”

Mon Mothma nodded, reprimanding Luke with her placid stare. A side console lit, this one a smaller light projection table. Above it appeared a miniature hologram of Admiral Ackbar with huge eyes bulging at the sides of his high-domed, ruddy head. Although the Calamarian had commanded the Battle of Endor from a chair under the broad starry viewport on Luke’s left, Ackbar felt more comfortable on his own cruiser. Life support there was fine-tuned to Calamarian standards. “Commander Skywalker,” he wheezed. Whiskery tendrils wobbled under his jaw. “You need to consider the risks you take ... more carefully.”

“I will, Admiral. When I can.” Luke reclined the floating repulsor chair and steadied himself against the main light table’s steel gray rim. An electronic whistle rang out from the hatchway behind him. Artoo-Detoo wasn’t letting him out of photoreceptor range for thirty seconds. The blue-domed droid had to take the long way around. Eclipsing tiny blinking instrument lights, he rolled along the upper computer bank to a drop platform. There he downloaded himself, then rolled close to Luke’s float chair before delivering a string of rebukes—probably from Too-Onebee. General Madine smirked behind his beard.

Luke hadn’t understood a single whistle, but he could guess at this translation too. “All right, Artoo. Pull in your wheels. I’m sitting down. This should be interesting.”

Young Lieutenant Matthews straightened up over the side console and turned his head. “Here it comes,” he announced.

Madine and Mothma leaned toward the screen. Luke craned his neck for a better view.

IMPERIAL GOVERNOR WILEK NEREUS OF THE BAKURA SYSTEM, TO HIS MOST EXCELLENT IMPERIAL MASTER PALPATINE: GREETINGS IN HASTE.

They hadn’t heard. Months, maybe years, would pass before much of the galaxy realized that the Emperor’s reign had ended. Luke himself was having a hard time believing it.

BAKURA IS UNDER ATTACK BY AN ALIEN INVASION FORCE FROM OUTSIDE YOUR DOMAIN. ESTIMATE FIVE CRUISERS, SEVERAL DOZEN SUPPORT SHIPS, OVER 1000 SMALL FIGHTERS. UNKNOWN TECHNOLOGY. WE HAVE LOST HALF OUR DEFENSE FORCE AND ALL OUTERSYSTEM OUTPOSTS. HOLONET TRANSMISSIONS TO IMPERIAL

Madine reached past Lieutenant Matthews and poked a touch panel. “More data,” he exclaimed. “We need more of this.”

The voice of an intelligence droid filtered through the comlink. “There are corroborative visuals if you would care to see them, sir, as well as embedded data files coded for Imperial access.”

“That’s more like it.” Madine touched the lieutenant’s shoulder. “Give me the visuals.”

Over the central light table, a projection unit whirred upright. A scene appeared that brought up a fresh rush of pain-deadening adrenaline. *Yoda would rap my knuckles*, Luke observed soberly. *Excitement ... adventure ... a Jedi craves not these things*. He stretched toward Jedi calm. A terrified world needed help.

At the center of the tableau hovered the image of an Imperial system-patrol craft of a sort Luke had studied but never fought, projected as a three-dimensional network of lines that gleamed reddish orange. He leaned closer to examine its laser emplacements, but before he could get a good look, it silently spewed out an explosion of yellow escape pods. A large orange image swung ominously into the viewfield, dominating the scene by its bulk: far larger than the patrol craft, stubbier than the Rebels’ sleek Mon Cal cruisers—roughly ovoid but covered with blisterlike projections.

“Run a check on that ship’s design,” ordered Madine.

After approximately three seconds, the intelligence droid’s monotone answered, “The design is used neither by the Alliance nor the Empire.”

Luke held his breath. The huge attack craft loomed larger over the table. Now he could make out half a hundred gun emplacements ... or were they beam antennae? It held fire until six crimson TIE fighters vectored close, then the fighters lurched simultaneously and slowed. Fighters and escape pods began to accelerate steadily toward the alien ship, evidently caught in a tractor beam. The scene shrank. Whoever recorded those visuals had left in a hurry.

“Taking prisoners,” Madine murmured, clearly concerned.

Mon Mothma turned to a shoulder-high droid that had stood silently nearby. “Access the embedded data files. Apply our most current Imperial codes. Locate this world, Bakura.” Luke felt relieved that even the Alliance’s knowledgeable leader had to ask for the system’s location.

The droid rotated toward the light table and reconnected its socket arm. The battle scene faded. Star sparks appeared in a conformation Luke recognized as this end of the Rim region. “Here, Madam,” the droid announced. One speck turned red. “According to this file, its economy is based on the export of repulsorlift components and an exotic fruit candy and liqueur. Settled by a speculative mining corporation during the final years of the Clone Wars and taken over by the Empire approximately three years ago, to absorb and control its repulsorlift production capacity.”

“Subjugated recently enough to remember independence well.” Mon Mothma rested her slender hand on the edge of the light table. “Now show Endor. Relative position.”

Another speck gleamed blue. Forgotten at Luke’s shoulder, Artoo whistled softly. If Endor was a good bit out from the Core worlds, Bakura was still farther. “That’s virtually the edge of the Rim worlds,” Luke observed. “Even traveling in hyperspace, it would take days to get

there. The Empire can't help them." It was strange to think of anyone turning to the Empire for help. Evidently the Rebels' decisive victory at Endor doomed the Bakurans to an unknown fate, because the nearest Imperial battle group couldn't help. Alliance forces had scattered it.

From a speaker at his left, Leia's voice projected clearly. "How large is the Imperial force at the system?"

Leia was down on Endor's surface, in the Ewok village. Luke hadn't known she was listening in, but he should've assumed it. He reached out through the Force and brushed her sister's warm presence, sensing justifiable tension. Leia was allegedly resting with Han Solo recovering from that blaster burn on her upper arm, and helping the furry little Ewoks bury their dead—not watching for new trouble. Luke pursed his lips. He'd loved Leia all along, wishing ...

Well, that was behind him. The intelligence droid answered her over a subspace radio comlink relay, "Bakura is defended by an Imperial garrison. The sender of this message has added subtext reminding Emperor Palpatine that what forces they have are antiquated, due to the system's remoteness."

"Evidently the Empire didn't anticipate any competition for Bakura." Leia's voice sounded disdainful. "But now there's no Imperial Fleet to help there. It will take the Imperials weeks to reassemble, and by then this Bakura could fall to the invasion force—or it could be part of the Alliance," she added in a brighter tone. "If the Imperials can't help the Bakurans, we must."

Admiral Ackbar's image planted finny hands in the vicinity of its lower torso. "What do you mean, Your Highness?"

Leia leaned against the wattle-and-daub wall of an Ewok tree house and rolled her eyes toward the dome of its high, thatched roof. Han sprawled casually beside her seat, leaning on an elbow and twirling a twig between his fingers.

She raised a handheld comlink. "If we sent aid to Bakura," she answered Admiral Ackbar, "it's possible that Bakura would leave the Empire out of gratitude. We could help free its people."

"And get that repulsorlift technology," Han mumbled to the twig.

Leia had only paused. "That chance is worth investing a small task force. And you'll need a high-ranking negotiator."

Han lay back, crossed his arms behind his head, and murmured, "You step off onto an Imperial world, and you're an entry in somebody's credit register. You've got a price on your head."

She frowned.

"Can we afford to send troops, given the shape we're in?" Ackbar's voice wheezed out over the comlink. "We've lost twenty percent of our forces, battling only part of the Emperor's fleet. Any Imperial battle group could do a better job at Bakura."

"But then the Empire would remain in control there. We need Bakura just like we need Endor. Every world we can draw into the Alliance."

Surprising her, Han closed his hand on the comlink and pulled it toward him. "Admiral," he said, "I doubt we can afford not to go. An invasion force that big is trouble for this whole end of the galaxy. And she's right—it's us that ought to go. You'd just better send a ship that can

make a fast getaway, in case the Imperials get ideas.”

“What about the price on *your* head, laser brains?” Leia whispered.

Han covered the squelch. “You’re not going without me, Highness-ness.”

Luke studied Mon Mothma’s expression and her sense in the Force. “It would have to be a small group,” she said quietly, “but one ship is not enough. Admiral Ackbar, you may select a few fighters to support General Solo and Princess Leia.”

Luke spread a hand. “What are the aliens doing? Why are they taking so many prisoners?”

“The message doesn’t say,” Madine pointed out.

“Then you’d better send someone who can find out. It could be important.”

“Not you, Commander, and it doesn’t look like we can wait until you’ve recovered.” Madine rapped a white handrail. “This team should leave within a standard day.”

Luke didn’t want to be left behind ... even though he had all faith that Han and Leia could take care of each other.

On the other hand, before he could pitch in, he must heal himself, and General Madine had suddenly become twins. His optic nerves were telling him to get horizontal soon, or risk a doubly humiliating faint in the war room. He eyed the handrail over the double row of white benches, wondering if the repulsor chair would lift over it. He ached to push the thing out of the envelope.

Artoo chattered, sounding motherly.

Luke fingered the float chair’s controls and said, “I’ll head back to my cabin. Keep me posted.”

General Madine crossed his arms over the front of his khaki uniform.

“I doubt we’ll be sending you to Bakura.” Mon Mothma’s robes rustled as she squared her shoulders. “Consider your importance to the Alliance.”

“She’s right, Commander,” wheezed the small ruddy image of Admiral Ackbar.

“I’m not helping anyone if I’m just lying down.” But he had to shake his reckless reputation, if he wanted the respect of the Rebel Fleet. Yoda had commissioned him to pass on what he had learned. To Luke’s mind, that meant rebuilding the Jedi Order ... as soon as he got the chance. Anyone else could pilot a fightership. No one else could recruit and train new Jedi.

Frowning, he steered to the lift platform, rotated his chair, and answered Mon Mothma and Admiral Ackbar as he rose. “I can at least help you put together the strike force.”

The higher-ups continued to confer as Luke floated toward a hatchway. The gray-furred guard, a Gotal, flinched as he saluted. Luke remembered that Gotal felt the Force as a vague buzzing in their cone-shaped perceptor horns, and he accelerated to keep from giving the loyal Gotal a headache.

Artoo shrieked behind him. Out in the corridor, Luke decelerated his float chair and let the little droid catch him. Artoo grappled the chair's left stabilizer bar and towed it along, spouting electronic static.

"Yes, Artoo." Luke leaned one hand on Artoo's blue dome. Gratefully he let himself be herded back to the medical suite. He pictured a thousand alien ships converging on ... on a world he still couldn't imagine. He wanted to see it in his mind's eye.

And to know why the aliens took prisoners.

Once inside the ship's clinic, he pulled off his boots and sank back down on the flotation bed. Its "give" underneath him felt inexpressibly good. After a glance at Wedge's bacta tank, he shut his eyes and imagined he could hear all the way to the war room.

Let them worry. He was finished, for a while. Literally.

Artoo beeped something interrogative. "Say again?" asked Luke.

Artoo wheeled over to the open hatch and reached out a manipulator arm. The door slowly closed.

"Oh. Thanks." Evidently Artoo thought he'd like to undress in privacy.

Evidently Artoo didn't know he was too tired to undress. He pulled his legs up onto the bed. "Artoo," he said, "get a portable data screen from Too-Onebee. Access those embedded data files from that message drone. I'll take a look while I rest."

Artoo's reply dropped disapprovingly in pitch as he wheeled away, but less than a minute later he rolled back, trailing a wheeled cart. He steered it to Luke's bedside and extended a connector into its input port.

"Bakura," Luke said. "Data files."

As the computer analyzed his voiceprint to confirm his security clearance, Luke stretched out and blinked. He'd never so appreciated normal, single vision.

A cloud-frosted blue world appeared on the screen. "Bakura," said a bland, mature female voice. "Imperial Study Survey six-oh-seven-seven-four." Cloud cover swirled closer. Luke's vision dropped through it to hover over a vast range of green mountains. Through a deep valley, two broad parallel rivers cut the mountains and wound down to a verdant delta. Luke imagined rich, damp smells, like on Endor. "Salis D'aar, capital city, is the seat of Imperial governorship. Bakuran contributions to Imperial security include a modest flow of strategic metals...."

So green. So wet. Luke shut his eyes. His head sank.

... He sprawled on the deck of a strange spaceship. A huge reptilian alien, brown-scaled with a blunt, oversize head, tromped toward him waving a weapon. Luke ignited his lightsaber. Heavy with

the Emperor's fingerprints, it slid through his grip. Then he recognized the big lizard's "weapon": restraining-bolt Owner, used to control droids. Laughing, he leaped into fighting stance. The lizard Owner whirred. Luke froze in place.

"What?" Disbelieving, he looked down. He had a droid's stiff-jointed body. Again the alien raised its Owner device....

Luke fought back to consciousness. He felt a powerful presence in the Force and sat up too quickly. Invisible hammers bashed both sides of his head.

The screen stood dark. On the foot of his flotation bed sat Ben Kenobi, robed as usual in unbleached homespun, shimmering under the cabin's faint night glims. "Obi-wan?" Luke murmured. "What's happening at Bakura?"

Ionized air danced around the figure. "You are going to Bakura," it answered.

"Is it that bad?" Luke asked bluntly, not really expecting an answer. Ben rarely gave them. He seemed to come mostly to reprimand Luke, like a teacher who could not give up hounding his student after graduation (not that Ben had stayed around to finish his training).

Obi-wan shifted on the bed, but the bed didn't shift with him. The manifestation wasn't literally physical. "Emperor Palpatine achieved first contact with the aliens attacking Bakura," said the apparition, "during one of his Force meditations. He offered them a deal, one that can no longer be honored."

"What kind of deal?" Luke asked quietly. "What danger are the Bakurans in?"

"You must go." Ben still didn't hear Luke's questions. "If you do not attend to the matter personally, Luke—Bakura—and all worlds, both Allied and Imperial—will know a far greater disaster than you can imagine."

Then it was as serious as they feared. Luke shook his head. "I need to know more. I can't rush in blindly, and besides, I'm—"

Shimmering air brightened and rushed inward, stirring faint air currents as the image vanished.

Luke groaned. Somehow he'd have to persuade the medical committee to release him, and then convince Admiral Ackbar to give him the assignment. He would promise to rest and heal himself in hyperspace, if he could figure out how. Suddenly the notion of battle no longer excited him at all.

He shut his eyes and sighed. Master Yoda would be pleased.

"Artoo," he said, "call Admiral Ackbar."

Artoo burred.

"I know it's late. Apologize for waking him. Tell him ..." He glanced around. "Tell him if he doesn't care to come to the clinic lounge, we can set something up in the war room."

"So, you see ..." Luke glanced up. The clinic lounge's door slid open. Han and Leia paused in the hatchway, then squeezed in between General Madine—who stood nearby—and Mon Mothma, seated on a stasis unit.

"'Scuse us," Han grunted. Too-Onebee had approved the conference, provided Luke didn't leave the medical suite. This crowded little lounge, spotless white like the rest of the suite, doubled as interim storage for cold stasis units. Mon Mothma's "seat" held a mortal, wounded Ewok, who rested in suspended animation until the Alliance transported him to

fully equipped medical facility.

Han backed up against the bulkhead. Leia sat down beside Mon Mothma.

“Go on.” Admiral Ackbar’s projected image (in miniature) shone on the floor beside Artoo, who stood at attention maintaining the projection. “General Obi-wan Kenobi has given you orders?”

“That’s it, sir.” Luke wished Leia and Han hadn’t interrupted his explanation right at the most impressive moment.

Admiral Ackbar flicked chin tendrils with a webbed hand. “I have studied the Kenobi offensive. It was masterful. I have little faith in apparitions, but General Kenobi was one of the more powerful Jedi Knights, and Commander Skywalker’s word is generally reliable.”

General Madine frowned. “Captain Wedge Antilles should be fully recovered by the time any battle group could reach Bakura. I’d thought to put him in charge of the group—no offense, General,” he added, smiling faintly at Han.

“None taken,” Han drawled. “Separate me from the Ambassador there, and I’ll resign my commission.”

Luke covered a smile with one hand. Mon Mothma had already assigned Leia to represent the Alliance on Bakura, and to the Imperial presence there, and even requested that she attempt to contact the aliens. *Imagine how solidly the Alliance could challenge the Empire, if our ranks were swelled by that alien military force*, Mon Mothma had said cautiously.

“But Commander Skywalker is in considerably more serious condition,” Ackbar declared.

“I won’t be, by the time we can reach Bakura.”

“We must plan for every contingency.” Ackbar’s ruddy head bobbed. “We must defer to Endor now, and we’ve promised General Calrissian assistance with liberating Cloud City—”

“I talked to Lando on the comlink,” Han cut in. “He says he’s got ideas of his own, and thanks anyway.” Imperial forces had taken over Cloud City when Lando Calrissian—its baron-administrator—fled with Leia and Chewie, chasing the bounty hunter who’d flown off with Han as his carbon-frozen prisoner. Lando had had to forget Cloud City while he led the attack on Endor. They had indeed promised him all the fighters they could spare.

But Lando had always been a gambler.

“Then we shall send Bakura a small but strong strike force,” Ackbar declared, “to support Princess Leia in her role as chief negotiator. Most of your fighting will probably be in space, not groundside. Five Corellian Gunships and a Corvette will escort our smallest cruiser-carrier. Commander Skywalker, will that be enough?”

Luke started. “You’re giving me command, sir?”

“I don’t see that we have any choice,” Mon Mothma said quietly. “General Kenobi has spoken to you. Your record in battle is unmatched. Assist Bakura for us and then rejoin the Fleet immediately.”

Elated by the honor, Luke saluted her.

Early the following day, Luke examined the status boards of the newly commissioned Rebel carrier *Flurry*. “She’s ready to jump,” he observed.

“Ready and eager, Commander.” Captain Tessa Manchisco nudged his elbow. Fresh from the Virgillian Civil War, Captain Manchisco wore her black hair hanging in six thick braids down the back of her cream-colored uniform. She’d accepted the Bakura assignment with

relish. Her *Flurry*, a small, unconventional cruiser-carrier retrofitted with all the stolen Imperial components that opportunistic Virgillians could cram on board, carried a Virgillian bridge crew: besides Manchisco, three humans and a noseless, red-eyed Duro navigator. Inside the *Flurry*'s hangar bays, Admiral Ackbar's crews had packed twenty X-wing fighters, three A-wings, and four cruiser-assault B-wing fighters, as many as the Alliance could spare.

Peering out the *Flurry*'s triangular viewport, Luke spotted two of his Corellian Gunship. Riding shotgun above the carrier—even in zero gravity they habitually established a “bottom” to every formation—drifted the hottest souped-up freighter in this quadrant of the galaxy, the *Millennium Falcon*. Han, Chewbacca, Leia, and See-Threepio had boarded the *Falcon* less than an hour ago.

Luke's initial elation over being given command had already faded. It was one thing to fly a fighter under someone else's orders, with the Force as his ally. Strategy was something else. He carried responsibility for every life and every ship.

Still, he'd been studying strategic and tactical texts. And now—well, to tell the truth, he was almost looking forward to it....

Whoops. Abruptly his knuckles stung. He heard or remembered Yoda's soft laughter.

Frowning, he shut his eyes and relaxed. Everything still hurt, but he'd promised Toonebee that he'd rest and self-heal. He wished he felt better.

“Hyperdrive stations,” called Manchisco. “Commander, you might want to strap down.”

Luke glanced around the spartan hexagonal bridge: three stations besides his command seat, an array of battle boards now darkened for transit, and a single R2 droid socket occupied by the Virgillians' own unit. He buckled in, wondering what “disaster” waited on Bakura unless he dealt with it personally.

• • •

On an outer deck of a vast battle cruiser called the *Shriwarr*, Dev Sibwarra rested his slick brown hand on a prisoner's left shoulder. “It'll be all right,” he said softly. The other human's fear beat at his mind like a three-tailed lash. “There's no pain. You have a wonderful surprise ahead of you.” Wonderful indeed, a life without hunger, cold, or selfish desire.

The prisoner, an Imperial of much lighter complexion than Dev, slumped in the entechment chair. He'd given up protesting, and his breath came in gasps. Pliable bands secured his forelimbs, neck, and knees—but only for balance. With his nervous system deionized at the shoulders, he couldn't struggle. A slender intravenous tube dripped pale blue magnetizing solution into each of his carotid arteries while tiny servopumps hummed. It only took a few mils of magsol to attune the tiny, fluctuating electromagnetic fields of human brain waves to the Ssi-ruuvi entechment apparatus.

Behind Dev, Master Firwirrung trilled a question in Ssi-ruuvi. “Is it calmed yet?”

Dev sketched a bow to his master and switched from human speech to Ssi-ruuvi. “Calmed enough,” he sang back. “He's almost ready.”

Sleek, russet scales protected Firwirrung's two-meter length from beaked muzzle to muscular tail tip, and a prominent black V crest marked his forehead. Not large for a Ssi-ruuvi, he was still growing, with only a few age-scores where scales had begun to separate on his handsome chest. Firwirrung swung a broad, glowing white metal catchment arc down to cover the prisoner from midchest to nose. Dev could just peer over it and watch the man

pupils dilate. At any moment ...

“Now,” Dev announced.

Firwirrung touched a control. His muscular tail twitched with pleasure. The fleet’s capture had been good today. Alongside his master, Dev would work far into the night. Before entechment, prisoners were noisy and dangerous. Afterward, their life energies powered droids of Ssi-ruuvi choosing.

The catchment arc hummed up to pitch. Dev backed away. Inside that round human skull, magsol-drugged brain was losing control. Though Master Firwirrung assured him that the transfer of incorporeal energy was painless, every prisoner screamed.

As did this one, when Firwirrung threw the catchment arc switch. The arc boomed out sympathetic vibration, as brain energy leaped to an electromagnet perfectly attuned to magsol. Through the Force rippled an ululation of indescribable anguish.

Dev staggered and clung to the knowledge his masters had given him: The prisoners on the ship thought they felt pain. *He* only thought he sensed their pain. By the time the body screamed, all of a subject’s energies had jumped to the catchment arc. The screaming body already was dead.

“Transferred.” Firwirrung’s fluting whistle carried an amused undercurrent. Such a paternalistic attitude made Dev feel awkward. He was inferior. Human. Soft and vulnerable, like a wriggling white larva before metamorphosis. He longed to sit for entechment, and transfer his life energy to a powerful battle droid. Quietly he cursed the talents that sentenced him to go on waiting.

The catchment arc hummed louder, fully charged, more “alive” now than the limp body of the chair. Firwirrung faced a bulkhead stippled with hexagonal metal scales. “Ready down there?” His question came out as a rising labial whistle, ending with a snap of the toothed beak, then two sibilant whistles falling to throat-stop. It had taken Dev years to master Ssi-ruuvi, and countless sessions of hypnotic conditioning that also left him yearning to please Firwirrung, head of entechment.

Entechment work never ended. Life energy, like any other, could be stored in the right kind of battery. But brain wavelength electrical activity, which accompanied life energy in the droid charges, eventually set up destructive harmonics. The droids’ vital control circuits “died” of fatal psychosis.

Still, human energies lasted longer than any other species in entechment, whether slaved to shipboard circuits or motivating battle droids.

Deck 16 of the huge battle cruiser finally whistled an answer. Firwirrung pressed his three-fingered foreclaw against a button. The catchment arc fell silent. The lucky human’s life energy was even now sparking in a reservoir coil behind one small pyramidal battle droid sensor clusters. Now he’d be able to see at additional wavelengths and in all directions. He would never again need oxygen or temperature control, nourishment or sleep. Free from the awkward necessity of will, of ever making his own decisions, his new housing would respond to all Ssi-ruuvi orders.

Perfect obedience. Dev bowed his head, wishing it were him. Droid ships suffered no sadness or pain. A glorious metamorphosis, until one day enemy laser fire destroyed the coil ... or those destructive psychotic harmonics unlinked it from control circuits.

Firwirrung retracted catchment arc, IVs, and restraints. Dev pulled the body husk off the

chair and slid it into a hexagonal deck chute. It thumped away into blackness.

Tail-down relaxed, Firwurrung swept away from the table. He poured a cup of red ksa while Dev brought down a nozzle arm and sprayed the chair several times. Biologic byproducts flushed harmlessly through drains in the center of the seat.

Dev raised the spray arm, locked it at standby, then waved at a switch for the chair to warm itself dry. "Ready," he whistled. Eagerly he turned to the hatchway.

Two small, young P'w'ecks brought in the next prisoner, a wrinkled human with eight closely spaced red and blue rectangles on the breast of his green-gray Imperial tunic, and a disarrayed shock of white hair. He struggled to wrench his arms out of his guards' foreclaws. The tunic provided pitifully little protection. Red human blood welled through his skin and his torn sleeves.

If only he knew how unnecessary all this resistance was. Dev stepped forward. "It's all right." He held his paddle-shaped ion beamer—a medical instrument that could double as a safe shipboard weapon—in the blue-and-green side stripes of his long tunic. "It's not what you think, not at all."

The man's eyes opened so wide that obscene white sclerae showed all around the irises. "What do I think?" the man demanded, his feelings a Force-swirl of panic. "Who are you? What are you doing here? Wait—you're the one ..."

"I'm your friend." Keeping his own eyes half closed to hide the sclerae (he had only two eyelids, unlike his masters' three), Dev rested his right hand on the man's shoulder. "And I'm here to help you. Don't be afraid." *Please*, he added silently. *It hurts when you fear me. And you're so lucky. We'll be quick.* He pressed his beamer to the back of the prisoner's neck. Struggling, gripping the activator, he ran it swiftly down the man's spine.

The Imperial officer's muscles loosened. His servent-race guards let him fall to the tile-gray deck. "Clumsy!" Firwurrung sprang forward on massive hind legs, tail stiff as he railed at the smaller P'w'ecks. Other than size and drabness, they looked almost like the masterly Ssruuk ... from a distance. "Respect the prisoners," Firwurrung sang. He might be young for command rank duty, but he demanded deference.

Dev helped the three lift and position the smelly, perspiring human. Fully conscious—the catchment arc would not operate otherwise—the man wobbled off the chair. Dev caught him by both shoulders, wrenching his own back. "Relax," Dev murmured. "It's all right."

"Don't do this!" the prisoner cried. "I have powerful friends. They'll pay well for my release."

"We would love to meet them. But we won't deny you this joy." Dev let his spirit center float over the stranger's fear, then pressed it down like a comforting blanket. Once the P'w'ecks had securely anchored the restraint bands, Dev relaxed his grip and rubbed his back. Firwurrung's right foreclaw jabbed upward, placing one IV. He had not sterilized the needle. It was unnecessary.

At last, the prisoner sat helpless and ready. Clear liquid dripped out of one eye and the corner of his mouth. The servopump sent magnetizing fluid up the IVs.

Another liberated soul, another droid ship ready to help take the human Empire.

Trying to ignore the prisoner's wet face and enervating terror, Dev rested a slim brow on his left shoulder. "It'll be all right," he said softly. "There's no pain. You have a wonderful surprise ahead of you."

At last all the day's prisoners were safely enteched—except one female, who slipped free of the servant P'w'ecks and dashed her head against a bulkhead before Dev could catch her. After several minutes' effort at revival, Master Firwirrung's head and tail drooped. "No use," he whistled regretfully. "Sad waste. Recycle it."

Dev cleaned up. Entechment was noble work, and he keenly felt the honor of involvement even if his role was merely that of a servant who could Force calm the subjects. He slipped his paddle-shaped beamer into the underside of an overhead storage shelf, with its flattened topside up, then pressed its pointed projection end into the sheath notch until it clicked. The knurled handle, specially made for his five-fingered hand, dangled beneath the flat paddle and behind its rounded handguard.

Firwirrung led Dev back up spacious corridors to their quarters and poured soothing ksa for both of them. Dev drank gratefully, seated in the circular cabin's only chair. Ssi-ruuk needed no furniture. Hissing contentment, Firwirrung settled his broad tail and hindquarters comfortably onto the warm gray deck. "Are you happy, Dev?" he asked. Liquid black eyes blinked over the ksa mug and reflected the bitter red tonic.

It was an offer of solace. Whenever life saddened Dev, whenever he missed the sense of wholeness he'd had when his mother Force linked with him, Firwirrung took him to bluescaled Elder Sh'tk'ith for renewal therapy.

"Very happy," Dev answered truthfully. "A good day's work. Much kindness."

Firwirrung nodded sagely. "Much kindness," he whistled back. His scent tongues flicked over his nostrils, taste-smelling Dev's presence. "Stretch out, Dev. What do you see tonight in the hidden universe?"

Dev smiled weakly. The master meant it as a compliment. All Ssi-ruuk were Force blind. Dev knew now that he was the only sensitive, human or otherwise, they'd ever met.

Through him, the Ssi-ruuk had learned of the Emperor's death moments after it happened. Because the Force existed in all life, he'd felt the shock wave of power ripple through spirit and space.

Months ago, His Potency the Shreeftut had responded immediately when Emperor Palpatine offered prisoners in exchange for tiny, two-meter droid fighters of his own. Palpatine couldn't have known how many dozen million Ssi-ruuk lived on Lwhekk, in the distant star cluster. Admiral Ivpikkis captured and questioned several Imperial citizens. The human Empire, he learned, stretched out for parsecs. Its star systems lay like nesting sand fertile for the planting of Ssi-ruuvi life.

But then the Emperor died. There would be no bargain. The traitorous humans had abandoned them to get home as best they could, with the fleet's energy almost spent. Admiral Ivpikkis had come ahead with the battle cruiser *Shriwirr* and a small advance force, only half a dozen attack ships with supporting entechment equipment. The main fleet hung back, waiting for news of success or failure.

If they could take a major human world, that entechment equipment—Master Firwirrung's domain—would give them the human Empire. Bakura, when it fell, would provide the technology to construct dozens of entechment chairs. Each enteched Bakuran would power or shield a battle droid fighter or vitalize some critical ship component on one of the large cruisers. With dozens of entechment teams trained and equipped, the Ssi-ruuvi fleet could take the humans' populous Core worlds. There were a dozen thousand planets to liberate. S

much kindness to accomplish.

Dev almost worshiped his masters' courage in coming so far and risking so much for the good of the Ssi-ruuvi Imperium and the liberation of other species. If a Ssi-ruu died away from a consecrated home world, his spirit roamed the galaxies alone forever.

Dev shook his head and answered, "Outside, I sense only the quiet winds of life itself. Aboard the *Shriwirr*, mourning and confusion in your new children."

Firwirrung stroked Dev's arm, his three opposable claws barely reddening the tendr scaleless skin. Dev smiled, empathizing with his master. Firwirrung had no clutchmates on board, and the military life meant lonely hours and terrible risks. "Master," Dev said, "maybe—some day—might we return to Lwhekk?"

"You and I might never go home, Dev. But soon we will consecrate a new home world in your galaxy. Send for our families ..." As Firwirrung glanced at the sleeping pit, a whiff of acrid reptilian breath trailed across Dev's face.

Dev didn't flinch. He was used to that smell. His own body odors sickened the Ssi-ruuk, so he bathed in and drank special solvents four times daily. For special occasions, he shaved all his hair. "A clutch of your own kind," he murmured.

Firwirrung cocked his head and stared with one black eye. "Your work brings me closer to that clutch. But for now, I am weary."

"I'm keeping you awake," Dev said, instantly repentant. "Please get your rest. I'll come along soon."

Once Firwirrung lay nested in his cluster of pillows, with his body warmed by below-deck generators and triple eyelids sheltering the beautiful black eyes, Dev took his evening bath and drank his deodorizing medication. To take his mind off the abdominal cramps that always followed, he pulled his chair over to a long, curved desk/counter. He withdrew an unfinished book from the library and loaded it into his reader.

For months, he'd been working on a project that might serve humankind even better than he served it now (in fact, he feared that the Ssi-ruuk would entech him into circuits to complete this work rather than into the battle droid he hoped to earn).

He'd known how to read and write before the Ssi-ruuk adopted him, both letters and music. Combining those symbologies, he was devising a system to write Ssi-ruuvi for human usage. On the musical staff, he noted pitches. Symbols he'd invented signified labial, full-tongue, half-tongue, and guttural whistles. Letters showed vowels and final-click blending. *Ssi-ruu* required a full line of data: The half-tongue whistle rose a perfect fifth while the mouth formed the letter *e*. Then a puckered labial whistle, down a minor third. *Ssi-ruu* was the singular form. The plural, *Ssi-ruuk*, ended with a throat-click. Ssi-ruuvi was complex but lovely, like birdsong from Dev's youth on the outpost planet G'rho.

Dev had a good ear, but the complicated task invariably overwhelmed him at the late hours of his free time. As soon as the cramping and nausea passed, he shut down his glowing reader and crawled in the dark toward the faint fetid smell of Firwirrung's bed pit. Too warm and blooded, he stacked a pile of pillows to insulate him from the quarters' below-deck heat. Then he curled up far from his master and thought of his home.

Dev's abilities had caught his mother's attention from a very early age, back on Chandrila. A Jedi apprentice who hadn't completed her training, she'd taught him a little about the Force. He'd even communicated with her over distances.

Then came the Empire. There'd been a purge of Jedi candidates. The family fled to isolate G'rho.

Barely had they settled in when the Ssi-ruuk arrived. Her Force sense vanished, leaving him far from home and bereft and terrified of the invading spaceships. Master Firwurrung had always said that his parents would've killed Dev if they could, rather than let the Ssi-ruuk adopt him. Terrifying thought—their own child!

But Dev had escaped death on both counts. The Ssi-ruuvi scouts found him huddling in a eroded ravine. Fascinated by the giant lizards with round black eyes, the undersize ten-year-old had taken their food and affection. They'd shipped him back to Lwhekk, where he had lived for five years. Eventually, he learned why they hadn't enteched him. His uncanny mental abilities would make him an ideal scout for approaching other human systems. They also allowed him to calm entechment subjects. He wished he remembered what he'd said or done that revealed his talent.

He'd taught the Ssi-ruuk all he knew about humankind, from mind-set and customs to clothing (including shoes, which amused them). Already he'd helped them take several human outposts. Bakura would be the key world ... and they were winning! Soon, the Bakuran Imperials would run out of fighting ships and the Ssi-ruuk could approach Bakura's population centers. A dozen P'w'eck landing craft carried paralysis canisters, ready to drop.

Over a standard hailing frequency, Dev had already announced to Bakurans the good news of their impending release from human limitations. Master Firwurrung said it was only normal that they resisted. Unlike Ssi-ruuk, humans feared the unknown. Entechment was a change from which there was no returning to report.

Dev yawned mightily. His masters would protect him from the Empire, and some day reward him. Firwurrung had promised to stand beside him and lower the catchment around himself.

Dreamily, Dev stroked his throat. The IVs would go ... here. And here. Some day, some day.

He covered his head with his arms and slept.

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