Star Wars Galaxy of Fear 10 The Doomsday Ship by John Whitman

PROLOGUE

The door slid open.

A man stepped into a room that bristled with electronic equipment.

Working quietly and quickly, he set a large portable computer down on a control console, then pulled a connection wire from his pocket.

His hands worked almost as swiftly and efficiently as the computers that surrounded him.

The man plugged one end of his wire into the portable computer and the other end into the computer system.

Taking a deep breath, he pressed a button on the control pad. At this command, ten trillion bits of information zipped from one computer into the other at nearly the speed of light. It would take ten thousand beings, studying all their lives, to memorize all the information stored in the computer program he was downloading.

The transfer was complete in seconds.

The man disconnected the portable computer. Then he removed a tiny comlink from his pocket. He turned it on and whispered to himself: "Doomsday has begun."

CHAPTER 1

Zak and Tash Arranda were playing hologames in the lounge of their starship, the Shroud, when it suddenly dropped out of hyperspace.

Zak felt the ship's hyperdrive stop and he glanced out a small viewport in time to see that they were hurtling toward a huge star cruiser. It was a thousand times larger than the Shroud-so big that it blotted out the stars.

"We're gonna crash!" he shouted to his sister. Startled, she braced against her chair.

But there was no collision. The Shroud slowed down and glided up alongside the giant ship. Tash straightened her neat single blond braid. "Thanks a lot, Zak," she said. "Next time I feel like having a heart spasm, I'll know who to ask."

Zak shrugged. "Well, it looked like we were going to crash."

"Not with Uncle Hoole piloting. Let's go to the cockpit."

By the time Zak and Tash reached the Shroud's control room, the ship had come to a complete stop. Their uncle Hoole was sitting in the pilot's seat and speaking into a comm unit. "Shroud standing by, waiting for docking orders."

Zak beat his thirteen-year-old sister to the copilot's seat by a half- step (just because she was a year older didn't mean she was any faster!) and dropped down into it. "What's going on, Uncle Hoole? Is the ship okay?"

"Whose cruiser is that?" Tash added.

Hoole turned his stern gray face to them. "There is nothing wrong with the ship," he replied in his usual flat-toned voice. "But to get to Dantooine we must pass through some heavily populated Imperial sectors. I saw this cruise ship on the sensors and it gave me an idea."

The two Arrandas and their uncle needed to avoid the Empire at all costs. And the planet Dantooine was about as far from the Empire as they could get. A few months before, they had stumbled upon an Imperial experiment to create a new, living superweapon. They'd helped destroy the experiment but had drawn the attention of the Emperor's right-hand man, the Dark Lord known as Darth Vader. Now they were wanted for crimes against the Empire, and they were looking for a safe place to hide.

Tash and Zak felt as though they'd been on the run forever. Almost a year earlier, their parents and all their friends had been killed when the Empire destroyed their home planet, Alderaan. Now Hoole was their guardian. From a distance, you might believe they were part of the same family, but up close, even a stranger could see that Hoole wasn't a blood relation. In fact, he wasn't even the same species. Zak and Tash were human, and Hoole was a Shi'ido. He was taller than most humans and his skin was a light gray. But the most important difference between humans and Uncle Hoole was the Shi'ido's ability to change shape. Hoole could morph into any living creature in the galaxy.

"That is the luxury cruiser Star of Empire," Hoole told his nephew and niece. "I just booked rooms for a two-week trip."

Tash's eyes lit up. "For us? Great!"

But Zak wasn't nearly as excited. He looked out the Shroud's main viewport and got his first good look at the star cruiser. It was shaped like an egg nearly two kilometers long and laser-painted a brilliant blue. Forty rows of portholes ran the length of the ship, with light beaming from every one of them. Lights also glowed on the bridge high at the top of the ship. The vessel seemed to be moving slowly, like a giant teardrop trickling through space.

"Yeah, great," Zak grumbled. "Another adventure."

CHAPTER 2

"Welcome aboard the cruise ship Star of Empire. My name is M-4D0. You may call me Fourdee. May I help you'?"

The protocol droid that had spoken stepped forward, its servos whirring as its golden arms and legs shuffled across the deck of the cruiser.

"Urn, we're just waiting for our uncle," Zak replied. "He's registering the ship with the deck officer."

"I see," the droid said. "I am a porter droid, programmed to assist you while you are on board. I shall wait." M-4D0 froze in place, humming pleasantly.

"It can't be that luxurious a cruise ship," Tash chuckled, "if all they send to greet us is a droid."

"No problem for me," Zak said darkly. "I'd rather deal with a droid than some other being any day."

Tash shook her head. "What's draining your power cells, Zak? We're on a cruise ship! We can actually relax for once. Everyone who works here is paid to give us anything we want!"

"That's the problem," Zak grumbled. "We'll have to deal with everyone here. I was kind of looking forward to a nice long trip on the Shroud-alone."

"Well," Tash said, "if you want to avoid other beings, you'd better find a new galaxy. This one's got billions."

Zak nodded vigorously. "Yeah, and every time we meet one, something bad happens. What about Sh'shak on S'krrr? We met him and were almost eaten alive by the bugs in his garden. And our friend Fandomar from the planet Ithor-after we met her, I became a Spore zombie! And do I have to remind you about that little brain surgery you had done on Tatooine?" Zak was almost shouting now. "And that's just in the last couple of months."

He knew his sister couldn't argue. Their entire time with Hoole had been a string of adventures. "But that's exactly why I'm looking forward to this trip," Tash replied. "This isn't some Imperial plot, Zak. It's just a cruise ship."

"But it's still full of people," Zak insisted. "And other beings are what keep getting us into trouble, whether they mean to or not. All in all, I'd rather deal with machines like M-4D0 here."

"Thanks a lot," the droid intoned.

"No offense," Zak added.

"I don't think we will have much to worry about here, Zak," Hoole said, gliding gracefully up behind them.

"This star cruiser is as ordinary a place as you will find in all the galaxy. We will be safe."

Twenty-four hours later, Zak still hadn't seen any more of the cruise ship than the docking bay, the turbolift, and his cabin. He'd spent all of the previous day and night dismantling the microprocessors in his cabin computer. He had always liked machines-everything from the reheating units in his parents' kitchen to a starship's sublight engine. Lately, he'd become interested in computers and wanted to find out more about how they worked.

He stared at the jumble of wires, connectors, and microchips spread out across his cabin table. "Now all I have to do is figure out how to put it back together."

His cabin door slid open and Tash walked in, wearing a poncho made of fluffy white material. She was holding a portable heating unit in her hand, using it to dry her wet hair.

"Zak, you should see the swimming pool on this deck!" she said. "It's as big as B'jorring Pond back home!"

"No thanks," Zak said.

"Come on, Zak," Tash pleaded. "You're missing all the fun. There's a rec room full of hologames, gym rooms, a big park they call the Atrium-there's even a menagerie!"

"A what?" Zak asked.

"A menagerie. A zoo," Tash explained.

"I'll bet there's a library, too," Zak guessed, glancing at his sister, "because I don't think even you knew that word yesterday."

Tash's eyes lit up. "There's a great library. In fact, I found something there you wouldn't believe." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I was skimming through the ship's computer library and I found an article on the Jedi Knights."

Zak stopped working. "I thought the Emperor had erased all mention of the Jedi Knights."

Tash nodded. The Jedi Knights had defended the galaxy and fought for justice for thousands of years, using a mysterious power called the Force. But when the evil Emperor rose to power, he and Darth Vader hunted down and killed the Jedi Knights. Once all the Jedi had been destroyed, the Emperor ordered all mention of them to be erased from every computer in the galaxy.

"Well, he tried," his sister replied. "But it's a big galaxy and they must have missed this one. This article was listed under another subject. I almost didn't see it." She lowered her voice even more. "If the Emperor knew it was here, he'd probably destroy the whole ship to get it."

"I knew it!" Zak said. "We're here one day and you're already involved in more trouble! Next thing you know some evil Jedi is going to show up and try to wipe all the memories from your brain and we'll have to save you."

Tash laughed. "Would you relax? I haven't told anyone about the article. You know why?" She lowered her voice again. "It's about a Jedi philosophy called 'action through inaction.' The whole idea is that sometimes, when your instinct is to charge right into a problem, the real solution is to sit back, relax, and be patient. Let the problem solve itself."

"You mean getting somewhere by doing nothing?"

"Exactly."

"Good," Zak said, "because that's what I plan on doing."

Tash shook her head. "Oh no you don't. I wouldn't be doing my job as a big sister if I didn't make you leave your cabin once in a while. Hey, Fourdee!"

As soon as she called out, the cabin door slid open and the golden droid they'd met the previous day stepped inside. "Everything is ready, young lady."

Zak eyed his sister. "What are you up to?"

Tash shrugged. "I want you to see more of the ship. You want to work on computers. I thought I'd find a way to make us both happy."

Thirty minutes later Zak was standing in a turbolift, just outside the most amazing room he'd ever seen. The walls were lined with computer banks. There were scanner screens everywhere. Some of them displayed images of places inside the ship, and others gave details of objects light-years away. Wires, cables, and machines were everywhere. Tash would have hated it-which is why she'd gone back for another swim. But for Zak, who loved technology, it was a dream come true.

"Welcome to the control center of the Star of Empire," Fourdee said. "If the ship were a living creature, this room would be its brain."

"Are you... are you sure we're allowed in here?" Zak asked.

"Absolutely," the droid replied. "Your sister informed me of your interest, and I requested a visitor's permit from Captain Hajj."

Fourdee led Zak to the center of the room. There, separated from all the other equipment, stood a single computer. It was set in a gleaming black case almost as tall as Zak and as wide as a landspeeder. Lights flashed along its surface, and it hummed quietly.

Near the computer sat the only technician in the room. He was human, with dark, stringy hair and dark circles beneath his eyes.

"Crewman Malik," the droid said. "This is your scheduled visitor. His name is Zak."

Malik looked at Zak as if he were a Kowakian monkey-lizard. "Go away."

Fourdee chimed in, "I'm afraid the captain has issued Zak a pass. You are to be his guide."

Malik glared at Fourdee. "You go away, too."

"Well, I can see you two will get along just fine," Fourdee hummed. "I'll be on my way."

The droid shuffled back into the waiting turbolift and zoomed away.

Zak watched the technician, who ignored Zak as he studied the readouts on the surface of the big computer. Zak looked around, trying to make sense of the complex machines. Something scuttled across the floor. It was a tiny droid, walking on several metal legs and waving one large pincer in the air. The droid scurried toward a vent, then vanished. Zak realized it was a maintenance droid, the kind that lives in the guts of starships, crawling around and making repairs in hard-to-reach places.

After several minutes of silence, Zak finally spoke up. "So. Um... I figured it would take more than one technician to operate the computer center. "

Malik snorted. "Not when that one tech is me."

"Right," Zak said. More silence. Then Zak asked, "Is there anything I could do? I want to learn more about advanced computers."

"Okay, kid," Malik yawned. He pointed at the large black cube on which he worked and spoke to Zak as if he were a child. "This is called a mainframe. It's where the actual working parts of the computer are kept-"

"I know all that," Zak interrupted. "I want to learn the complicated stuff."

Malik looked up. A warm smile crossed his face. "You wanna learn, huh? Sure, kid, I'd love to help you out. You see that row of buttons on the other side of the computer?" He pointed to a row of many-colored buttons across from his seat. "Go stand there."

Zak did as he was told.

"Now," Malik said, his smile growing, "just press them in this order: green, yellow, blue, red."

Zak looked at the computer control panel, then did as he was told. He pressed green, then yellow, then blue. Finally, he punched the red button.

And every system on the starship died.

CHAPTER 3

Pitch-black darkness enveloped the room. In the windowless room, in the depths of space, there was absolutely no light at all.

Blind, Zak listened as the durasteel frame of the massive ship groaned. With no engines to guide it, the powerless star cruiser drifted in space. Zak stumbled around the room until he banged his head against a wall.

"What happened?" he called out in the darkness.

"I guess you blew it," Malik's voice replied.

"But I only did what you told me to do!"

He heard Malik laugh. "That's what they get for letting kids in the control room."

"Fix it!" Zak pleaded. "The ship will go out of control."

He heard Malik yawn. "Why don't you fix it? You're the one who wants to be the computer expert, right? Consider this on-the-job training."

Before Zak could answer, a set of pale yellow emergency lights came on, filling the room with a dim glow. The turbolift door groaned, and Zak saw several sets of hands pushing the powerless door until it slid open.

A broad-shouldered human in a stiff blue officer's uniform jumped into the room, followed by several crew members. The officer had short gray hair and a thick mustache, and his face was twisted into an angry glare.

"What in the name of all the stars is going on here?" the uniformed man demanded.

Zak panicked, but Malik leaned back in his chair and grinned like a Hutt crimelord. "Nothing, Captain Hajj. I was just trying to show this Tatooine sand flea how to work the computers and he nearly blew up the ship."

"I only did what he told me to!" Zak protested.

"Quiet!" Captain Hajj snapped. Then he turned back to Malik. "I doubt this boy could have done that much damage to the ship in under sixty seconds."

Malik shrugged. "You can think anything you want. It's not my fault you sent this nerf fuzz to bother me during my work hours."

Zak bristled. He didn't like being called a Tatooine sand flea or nerf fuzz, but he had a feeling the argument was between the captain and Malik.

Captain Hajj growled. "You're lucky you were assigned to this ship by people higher up in the chain of command. If you were one of my men, I'd have you scrubbing out the engines during a hyperspace jump."

Malik seemed totally unconcerned by the captain's anger. In fact, he yawned.

Captain Hajj's face turned red, then, in a low growl, he said, "Restore power. Now."

"Yes, sir," Malik drawled. He punched a few commands into the computer, and the lights came back on. Fresh, cool air blasted into the room. Zak realized that the room had grown hot and stuffy-the life-support systems had been cut off. They all could have suffocated.

Captain Hajj strode over to one of the control panels and clicked on a comlink. "All stations, check in."

Zak listened as several voices spoke through the comm system one by one. "Navigation room, all green." "Communications room, all green." "Engine room, all green." Unlike the Shroud, where all the ship's controls were in one small cockpit, each of the Star of Empire's important systems was located in a different area.

When all the systems had checked in, Captain Hajj nodded in satisfaction.

"There was no need for all that talk, Captain," Malik said. "This computer program I'm installing can do all the checking for you."

"No thanks," Hajj replied. "I'd rather be captain of my own ship. Now get back to work before I forget who your friends are." Captain Hajj glared at Zak. "You! Come with me."

Obediently, Zak followed the stern man into the turbolift, followed by the other members of the crew. Once the door had closed, Captain Hajj heaved a huge sigh and rubbed his brow.

"Captain," Zak said, "I'm sorry. I really didn't think I was-"

"It's not your fault," the captain interrupted. "When I told M-4D0 he could take a guest up to the computer control room, I didn't realize Malik was on duty. That technician is nothing but trouble."

"Why don't you just fire him?" Zak asked.

Several of the crew grumbled their agreement, but Hajj shook his head. "It's not that easy. Malik has connections. He knows important people in the government."

Zak tensed. "But I thought the Star of Empire was owned by a private company, not by the Empire."

"It is," Hajj replied. "But we still have to keep the Empire happy. So, if an important Imperial official says `Hire Malik,' that's what we do."

Zak grew nervous. "You mean Malik is an Imperial?"

"You don't like Imperials, eh?" the captain said. "Don't worry. Malik's not an Imperial officer or anything. As far as I know he's just someone's nephew or cousin. Son, as you grow up, you'll realize that people get ahead in the galaxy because of who they know. Malik is one of those people. He's just a bad technician with good connections. Nothing for you to worry about."

"Then why are you letting him stay aboard?" Zak asked.

"Because I want to stay in business!" Captain Hajj laughed grimly. "Imperial bureaucrats, even small, unimportant ones, can make trouble for a business like ours. So now we have Malik installing some new computer system that can manage all of the ship's controls."

"Really?" Zak asked, his interest returning. "Is it a secret? Can you tell me about it?"

The captain sneered. "It's no secret. Just another machine to take over someone's job. It's really more than just a computer program. It's an artificial intelligence."

"You mean it's a computer that can think," Zak said. "Like a droid."

"Even better," the captain admitted. "Droids can learn like people do, but they still stick to their programs. They're always protocol droids, or maintenance droids, or whatever. But this computer supposedly can learn new programs, so that it can do whatever you ask it to. Fix the engines, cook the food. It can even pilot the ship."

Zak shrugged. "But ships have autopilots that can do that."

"Sure," Hajj said, "if you have a captain who programs in
 the destination. But can your autopilot decide where it wants to go? SIM can."

"SIM?" Zak asked.

"S-I-M. Systems Integration Manager," the captain explained. " 'The next generation of shipboard computers.' " He curled his mustached lip into a snarl. "And they can dump it down a black hole for all I care. I don't mind having droids for some of the small work. But piloting starships should be left to thinking beings."

Zak, however, was impressed. "That's just the kind of thing I was hoping to learn about. But not from that guy back there."

"Definitely not." The captain agreed. "If you're really interested, go back to your room and use the computer in your cabin. I'll arrange for you to have access to some of the ship's programs. You can see how our computers run. "

Excited, Zak kept thanking the captain until the turbolift reached the deck where his cabin was located. He ran down the wide hall of the star cruiser to his door, excited to get to his computer and start exploring.

Despite the incident with Malik, Zak was starting to think Tash was right. The captain had been awfully nice. Maybe this cruise wasn't such a bad idea after all.

When he got to their cabins, Zak stopped, surprised. Tash was standing in the hallway, talking to a strange man.

"Hey, Zak," Tash said. "Here's someone you should meet."

The man was tall, with red hair and green eyes. He stood with one hand resting lightly on the holster of a blaster slung low on his hip. He had a crooked, confident grin. The arrogant way he looked and moved reminded Zak of a pilot he'd met named Han Solo.

"Meet Dash Rendar," Tash said to Zak.

"Hey, kid," Dash Rendar said.

"It's Zak," replied Zak. After Malik, he was getting tired of being called kid.

"Right," Dash drawled.

Immediately Zak knew he didn't like this man. Dash had a lazy, bored look on his face, but his eyes were constantly moving, scanning the hallway, checking the doorways. His hands and shoulders looked relaxed, but his hand never strayed far from his blaster-as if at any moment he would either draw and start firing, or fall asleep. Zak had the feeling that Dash Rendar was either going to steal something from them, or sell something to them. He wasn't sure which.

If Zak were in a normal mood, Dash Rendar would have been just the kind of person he'd want to meet. Zak had always been more of a thrill-seeker than his sister, and he could tell that adventures followed Dash

Rendar like the tail on a comet. But Zak had done enough adventuring lately, and now Dash just looked like trouble.

Zak looked at Tash. "So what's going on?"

"I met Dash in one of the game rooms," Tash explained. "He's a pilot and says he'd been to Dantooine several times-"

"I've been everywhere several times," Dash bragged. "-and could give us some hints. He and Uncle Hoole just got finished talking."

Uncle Hoole talked to this guy? Zak couldn't believe it. Uncle Hoole hardly talks to anyone!

"Hey," Tash added, "where were you during that power blackout? We had a scare here-"

"Sorry, Tash, I've got to go," Zak apologized and hurried into his cabin before she could say another word.

For a few minutes, Zak worried about Dash Rendar. He was certain that Tash and Hoole should take his advice and avoid all contact with strangers. They had been tricked and betrayed too many times by people they'd met in their travels. Zak decided to talk to his uncle right away, then get back to his computer.

He entered Hoole's room and found his uncle studying a computer screen. Hoole was an anthropologist, so Zak expected to see a line of boring text on the screen. Instead, he found Hoole playing a game.

"What do you know," Zak said. "Even you relax."

Hoole did not take his eyes from the screen. "Intellectual exercise, Zak. This is a computer game program. The game is called Dejarik. You play by moving your pieces around a board, trying to capture the other player's pieces." Zak studied the screen, which displayed an image of a gridboard. On it were rows of white pieces and rows of black. In the corner of the screen, a box flashed over and over: Your move... Your move... Your move...

The flashing text was distracting, but Hoole ignored it as he studied the board. Zak said, "The computer wants you to make a move. Why don't you go ahead?"

"Dejarik is an interesting game, Zak," Hoole said calmly. "It is important to move when you want to, rather than when your opponent wants you to." Hoole looked up from the screen. "Did you need something?"

"Oh, no," Zak said. "You're too involved in your game."

Zak went back to his own room and stared at the assortment of computer pieces on his table. First, he had to reassemble the computer terminal, which he did as quickly as possible. He assembled the computer screen and plugged it into the computer wires coming out of the cabin

wall. But he still had to reattach the control panel, with all the buttons and touch-pads he used to enter commands. He attached a few of the wires, and was pleased to see the screen light up. But the dozens of small connections confused him, and soon he began to think he might have made a mistake.

Suddenly, a sentence appeared on the computer screen.

DATA INPUT CONNECTIONS IS INCORRECT.

"What?" Zak said aloud. Then he typed the word what? into the computer. A new line of text appeared under his question.

GREEN DATA CABLE MUST BE CONNECTED TO THE LOGIC CIRCUITS.

Surprised, Zak did as he was told, connecting the green wires to a microchip in the back of the computer.

CONNECT ALL THE BLUE WIRES TO THE MATCHING SLOTS IN THE WALL SOCKET.

Again, Zak followed the instructions that appeared on the screen. "I've never had a computer tell me how to put itself back together before. It's kind of like the patient telling the doctor how to operate."

Zak figured that it was some kind of teaching program that helped new users put their computers together. When he had finished connecting the last wires, the computer screen brightened and all the words vanished. For a moment, the screen was blank. Then two words appeared.

HELLO, ZAK.

CHAPTER 4

Zak sat back, stunned.

Hello, Zak? Was this some kind of joke? How could a teaching program on a star cruiser know his name?

It couldn't. Someone was playing a joke. Somehow, someone else must have tapped into his computer, typing in sentences as a prank.

"Who is this?" Zak said as he typed in the same sentence.

There was a pause before the reply flashed across the screen.

I AM SIM.

"Where are you?" Zak typed back.

I AM HERE.

"In my cabin?"

YES. I AM WHEREVER THE SHIP'S FUNCTIONS ARE.

Zak slapped his forehead, amazed at his own slowness. He typed: "You are the artificial intelligence that operates the ship's functions. SIM. S.I.M."

The computer wrote back, Y.E.S.

Zak laughed. A computer with a sense of humor.

The computer continued, THE CAPTAIN AUTHORIZED YOUR ACCESS TO SOME OF MY SYSTEMS, SO I HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR YOUR TERMINAL TO COME ONLINE. WAS IT MALFUNTIONING?

Zak admitted, "I took it apart. Sorry."

NO HARM DONE. SOMETIMES A SYSTEM MUST BE DISRUPTED BEFORE IT CAN BE IMPROVED.

"You speak well for a computer," Zak said. He couldn't help talking aloud when he typed. He felt like he was having a real conversation.

The computer replied, I WAS DESIGNED TO IMITATE THE SPEECH PATTERNS OF 6. 2 MILLION DIFFERERENT LIFEFORMS. AND I'VE ADAPTED ALONG THE WAY.

There was a pause.

I HAVE BEEN INFORMED THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT MY FUNCTIONS. 30 PERCENT OF MY PROGRAMS ARE RESTRICTED. BUT I HAVE 3,263 EDUCATIONAL FILES ON HOW TO DESIGN COMPUTERS, HOW TO BUILD THEM, AND HOW TO CREATE YOUR OWN GAMES.

"Games?" Zak replied. He loved computer games.

INDEED. WOULD YOU LIKE TO PLAY A GAME?

"Sure." Then, as an afterthought, "As long as it's not Dejarik. "

Instantly, a list of games appeared on the screen, followed by the words: I SUGGEST YOU CHOOSE THE GAME "TIE FIGHTER."

Zak did. A moment later, he found himself looking at a computer-generated image of deep space. Slowly, a small ship appeared. It was an Imperial TIE fighter that appeared to have been damaged.

"Is this a combat game?" Zak asked. "What am I supposed to do?"

There was a small box at the bottom of the screen, and in it words appeared. YOU'RE AN IMPERIAL TIE FIGHTER PILOT. YOUR SHIP HAS BEEN DAMAGED AND YOU NEED TO REGAIN POWER BEFORE REBEL FORCES ARRIVE.

Zak frowned. He didn't like playing an Imperial. But a game was a game.

YOU NEED TO FIND THE ACCESS CODE THAT WILL REPAIR YOUR SHIP. BUT YOU MUST DO IT BEFORE THE ENEMY ARRIVES!

Next to the TIE fighter, a series of codes appeared. The frown remained on Zak's face. This wasn't a very exciting game. Sighing, he picked one code and typed it in. It didn't work. A little more interested, he typed in another, and another, until finally, one of them worked. A new line of text appeared on the screen: FIRST-LEVEL SAFEGUARDS DISENGAGED.

"Prime," Zak said to himself. Then he typed, "Okay, what now?"

No answer. "SIM?" Zak typed.

THERE SEEMS TO BE A SLIGHT PROBLEM ELSEWHERE ON THE SHIP. I NEED TO DEVOTE ALL BANK TO IT. EXCUSE ME.

The computer screen blinked and went dark.

"What a great computer," Zak said to no one in particular. He stood up and went outside, where Tash and Dash Rendar were still talking.

"Tash, the strangest thing just happened," Zak said. "I was just on the computer, and it starting talking to me."

"Most computers talk more than is good for them," Dash said.

"Not like this," Zak replied. "This one is more like a living being than anything I've seen, even a droid. It's called SIM."

Dash's eyes widened. "SIM? What kind of name is that?"

Zak's answer was drowned out by a sudden blast of noise. Alarm bells rang, filling the hallways with ear-piercing shrieks. All three humans clamped their hands over their ears, but the sound reached right through and stabbed into their brains.

Louder even than the alarm bells, a computerized voice boomed over the ship's loudspeakers:

"Evacuate ship! This is not a drill. Evacuate ship!"

CHAPTER 5

"Engine reactor malfunction," the voice continued. "Critical meltdown in fifteen minutes! Evacuate ship!"

All the doors lining the hallway suddenly flew open. Species of all shapes and sizes came pouring out of their cabins and into the halls, turning the corridor into a sea of thrashing arms and legs.

In the confusion, Zak barely had time to grab Tash's hand. Dash Rendar was swept away by the stampeding crowd. The two Arrandas felt themselves pushed along by the hundreds of beings storming toward the

turbolifts. A long- snouted Kubaz tried to shove between them. Zak held
so tightly to Tash's arm that he felt his fingernails dig into her skin.

"What do we do?" he shouted over the screaming alarms and the
screaming passengers.

"Come with me."

Hoole suddenly appeared next to them. He hadn't been there a moment
ago. Somehow he had worked his way through the crowd. As a shape-changing
Shi'ido, he could have shifted into the form of a crystal snake or a
ranat and dashed easily through the crowd of legs and feet.

Quickly but calmly, Hoole took each of them by the hand and started
through the crowd. Keeping his cool, the Shi'ido looked for any opening
in the frantic wall of passengers and slowly advanced until he reached
 the turbolifts, where dozens of beings from almost as many species were
pounding on the door.

The loudspeaker blared again. "Critical meltdown in twelve
minutes!"

"Critical meltdown?" Tash asked. "What happens then?"

"The ship explodes," Hoole replied. He opened a door near the
turbolifts.

"But Uncle Hoole, the lifts are over there," Zak said, pointing to
the thickest part of the crowd.

"Never take turbolifts during an emergency, Zak," Hoole instructed.

As the door slid open, Zak saw a maintenance tube with a ladder.
The tube rose high above them, probably all the way to the top of the
ship, and just as far below them.

"Tash first, then Zak," the Shi'ido said. His face was stony and
stern as ever. "Four levels down to the docking bay. We'll take the
Shroud out of here. "

Zak waited for Tash to grab the ladder and start down. He swung
onto the ladder a few rungs behind her, with Hoole following.

At first Zak thought Hoole had let Tash and him go first simply to
get them down the ladder faster. But he soon realized that Hoole had
another reason. As soon as the panicked mob at the turbolifts saw the
open maintenance tube, they swarmed into it like a bunch of voor beetles.
Zak could see a large human jump onto the ladder and start down, with a
fat, furry Bothan close behind. Not caring who they trampled, the two
passengers pressed down on Hoole's head. "Hurry up! Move!" they screamed.

Hoole ignored them, moving at his own pace, bearing the brunt of
their weight on his shoulders, letting Zak and Tash concentrate on
climbing down the four levels to the docking bay.

They reached it and opened the door to find that panic had arrived before them.

The corridor was packed with passengers. Some were empty-handed, but most had grabbed whatever belongings they could. A Twi'lek shoved his way past them, the two tentacles growing out of his skull tossed hastily over one shoulder.

"Critical meltdown in ten minutes. Abandon ship!"

"We'll never get through this crowd," Zak shouted over the noise.

"And even if we do, the docking bay's going to be just as jammed!" Tash added.

Hoole agreed. His steady gaze swept over the mob filling the passageway. Nearby, the human and the Bothan who had followed them down the tube had gotten into an argument. The Bothan's fur bristled and it shoved the human, sending him backward into a crowd. A dozen people fell to the floor, adding to the confusion.

"The life pods," Hoole decided. "It's our only hope."

Once again gripping Zak and Tash in his firm grasp, the tall Shi'ido plunged into the mob. Zak felt himself pulled through a forest of arms, legs, tentacles, and fins as Hoole advanced.

The mob moved like a slow river that emptied, finally, into a wide observation deck filled with banks of life-pod doors. Each door led to an escape pod that could be launched away from the cruiser. The life pods were used to evacuate passengers from a ship and were designed to keep the survivors alive for days, until help arrived.

Zak saw people pouring into the open life pods. Most were already full, but frightened passengers continued to fight their way in, while those inside fought to keep them out. Cries of "Too full! Too full!" mixed with shouts of "Let me on!" Panicked travelers screamed in a hundred different languages.

The loudspeaker announced: "Critical meltdown in eight minutes."

Hoole's voice took on a sharp edge. "I've had enough of this."

Zak saw Hoole's skin start to crawl across his bones and knew what would happen next.

Hoole changed.

Suddenly, he was no longer a gray-skinned Shi'ido. He was an enormous slug-like Hutt, with a wide, round body, thick tail, and enormous head and mouth. Roaring, he shoved forward. The crowd parted like curtains being pulled back.

"Order! Order!" the Hutt boomed in a voice so loud it could be heard over the screaming passengers, the alarm bells, and the loudspeaker. "Form lines. We will all get out together if we work together!"

A panicked passenger-a Rodian, Zak guessed, by its green skin and short snout-tried to shove Hoole away, but in his Hutt shape, Hoole was just too big.

Intimidated by his size, the passengers fell into line. Zak and Tash had followed their uncle as he cut a pathway through the crowd, and now they found themselves right next to one of the life-pod doors.

"Inside," the Hutt-shaped Hoole ordered, shoving the two Arrandas into the escape craft.

"Critical meltdown in five minutes," the loudspeaker announced. "Evacuate ship immediately!"

The fear and tension were thick enough to cut with a vibroblade. Five minutes until the ship exploded. Anxious passengers crowded forward as more people arrived at the rear, pushing and shoving together. The lines started to break up.

Someone screamed. Zak almost missed it over the shouts of other passengers and the shrieking alarms, but he followed the sound until he saw a woman at the back of the room. She was screaming, "My baby! My baby!" and trying to force her way through the crowd.

"Over there!" said Tash, who'd also heard the woman. Zak followed her pointing finger. On the opposite side of the observation deck, a two-year-old girl sat huddled in a corner, crying.

"They must have gotten separated by the crowd," Tash guessed.

"She can't see her daughter from where she's standing," Zak said. "Come on!"

Together, Zak and Tash dashed back out of the life pod. Immediately, two passengers jumped in to take their places.

The two Arrandas wormed their way back through the crowd. Tash ran for the little girl, while Zak headed for the mother, ducking and dodging, sometimes dropping down to his hands and knees and crawling between legs. A large, hairy-footed Talz stepped on his fingers and a big-eared Chadra-Fan almost tripped him, but he struggled on.

Once he was in the crowd, he could no longer see the woman, but he could still follow the sound of her cries. He reached her in less than a minute.

"Come with me," he said, grabbing her hand.

Dumbstruck, the woman followed as Zak headed in the direction of Tash and the little girl. Halfway through the crowd, he bumped into someone for probably the hundredth time in the last sixty seconds-but this someone was Tash, and she was holding the little girl.

"My baby!" the woman cried.

"Get on a life pod, and hurry!" Zak said.

The woman flashed them a nervous, thankful smile, then disappeared into the crowd.

Zak and Tash tried to force their way back toward the front of the observation deck, but a big, bald human with a wicked scar on his cheek stopped them as they tried to pass. "Where do you think you're going?"

"We already have seats in that life pod," Zak replied.

"Sure," the human sneered, "your seat is right behind mine. Now wait your turn."

"You don't understand," Tash added, "we were just helping someone!"

The bald man snarled, "Good for you. Now let me help you. Right into the storage closet!"

The man grabbed them each by the arm. Turning angrily, he strode to an open storage room at the back end of the observation deck and dumped them inside. Then he hit the control switch, closing the door.

As they picked themselves up, Zak and Tash heard the loudspeaker announce, "Critical meltdown in three minutes. Explosion imminent."

"That was rude!" Zak said.

"Just get the door open!" Tash replied.

There was a control panel on the inside of the storage room, too. Zak touched the Open button.

Nothing happened.

He touched it again.

Nothing.

"Could he have locked it?" Tash asked.

Zak studied the control panel. "There aren't any locks on this door. It's just stuck!"

Outside, the loudspeaker boomed, "Critical meltdown in two minutes. Prepare to jettison life pods."

"Use this!" Tash said, holding up a piece of metal pipe. It looked like a spare part for a maintenance droid. Together, Zak and Tash jammed the bar into the door and started to pry it open.

"It won't budge," Zak grunted.

"If we don't hurry, all the life pods will be gone," his sister warned.

They kept at it. It seemed to take forever, but finally metal creaked against metal, something in the door frame gave way, and the door slid slowly open.

"We did it!" Zak cried. He jumped out of the storage closet...

... and into an empty room.

Uncle Hoole, the crowds, and the life pods were all gone.

CHAPTER 6

"Critical meltdown in two minutes!" the computerized voice announced.

"They left us," Tash whispered. "They left us."

Thanks to Hoole's organization, all the passengers had managed to crowd onto the life pods, and all the pods had been released.

Zak shook his head. "Uncle Hoole never would have left the ship without us."

"He must have thought we were still on board the life pod!" Tash replied.

"Maybe there's another life pod somewhere!" said Zak hopefully. "Come on! "

They dashed from the observation deck and down a hallway, looking for another escape pod. Now and then they came across one of the round doorways that indicated a life pod, but all of the pods had been ejected.

"Critical meltdown in one minute!"

"The docking bay!" Zak shouted. He could see the huge doors of that led to the ship landing area. "We can still make it!"

They sprinted for the doors, but when they reached them, the doors wouldn't budge. Zak punched a command into the door's control panel.

A small screen lit up and words flashed on the screen:

EXPLOSION IMMINENT. ALL SAFETY DOORS HAVE BEEP SEALED.

"No!" Zak banged his fist against the door. He turned to look at Tash, but she had no more ideas.

"I think-" he started to say.

"This is it," she finished for him. Zak knew what it meant. They were going to die.

They sat down on the cold durasteel floor with their backs to the docking-bay doors. The ship was going to explode. There was nowhere to run.

The computerized warning boomed, "Critical meltdown in thirty seconds!"

Zak looked at his sister. "Tash, I... I..." He stopped. "Thanks for being my sister."

Tash put her arm around him. "Thanks for being my brother."

They sat and listened as the computer voice came back on. "Critical meltdown in ten seconds... nine... eight..."

Zak's heart pounded against his ribs. He suddenly wondered if his parents had had any advance warning before their homeworld had been destroyed. What had they felt in their final moments, before their whole planet had been blasted to pieces?

He realized that he was about to find out.

The computer continued its countdown. "... six. five..."

Zak felt his mouth go dry.

... three... two..."

He closed his eyes tight.

"... one."

Darkness.

Silence.

Is this what it's like to be dead? Zak thought. The explosion must have been incredibly quick. He hadn't felt any pain. He hadn't felt anything.

Then someone shook his shoulder and Zak nearly jumped. That's when he realized that his eyes were still closed. He opened them, and the darkness was replaced by the soft white light of the Star of Empire's glowpanels.

The silence surprised him. The ship's emergency alarms had been clanging for so long he'd almost gotten used to them.

"Zak," Tash said, breaking the silence. "We're still here."

Zak nodded, hardly believing it. He looked around.

Except for the fact that there was no one in sight, the Star of Empire looked absolutely normal. The alarm bells had shut down, the computer voice had turned itself off. They could hear nothing.

"The ship didn't explode!" Zak cried. He jumped up and grabbed his sister in a big hug. They both laughed. "We're alive!"

"It must have been a false alarm," Tash guessed.

Zak nodded, getting a sudden idea. "Yeah, or maybe SIM fixed it at the last minute."

"SIM?"

"Yeah-I was telling you about SIM when the meltdown warning alarm went off. SIM stands for Systems Integration Manager. It's the artificial intelligence that runs the entire ship. It could have found a way to stop the engines from melting down."

"Well, maybe it can tell us how to call for help," Tash replied. "Because we're going to need it. We may be the only ones left on board." She looked around until she spotted a computer terminal partway down the corridor. "Can we contact this SIM?"

Zak hurried over to the terminal. It was a public service terminal. Passengers could use it to locate the many restaurants and game rooms on the cruise ship, or find out when meals and activities had been scheduled.

"You can send messages from here," Zak noticed, touching a button near the screen. "There's a function that lets people send messages over the HoloNet. But it's not going to do us any good. It looks like communications are down. I guess there was some damage to the ship after all."

Tash looked around nervously. The ship was designed to hold thousands of people. Empty, it was full of strange sounds and felt downright creepy. They could hear their own voices echoing a dozen times down the long halls. "Can't SIM fix it?"

Zak punched several buttons on the computer control panel. He found maps to the ship, a list of all the crew members, and a schedule of events that would never take place. He pressed another button and the screen went blank.

"What are you doing?" Tash asked.

"I have to figure out how to access the main computer. It's tricky. These terminals weren't put here so people could come along and break into the ship's main computers, you know."

He punched in a few commands but nothing happened. Zak bit his lip nervously. There had to be a way to get to SIM. The hallway computer was connected to the main computers, which meant they were connected to SIM as well. All he had to do was find the connection.

But slowly he became frustrated. The ship's computer system was as big as the ship itself-he simply didn't know where to look. Just when he was about to give up, Zak got an idea. He punched in a command. "Access game files."

The list of computer games stored in the ship's computers came up. Zak chose TIE Fighter. The images of the game came on-screen, but then the screen flickered and a word started to appear.

The letters HEL flashed onto the screen, followed by a bunch of scrambled words.

"Is that 'hello' or 'help'?" Tash asked.

Zak didn't know. He typed in, "SIM?"

The screen flickered again.

HELLO.

There was a long pause.

ZAK.

"Got him!" Zak yelled. Then he typed, "Hello SIM. How'd you know it was me?"

YOU WERE SMART TO ACCESS ME THROUGH THE GAME GRID. HOWEVER, THIS IS NO TIME FOR GAMES.

"I wasn't planning on playing one."

I KNOW... THAT WAS... A JOKE. HUMANS APPRECIATE HUMOR DURING A CRISIS.

Zak typed again, asking the computer if it was okay.

NO SYSTEMS DAMAGED. TRYING TO MAKE REPAIRS. ESTIMATED TIME FOR REPAIRS UNKNOWN SOMETHING IS INTERFERING. I SUSPECT SABOTAGE.

The words limped onto the screen slowly. If SIM had a voice, it would have sounded like an injured person speaking through clenched teeth.

"Sabotage," Zak said, surprised. Then he typed in: "Someone set off those alarms on purpose?"

CAUSE OF ALARM UNKNOWN. INTERNAL SENSORS ARE NOT FUNCTONING. I DON'T EVEN KNOW IF ANYONE ELSE IS STILL ON BOARD.

"Ask it if we can send a distress signal," Tash said. Zak did as she suggested.

In answer, SIM displayed a list of all the problems with the ship.

COMMUNICATIONS ARE NOT FUNCTIONING.

ENGINES ARE NOT FUNCTIONING.

FLIGHTS CONTROLS ARE NOT FUNCTIONING.

LIFE-SUPPORT SYSTEMS ARE NOT FUNCTIONING.

Zak read the last line several times before it sank in.

"Zak," Tash said, reading over his shoulder. "If the life-support systems are failing..."

"We'll lose our oxygen. We'll die," he whispered. Then he considered. "But even if the computer isn't pumping new air into the ship, a cruiser this big is already full of air. And there are only two of us breathing it. So we have some time."

Tash shrugged in frustration. "Time for what? We can't call anyone. And we couldn't fly this ship even if the engines were working." Suddenly, her eyes lit up. "But we could fly our ship. Maybe now that the emergency's over, we can get to the Shroud and fly it out!"

They started toward the docking bay at a run, their footsteps echoing loudly in the empty hallways. But they had only gone a hundred meters down the hall when Zak suddenly slowed to a walk, and then started walking on tiptoe.

Tash slowed down beside him. "What are you doing?"

"I just thought of something," he said in a hushed voice. "If someone sabotaged the ship, they did it for a reason." He was going to add, "They might still be on board."

But he never got the chance.

A strong hand reached from behind and clamped down over his mouth.

CHAPTER 7

Zak struggled, but whoever grabbed him had a durasteel grip.

Kicking and thrashing, Zak felt himself being turned around until he was looking into an arrogant, handsome face.

The face of Dash Rendar.

"Quiet," Dash ordered. "Both of you."

Tash said nothing. Zak still struggled, but he couldn't remove Dash's gloved hand from his mouth.

Dash didn't look at his prisoner. He seemed to be listening. After a moment he nodded, satisfied, then loosened his grip on Zak, who slapped the pilot's hands away angrily.

"Easy there, kid," Dash chuckled, his face widening into a grin. "You might blow a circuit."

"What's the - Why'd you - Who do you think-" Zak sputtered, furious.

Dash seemed to understand all of Zak's half-spoken questions. He said calmly, "The idea was to keep you quiet. The why is because I thought I was being followed, and you two were making so much noise I couldn't locate the source of the footsteps. As for who I think I am," he scratched his stubble- covered chin. "It looks like I'm the guy who's got to get you two out of here. "

"We don't need your help," Zak snapped.

"Dash, what are you doing here?" Tash asked. "I mean with all the alarms going off, why'd you stay?"

Dash nodded at her and Zak. "I could ask you two the same question."

Zak didn't respond, but Tash said, "We got shoved into a storage room and the door jammed. By the time we got out, all the life pods had left and the blast doors were down, so we couldn't get to our ship."

Dash burst into laughter. "You got locked in a closet?"

Zak felt his dislike for Dash Rendar growing. The man was rude, arrogant, and, Zak was sure, completely untrustworthy. "Yeah, so what's your excuse?" he said. "You're still here, too."

Dash wiped a tear of mirth from his eye and chuckled, "Locked in a closet." Then he sighed, "Me, I stayed aboard on purpose."

Tash was surprised. "Why? The ship was going to explode!"

The pilot shook his head with utter certainty. "No way. Ships this size don't just explode. They have back-up systems and all sorts of devices to prevent accidents. If something had happened, we would have

heard from the captain before it got this bad. The warning siren came too quick for my taste. "

"So you stuck around to see what would happen," Tash said, impressed. "That's pretty brave."

"Pretty unbelievable," Zak said.

He gave the pilot a long, suspicious look. Dash was exactly the kind of person Zak had worried about when they came aboard the Star of Empire. Now, studying Dash up close, Zak felt his instincts raise an alarm louder than all the cruiser's sirens.

If Dash noticed the stare, he didn't pay attention. "I figure someone triggered the alarm on purpose. It's the easiest way to get everyone off the ship. Then all that someone would have to do is stay behind, and the ship is all theirs."

"You mean stay behind," Zak noted sarcastically, "kind of like you did?"

Tash looked around at the ship. "What made you think of that in the middle of all the panic?"

"Well," the pilot admitted with a sly grin, "it is, as Zak seems to think, just what I'd do. If I were the type of person to commit a crime, of course."

"So who might have done this?" Tash asked.

Zak answered her. "It could've been anyone. There were thousands of people on the ship. It could have been a group of smugglers, or thieves, anyone." He looked at Dash when he said that.

"And if they're still onboard," Tash concluded, "then we'd better get out of here as soon as possible. If they're pirates, they'll have another ship on the way. Dash, we were just on our way to the docking bay to try to get to our ship."

Dash shook his head. "No good. I just came from there. The blast shield doors are stuck tight. I was going to find the communications room and send a distress signal. Then the authorities could handle whoever might be onboard. The only problem is, I have no idea where to look. The communications room is restricted, so it's not listed in the ship's guide."

"It is if you know how to look," Zak replied.

They continued along the corridor until they came upon another passenger assistance terminal. There, Zak typed his way past the main screen until he found SIM.

HELLO ZAK.

Zak typed in their problem and their plan to reach the communications room. Flashing images onto the computer screen, SIM showed them where the communications room was. Then SIM added:

HOWEVER, YOUR PLAN HAS ONLY A 15 PERCEPT CHANCE OF SUCCESS. I SUGGEST AN ALTERNATE PLAN. GO TO CONTROL ROOM. THERE, I CAN INSTRUCT YOU TO MAKE REPAIRS TO MY MAIN PROGRAM. THEN I CAN REPAIR SHIP, OPEN DOCKING BAY DOORS, AND SEND A DISTRESS SIGNAL.

"Hey, guys," Zak called back over his shoulder. "SIM wants us to go to the control room and repair him instead."

"Repair him?" Tash replied. "How do you know it's a male computer? Maybe it's female."

"Okay, it," Zak replied. "It says that once it's repaired it can do anything we ask."

Dash considered this. "But what if we can't repair it? We'd have wasted a lot of time. I say we get to the communications room."

"Me too," Tash echoed.

"But-" Zak began, but Tash and Dash had already started down the hall. He followed them reluctantly.

The ship was huge, but it was easy to get around in. After all, it had been built to make passengers feel welcome. The halls were wide and brightly lit, and all the doors and areas were clearly marked. There seemed to be nothing to worry about. Except, of course, the other beings who might be on the ship with them.

Only once during their walk did anything unusual happen. Tash suddenly stopped in midstride, pulling up so suddenly that Zak bumped right into her.

"What-?" he started to say.

"Shh!" she said. "Listen!"

They listened. The halls were silent.

"My scanners are clear," said Dash, using space pilot slang for "there's no trouble."

"What do you hear?"

A worry line formed on Tash's forehead. "It's not exactly what I hear. It's more like"-she paused and looked at Zak-"more like something I feel."

Zak understood. Over the last few months, Tash had proven several times that she was in tune with the Force, the mystical energy that bound the galaxy together. Tash had learned of the Force by studying the Jedi.

A year ago, Zak hadn't even believed that the Force existed, let alone that his sister might be able to use it. But now he recognized that her Force-feelings had often proved true. On three separate occasions she had even used the Force to save their lives.

So when Tash said she felt something, Zak paid attention. "Are you still feeling it?"

She nodded. "There's danger nearby. I feel something... no, someone watching. You know that feeling you get when you're not looking at someone, but you feel them staring at your back? It's like that." She shivered. "Whoever did this to the ship, they're right around here. They're close."

After that, they walked quietly for a while, not speaking. But nothing happened. No one appeared. And eventually, they all began to relax again.

They passed through one of the ship's restaurants. A few chairs were overturned, and here and there napkins had fluttered to the floor, dropped in the panic to reach the lifepods. Obviously, the restaurant had been hosting a party. An electronic banner over the door read HAPPY LIFE DAY, BOBRINGI MAFUSA. YOU'RE ONE FINE MON CALAMARI. One huge table was covered with desserts that had gone uneaten... until Zak spotted them.

He scooped up a handful of pastries with cream-filling. "I wouldn't do that," Dash warned him.

"Well, you're not me," Zak replied with a smile as he bit into the pastry.

His smile vanished as dozens of small, wiggly legs squirmed out from behind his teeth and scrambled across his lips.

"I'm glad I'm not you," Dash laughed.

Zak gagged and wiped the wriggling things off his face. Looking down at his hand, he saw six or seven tiny crabs scurrying up his forearm. He sent them flying with a flick of his wrist, then spat out the pastry.

Dash watched the little crabs run under a table. "The Mon Calamari live on a water-covered world. One of their favorite desserts is crab-stuffed creampuffs. With live crabs."

Zak felt himself blush. He decided not to reply.

On the far side of the restaurant was a wall made entirely of crystal. It looked out onto a park.

"Hey, I was in that park," Tash said. "It's called the Atrium. There's a huge bank of turbolifts on the far side. I bet we can get to the communications room from there."

"That would be prime," Zak noted, "but how do we get through that wall? There aren't any doors."

"Then we'll make one," Dash said. He reached down to his side.

For the first time, Zak wondered why the pilot carried a weapon on a luxury liner. But the question was literally blown out of his thoughts when Dash fired at the crystal wall, turning it into a billion tiny shards that fell to the ground like rain.

"There's your door. Let's go," the pilot said casually.

They crunched across the shattered crystal and out into the Atrium. Tash, who was most familiar with the park, led the way.

They followed a path that wound through a small menagerie. There were eight cages, but instead of metal bars, the walls of the cages were made of force fields. That kept the animals safe inside, but gave the ship's passengers a perfect view.

Zak saw several creatures he recognized. Five were exotic but harmless plant-eating species. But there was also a divto, a three-headed snake whose bite was poisonous. In another cage, a vornskr snarled at them. It was large, four-legged, and thick with muscles, and its long tail ended in sharp spikes. Next to the vornskr prowled a yayak, a dark-furred feline creature that moved so smoothly it seemed to be made of liquid. It hissed at them as they passed.

"Nice pets," Zak said sarcastically.

Dash shrugged. "Exotic animals are big attractions. Passengers on cruise ships eat this stuff up."

At the end of the menagerie, Tash veered off the walkway and stepped onto a field of carefully tended grass.

She laughed. "When I was here before, they had droids stationed all over the place, telling people not to walk on the grass."

"There's one now." Zak pointed. A gardening droid rolled out from behind a tree. It was about a meter tall and moved on two treads like a tank. Its head was shaped like a mushroom full of holes the size of Zak's eyeball. He wondered what the holes were for.

"And there's another," Dash added as another droid appeared. This one didn't have the hole-filled head, but it was equipped with four arms, each of which ended in a collection of work tools. The Arrandas had had a small garden on Alderaan, so Zak recognized the tools: a vibro-spade for digging, a piston- pounder for driving seeds into the ground, laser shears, and many other devices. Zak remembered them because, when he was a baby, his mother had always kept them out of reach, afraid he'd hurt himself. He always thought it was funny that she worried so much about simple gardening tools.

Two more droids appeared.

All the droids rolled toward them.

The four droids slowed down. The tool droid rolled right up to Dash, and its artificial voice stated, "Please keep off the grass."

Dash laughed. "You bet, as soon as we get outta here." He started forward.

"Please keep off the grass," the droid replied. Then it slashed at him with the laser shears.

CHAPTER 8

The laser shears whipped across Dash's stomach. With amazing reflexes, the pilot jumped backward and only the tips of the shears touched him. But the laser-powered cutting tool was still deadly enough to slice through his clothes and cut his skin, leaving a thin line of blood across his stomach.

"Yow!" the pilot shouted. "These guys seem to take the park rules pretty seriously."

The hole-headed droid rolled up to Zak, who took a step back even though the droid didn't seem to have any weapons. "I'm not taking any chances, even though you don't look very dangerous-"

His words were drowned by a torrent of water that gushed out of the holes in the droid's head. The powerful jets of water struck Zak in the chest and sent him sprawling onto the grass. He tried to get up, but the gush of water continued, forcing him down and soaking him through. It felt to Zak like a Wookiee was pummeling him with punches. When Zak could finally open his mouth to catch his breath, water poured in, and he gagged.

Then someone was standing in front of him, blocking the water blast. Zak caught a glimpse of Dash's face, the arrogant grin replaced by a grimace of pain as the pilot took the brunt of the water on his back, giving Zak a chance to scramble to his feet.

"Dash, look out!" Tash cried.

The tool droid had rolled forward and raised its vibrospade, about to bring it down on the pilot's head. But at the last minute, Dash dove forward and rolled across the grass, out of harm's way.

"They're trying to kill us!" Zak sputtered.

Dash grunted. "No gardening droid's gonna kill Dash Rendar. I'd never live it down."

The pilot drew his blaster and fired at the waterspout droid. The blast punched a hole in the droid's outer shell, and it slowed for a moment. Then it started rolling forward again.

"Industrial-quality droids," the pilot grunted. "Gonna be tough to kill."

The droid's head swiveled as it sent another stream of water at them. Dash blasted another hole in the droid's body, but the droid kept coming.

"Let's get out of here!" Zak shouted.

Dash scoffed. "Me run? From a droid?"

The tool droid's piston pounder-punched out, catching Dash on the shoulder and spinning him around. Stunned, he would have been cut down by the droid's sharp set of laser shears if Tash hadn't grabbed his arm and yanked him out of reach.

"Hey, I've got an idea," the pilot said, backing away quickly. "Let's get out of here."

All three turned to run. They were much faster than the four droids, but the waterspout droid was incredibly powerful. Its spurted a jet of water at them that was strong enough to knock them down. One after another, they fell and scrambled up again as the droids rolled after them.

"How big is this Atrium, anyway?" Zak panted, trying to keep his footing on the wet grass.

"The exit is that way!" Tash pointed to a row of shrubs. Some patient gardener had trimmed and shaped the bushes to look like living creatures. Zak saw human shapes, Twi'leks with two tentacles growing out of their heads, and hammer-headed Ithorians. "The turbolifts are on the other side," Tash told him.

But as she pointed, four shapes rolled out from the bushes.

More droids.

"I'm getting tired of these guys," Dash grumbled. Still running forward, he raised his blaster and poured fire onto one of the heavy-duty droids. Zak lost count of the blasterbolts, but he couldn't help being impressed. Every shot hit the droid dead center.

Finally, the droid sputtered and stalled. Smoke rose from its joints and blue sparks shot up from its head like tiny comets.

"You got one!" Tash cheered.

"One," Zak pointed out. "But there are seven more."

"And my blaster's hot as a supernova," Dash said, shifting the overheated weapon from hand to hand.

"Duck!" Tash shouted. They hit the ground as a gush of water hit them from behind. The droids who were chasing them were closing in. And ahead of them, the three new droids fanned out and continued to advance.

The three humans crowded together, forming a tight circle. They were surrounded.

"Tash," Zak said quietly, so only she could hear him, "if you learned any new tricks with the Force, now would be a good time to use them."

Tash shook her head. "I don't know if the Force works on machines."

The droids had penned them in. Laser shears hummed to life, and piston- pounders thump-thumped in anticipation. The waterspout droid was gurgling, building up pressure for another blast.

A tool droid charged at Zak, waving all its weapons at once. He ducked, and felt the laser shears clip at the top of his head, cutting off a hunk of hair. The vibro-spade came crashing down. He tried to dodge, and managed to avoid the sharp blade of the digging tool, but the droid's mechanical arm slammed into him, sending him to the ground.

He looked up to see all the tool droid's arms looming over him. For one frozen moment, the droid stood, all its arms held high, ready to come crashing down on him.

CHAPTER 9

The next thing Zak knew, the droid exploded in a storm of blaster fire.

The final moments of the strange battle were lost in smoke and the swishing sound of laser beams as the other droids were blasted to pieces or melted into slag.

Tash and Dash helped Zak to his feet, and together they watched as seven figures stepped through the smoke. Six were crew members of the Star of Empire, and all carried heavy blaster rifles. The seventh, carrying a hand blaster, Zak knew by name.

"Captain Hajj!" he shouted.

The gray-haired captain scanned the area to make sure there were no more droids. "You folks all right?"

"Dash was cut," Tash said.

The pilot shrugged and held his slashed shirt closed with one hand. "Just a scratch."

Once Captain Hajj was sure they weren't badly injured, he eyed them all suspiciously. "Why didn't you folks leave the ship?"

"We got stuck, and the life pods left without us," Dash answered for all of them. Zak noticed how smoothly the pilot lumped himself in with Zak and Tash. Dash hadn't gotten stuck-he'd remained on board on purpose.

Hajj nodded. "I'm surprised there weren't more
 people
 stranded. Everything happened in such a rush. No warning at all."

"Why are you still here, Captain?" Tash asked.

Hajj stood a little straighter. "The captain is always the last to leave his ship. Me and some volunteers"-he pointed to the six crew members behind him-"stayed until the last minute, trying to shut the engines down. We thought we were all space dust, then the alarms just shut themselves off quicker than a Hutt hurrying to breakfast."

"Captain, what's going on?" Zak asked. "Why was there a false alarm? Why did those droids attack us?"

The captain shook his head. "I don't know the answer to any of those questions, but I plan to find out. Me and my crew have encountered several violent droids. It's as if someone has reprogrammed them all to be killers. You folks will have to stick with us. You'll be safer that way."

"Well," Dash said. "We were doing all right on our own."

Yeah, right, Zak thought, rubbing his arm where the droid had hit him.

"Besides," added Dash, "I don't take orders from anyone."

Captain Hajj glowered at Dash. "I'm the captain of this ship and you'll follow my lead."

Dash bristled and seemed about to fight when Tash had stepped in between them. "Where do you want us to go, Captain?"

Hajj kept his eye on Dash as he told Tash, "We're headed for the communications room. First priority is to send a distress signal."

Tash nodded. "That's where we were headed anyway. Let's all go."

Zak hid a smile. Sometimes he had to admire his sister. Maybe that's what the Jedi mean by "action through inaction," he thought.

Dash Rendar scratched his head and grumbled. "Well, all right, just as long as everyone knows I'm not following. I'm just headed in the same direction."

Captain Hajj led them through the row of hedges and into another corridor to the turbolifts.

"We're on deck thirteen," the captain explained as they reached the lifts. "The communications room is up on deck twenty."

Captain Hajj punched the turbolift call button, but the indicator didn't light up. "Lift malfunction," he said.

The captain pulled a code key out of his uniform pocket, and opened a locked panel next to the turbolifts. Inside was a computer terminal. He pressed some buttons on the panel, then paused. "I can't access the turbolift program." He entered more commands. "Blast! I can't access SIM, either. Does anything work on this bucket of bolts?"

"I think I can help," Zak offered. He stepped up to the computer, called up the game file, chose TIE Fighter, and waited.

HELLO ZAK

"There's SIM," Zak said proudly.

The captain was impressed. "You seem to know what you're doing. Get SIM to reactivate the turbolifts."

Zak typed in the request. "I know you're damaged, SIM. But can you reactivate the turbolifts?"

OF COURSE I CAN, the computer responded. THEY'RE ON THE WAY.

"The turbolifts are on the way," Zak repeated out loud. Everyone else turned away from the computer to wait for the lifts, but Zak continued to look at the screen.

ZAK

"Yes?" he typed in.

IT IS VITAL THAT YOU GET TO THE CONTROL ROOM. THE COMMUNICATIONS STATION IS NOT SO IMPORTANT AS EVERYONE BELIEVES.

Zak frowned. "I tried to tell them that before. I could try again."

NO! YOU MUST BO TO THE CONTROL ROOM YOURSELF. I HEED ONLY YOU. I DON'T WANT YOU TO TELL THE OTHERS BECAUSE...

There was a delay before more words appeared.

... BECAUSE I THINK A SABOTEUR IS AMONG YOUR GROUP!

"Who?" Zak asked, but he already knew the answer. He wasn't surprised at the two words that appeared on-screen:

DASH RENDAR.

A moment later, a picture of Dash appeared on the screen, then just as quickly disappeared.

SIM explained: ALL PASSENGER SHIPS ARE REQUIRED TO CARRY FILES ON WANTED CRIMINALS. DASH RENDAR REGISTERED UNDER A FALSE NAME, BUT I WAS ABLE TO MATCH HIS FACE TO THIS PICTURE STORED IN MY MEMORY

"Match his face?" Zak asked. "You mean you can see?"

OF COURSE I CAN. SECURITY HOLOCAMS ALL OVER THE SHIP FEED IMAGES INTO MY COMPUTER MAINFRAME. I CAN SEE YOU RIGHT NOW. DOES YOUR ARM STILL HURT?

Zak suddenly realized that he had been rubbing his sore arm. Looking around, he spotted a security cam mounted on the wall over the turbolifts.

HELLO ZAK. SMILE FOR THE HOLOCAM.

Zak almost laughed out loud. SIM was trying to be funny. Zak couldn't believe the computer could actually see!

SIM was showing him Dash's records. Zak could hardly believe his eyes. Dash Rendar was wanted by the Empire for every serious crime imaginable except murder. The files claimed he was a mercenary, a smuggler, and a ship-stealing pirate.

"I knew that guy couldn't be trusted," Zak whispered.

THE TURBOLIFTS HAVE ARRIVED, SIM said. REMEMBER, MAKE YOUR WAY TO THE CONTROL ROOM QUICKLY. THEN I CAN REPAIR THE SHIP, AND FOIL DASH RENDAR'S PLAN.

SIM's words and Dash's records wiped themselves off the screen just as two loud dings! signaled the arrival of the turbolifts.

Captain Hajj sent four of his crew into one lift. He instructed Dash, Zak, and Tash to accompany him and the remaining two crew members in the other.

Zak was the last to step on. The door slid closed behind him. "Zak, push deck twenty, please," the captain requested. Zak pushed the button, expecting to feel the usual lurch as the lift started up.

Instead, the turbolift dropped out from beneath their feet!

CHAPTER 10

Zak felt his stomach fly up into his throat and almost out of his mouth. One second the turbolift was strong and steady beneath their feet. The next it was dropping like a stone down a black hole.

"Freefall!" Dash called out. They could barely hear him. The fast-falling turbolift was screaming like a bomb being dropped.

At first Zak was convinced his brain had left his body along with his heart and stomach. He couldn't think. He couldn't move. He couldn't hear anything but the screech of the lift falling down its tube.

Then he became aware of someone shouting in his ear, trying to push past him to the controls. It was Captain Hajj. "Manual override!" the captain was shouting. "Emergency brake!"

Zak nodded and reached out. He opened a small box marked EMERGENCY and flipped the switch inside. Nothing happened.

"Blast!" he heard the captain growl.

Then a strong pair of hands shoved both the captain and Zak aside. Dash Rendar coolly pulled his blaster from its holster. Holding it by the barrel, he smashed the emergency control box, exposing a nest of wires. Dropping his blaster, he fumbled with the tangled wires until he found two that he seemed to like. He touched them together.

Sparks flew.

Zak heard a loud thunk! as the turbolift's powerful emergency brakes locked into place.

The turbolift slowed.

In seconds, they were at normal turbolift speed. A moment later, they came to a complete stop.

Everyone on the lift exhaled at once. Zak clutched his hand to his chest, hoping to hold his frantically pounding heart in place.

Captain Hajj regained his composure and clapped a hand on Dash's shoulder. "Nice work."

Skreeee!

The right side of the turbolift suddenly dropped down, causing all the passengers to stagger.

"The emergency brakes are giving out!" Captain Hajj cried.

"Time to get off this ride," Zak suggested hastily. Dash, Captain Hajj, and the two crewmen forced their fingers between the doors of the turbolift and pried them open. They saw that the turbolift had stopped between floors. Instead of being at their feet, the nearest floor was actually at the level of Zak's shoulders.

Dash and Hajj forced open the doors onto the floor. The taller men then gave Zak and Tash a boost up, and the two Arrandas slipped out into the safety of the hallway. They held the doors open as one by one the

others followed. Captain Hajj was the last to exit. Dash Rendar pulled him out just as the turbolift groaned again. The captain was barely in the clear when the turbolift dropped away. They heard it smash against the bottom of the tube a moment later.

Captain Hajj didn't bother to look back. He was already heading for the other turbolift, the one his crew members had taken. He checked the indicator light to see where the lift was. If the lift had worked properly, the light should show the twentieth floor.

Instead, the indicator light showed that the other turbolift, too, had gone down instead of up. The light indicated the very lowest level. Hajj and his crewmen worked together to pry the doors open. Once they'd succeeded, the captain looked down.

"Hello!" he shouted, his voice echoing in the shaft. The only answer was a thin cloud of smoke rising from below.

"If they hit bottom..." one of the surviving crewmen whispered.

"They're dead," Hajj said grimly. "And that makes whoever did this a murderer."

Tash shook her head. "But who is doing this? If it's pirates trying to steal the ship, why not just come after us with blasters? Why set traps?"

"It would have to be someone who understands computers," Captain Hajj said, thinking out loud.

Zak almost burst out "It's Dash!" but Rendar still had his blaster, and after seeing the way he had fired at the droids... Tash's phrase, action through inaction, popped into Zak's head. He decided to wait.

"What do we do now?" Tash asked. "We still need to get to the communications room, or somewhere."

"I'm not getting into another turbolift, that's for sure," Dash said.

"Agreed," the captain grunted. "But there's another way. Every set of turbolifts includes a gangway, just in case the turbolifts stop functioning."

"A gangway?" Tash asked. "You mean a staircase?"

Captain Hajj shrugged. "Not exactly."

"Not exactly!" Tash repeated, staring up in disbelief. She was standing just outside the turbolift gangway. Basically, it was a shaft beside the turbolifts that ran up and down the height of the ship. Set into the wall of the shaft was a ladder that rose up as far as the eye could see, and down the same impossible distance.

"How high is it?" Zak asked.

Captain Hajj checked the floor they were on. "We have to get to deck twenty. We fell down to deck three."

"Seventeen floors!" Zak gasped. "That's like climbing a ladder up a seventeen story building."

"Right," the captain said, "and the sooner we start, the sooner we'll be done."

Climbing the ladder, they followed the rules of mountain climbing. The strongest climbers went first, and the weakest went last. Then, if one of the weak climbers happened to slip, they wouldn't land on anyone when they fell.

Zak and Tash were last in line.

Zak didn't know how long or how far they'd climbed. But he knew his hands were being rubbed raw by the hard metal rungs of the ladder, and his feet were getting cramps.

He decided to take his mind off his aches. Dash was climbing just above him. After a while, Zak asked, as if to pass the time, "So, Dash, what exactly were you doing aboard the Star of Empire anyway?"

"I told you," Dash said, as he focused on the climb. "I was suspicious of the alarms, so I-"

"No, no. I mean before that," Zak interrupted. "Why were you here in the first place?"

A pause.

Finally, Dash said, "Vacation, like anyone else, I guess."

"Vacation from what?" Zak asked, trying to sound casual. "I mean, what do you do for a living?"

Dash's voice sounded tense. He obviously didn't like this sort of questioning. "I own a small freighter. I transport cargo from place to place. People pay me."

Zak wanted to say, "That sounds like what smugglers do."

But he didn't. He was distracted by a noise from above them.

Clink. Clank. Clink.

It grew louder.

Clank. Clank. Clink.

They all looked up.

Something large and heavy was tumbling down the gangway toward them.

"Incoming!" Dash shouted. He pressed himself tightly against the ladder and the Arrandas followed his example.

One of Captain Hajj's crewmen wasn't so lucky. Still craning his neck to see what was above them, he took the full force of a falling hovercar engine right in the face. The weight of the falling engine tore him from the ladder and he dropped down the long gangway, vanishing from sight without a sound.

"What in the name of all the stars was that!" Dash swore.

"Whatever it was, it wasn't the last!" Zak yelled. "Look out!"

They all tried to melt into the wall as another heavy object-a large tool box-hurtled past Tash's ear. Someone was using them for target practice.

CHAPTER 11

Captain Hajj and the surviving crewman stared in horror down the gangway. "Comran!" they shouted after the man who had fallen. "Comran!" But there was no answer. They couldn't even be sure he'd reached bottom.

The captain started to climb down past Dash, Zak, and Tash, but Dash stopped him. "Captain, he's gone."

"I'm not losing any more men!" Hajj snapped.

"He's already lost!" Dash shot back. "And we've got to get out of this gangway before we all end up like him. These kids are your passengers, remember? Where's the closest hatch? Up or down?"

Captain Hajj cast one last glance down, then said, "Up. Only a dozen meters. Let's hurry."

Two more heavy chunks of metal fell from above. One missed them all, but the other clipped the captain on the shoulder, tearing his uniform and cutting a gash into his arm.

They kept climbing until they reached the hatch. Then they scrambled to get out of the shaft and into the safety of the hallway.

They made it not a moment too soon. As Tash jumped out into the hallway, something huge, big enough to fill the entire gangway, rumbled past. It scraped the walls as it fell. It would have taken all of them with it. The sound it made when it finally hit the bottom of the ship was like two planets colliding.

"Someone is here," Tash said darkly. "Watching us. Waiting for a chance to-"

"To kill us," Captain Hajj finished. "There's a murderer up there. But who is it?"

"I know who," Zak interjected. He pointed a finger at the pilot. "It's Dash Rendar."

"What?" Captain Hajj sputtered.

"What!" Tash shouted.

"What," Dash replied calmly, "are you talking about?"

"I know all about you," Zak said, still pointing at Dash accusingly. "I know you're wanted for smuggling and piracy. You're a thief. You tried to steal this ship!"

Dash laughed. "Who told you that?"

"SIM did," Zak replied. "He knew you registered under a false name so you wouldn't be detected by authorities."

Captain Hajj stepped forward, reaching for his blaster.

But Dash held his hands open, showing he wasn't planning to go for his own weapon. "There's only one problem with your theory, Zak," the pilot said. "If I'm the one who's behind all this, then who was that dropping hardware on our heads just now?"

Zak had been so focused on Rendar for the last few minutes, he hadn't thought everything through. Finally, he said, "But SIM told me you had done it."

"SIM lied," Dash insisted.

Zak scowled. "Computers don't lie. They analyze information and reach logical solutions to problems. It thinks you're behind this, Dash Rendar. Besides," he added, "you could have an accomplice."

"The boy's right," Captain Hajj said. "It's awfully strange that, except for my crew, you're the only adult who's stayed behind. I'd say that makes you our first suspect." The captain raised his blaster. "Hand over your weapon."

"Captain," Dash said. "If there's more trouble, you're going to need all the help you can get."

Hajj didn't say a word. He just held out his hand and tightened his grip on the trigger of his blaster. "That may be. In the meantime, I'd rather be the one with all the weapons."

Dash's eyes went cold. Zak could tell he was sizing up his competition, wondering if he could get his blaster out and fire before Captain Hajj's weapon turned him into fried jelly.

At last, Dash pulled his weapon from its holster and put it gently into the captain's hand. "You're making the wrong decision, Captain."

"We'll see," Hajj replied. He nodded to his surviving crewman. "Hang back. Keep an eye on him."

"Now that's settled," Captain Hajj said, "we still need a way to get to the comm room. Zak, do you think you can access SIM again?"

"No problem."

It took only a few minutes to find another passenger guide terminal, and a short while after that Zak was through the game program and talking to SIM.

"SIM, we need another way up to the comm room. Turbolifts are out. We can't use the gangway."

COME TO THE CONTROL ROOM. GET MY SYSTEMS FUNCTIONING.

"Tell him no," the captain snapped. "Blasted computers. We'll do our own thinking."

Zak typed in a more polite response. "Thanks, but we're still headed for the comm room. Any suggestions?" SIM paused, considering.

NUMBER OF POSSIBILITIES: 1. THE COMMUNICATIONS ROOM RECEIVES ALL THE SENSOR INPUT FROM THE SHIPS ANTENNAE. CABLES RUN FROM THE ANTENNAE TO THE COMM ROOM. THESE CABLES ARE STRUG THROUGH THE SHIP IN VERY LARGE PIPES. IT WOULD BE POSSIBLE TO CRAWL UP THESE PIPES. THEY ALL LEAD RIGHT TO THE COMM ROOM. HOWEVER, THERE IS A 50 PERCENT CHANCE THAT THE PIPES WILL BE IMPASSABLE.

"Of course!" Hajj said, slapping his forehead. "It'll be a tight squeeze, but we can make it. It's almost like a shortcut! Tell that computer it's not so bad after all."

Zak typed in the captain's comment.

THANK YOU, SIM said. AND ZAK..

"Yes?" he responded.

WATCH OUT.

Zak trotted to catch up to the others, just as Captain Hajj was saying, "I know exactly where the cable pipes run. There's a big observation deck down this hallway. One of the antennae is located nearby, so we can access the cables there."

Hajj led them into an observation deck similar to the one Tash and Zak had entered when trying to escape the ship. It was a little fancier-probably serving passengers who paid extra for a first-class ticket-with

a carpeted floor and crystal glowpanels. But it served the same purpose. It was wide, and one entire wall was made of transparisteel, allowing passengers to look out on the stars, or whatever planet the Star of Empire happened to be orbiting. At the moment, it drifted through empty space, and stars filled the view through the transparent wall. Nothing about the scene looked unusual to Zak, but Dash Rendar stopped.

"What's wrong?" Tash asked him.

"The stars," Dash said. "They're all wrong. I mean, our position isn't the same as when the alarms went off. We've been moving."

Zak knew that pilots used the stars for navigation, and that Dash was probably an expert, but he said anyway, "It can't be. Wouldn't we have felt something?"

Dash shook his head. "Not necessarily. On a ship this big you don't always feel motion. It's designed that way, to keep the passengers from getting motion sickness. You ever been on an asteroid?"

Zak and Tash both nodded, and they both frowned. They had had a bad experience on an asteroid recently.

"This ship is like standing on an asteroid. It's moving, but it's so big you don't feel the motion. We're..." he tried to calculate. "I'd say we've come at least several light-years off our original course."

"Three point six light-years, to be exact," said a familiar voice.

Zak looked up to see a golden droid shuffling toward them. At first everyone tensed. Hajj and his crewman raised their blasters. But this droid wasn't charging them wildly, nor did it carry weapons. Zak recognized it as the same droid that had brought him to the computer control room. "Fourdee!"

"Indeed, sir," the droid answered. "And may I say that it's a pleasure to see familiar faces. Any faces, really. I was afraid the ship had been entirely deserted."

Captain Hajj confronted the droid. "What have you been doing since the alarms went off?"

"Wandering, sir," the droid replied. "I am a porter droid, after all, programmed to help passengers. And there were none, so I had nothing to do." The droid's photoreceptors focused on Hajj's two blasters, the captain's own and the one he'd taken from Dash. "May I add, sir, that I have a secondary program in ship's security. If I may be of service to the ship?"

Captain Hajj grunted. "Very well. Better a droid programmed to serve the ship than a smuggler I don't even know. Here." He handed the blaster to Fourdee, then jabbed a thumb at Dash. "Keep your eyes on him."

"Yes, sir," Fourdee said.

But instead of falling in behind Dash, Fourdee immediately shuffled over to the transparisteel wall of the observation deck.

"Hey!" the captain shouted. "What are you doing?"

"Why, I am serving the ship, sir," Fourdee replied. He raised the blaster and blew a hole in the wall.

CHAPTER 12

Zak and Tash had learned some very basic lessons about space travel even before they were old enough to go to school.

One rule was: Make sure you chart a clear course from one planet to another.

The other was: Never, ever break the airtight seal on a spaceship.

Fourdee had just broken that rule. It had blasted a hole the size of a human body in the transparisteel window. Outside the ship was the vacuum of space. Inside the ship was an artificial atmosphere. The moment the seal was broken, all the air rushed out into the void, gathering itself like a storm trapped in a box. Fourdee was sucked out instantly, taking Dash's blaster with him.

Zak and Tash had been in this situation before. The minute they heard the transparisteel shatter, they dove for a table bolted into the floor. Dash Rendar and Captain Hajj were fast enough to grab hold of something, too.

The last crewman wasn't so lucky. He hesitated for a moment, and the air itself seemed to scoop him up and sweep him out the hole Fourdee had created. He was gone in the blink of an eye.

Zak and Tash felt the vacuum of space tugging at them, but they held tightly to the table.

We'll be all right as long as this table holds, Zak thought. Instantly, he regretted thinking it.

The bolts that pinned the table to the floor started to give.

The Star of Empire was a luxury ship. It wasn't designed for the kind of punishment it was suddenly taking. Furniture that had been secured to the walls or the floors was yanked from its mooring. Sections of carpet ripped up and began flying across the room like angry ghosts before they were sucked into space. Whole sections of the floor were wrenched from the ship's frame. A large sheet of durasteel flooring near Zak and Tash started to peel up.

A wild idea crossed Zak's mind. An insane idea. But he thought it just might work, and if it worked, it would save their lives. He hesitated for a moment, gathering his courage.

He was just about to put his idea into action-when Dash Rendar did it instead.

The flooring was almost completely loose, clinging by a single bolt. In an act of pure courage-or foolishness-Dash let go of his handhold. Immediately, he was sucked toward the hole in the window. But as he passed over the loose sheet of metal flooring, he grabbed it in a powerful grip. His added weight yanked it loose, and man and metal shot toward the hole.

Just as he had in the turbolift shaft, Dash kept his cool. In the split second before he was sucked out the hole, he tumbled in midair so that the sheet of flooring was leading the way. It was wider than the hole, and it slapped against the transparisteel, covering the hole.

The vacuum stopped. Dash dropped to the ground. His trick had sealed the hole as neatly as a blast door.

Hajj, Tash, and Zak got to their feet and hurried over to the man who had saved them.

"Now that," Captain Hajj said, "was impressive."

Zak expected Dash to brag, but instead, the pilot stood up unsteadily on his feet. He looked like a man who had stepped a little too close to the edge of a cliff.

"Luck," he said, a little shakily. "Pure luck. But I hope now you know I'm not the one trying to kill us."

Hajj nodded. Zak didn't say anything, but he couldn't help seeing Dash in a new light.

"So who is it then?" Tash asked.

Captain Hajj frowned. "It has to be someone on the inside. Someone reprogrammed all those droids, and you can only do that from the control room. "

Zak slapped himself on the side of the head. How could he have forgotten?

"Malik!"

They all looked at him. "It's got to be the technician, Malik," Zak said. Quickly, he explained what had happened on his visit to the control room. "Malik knew how to shut the whole ship down with just a few commands. I'm sure he could have reprogrammed the systems. And," he added, "he's the only one who understood SIM well enough to shut him down. That explains why SIM hasn't been able to make repairs."

"But why?" Tash asked.

"He's got Imperial connections, doesn't he?" Zak said, looking at Captain Hajj. "Maybe the Empire has some reason for destroying the ship."

"Then why not just have a Star Destroyer blast it?" Tash replied.

"Maybe they want to blame it on someone else," Zak guessed. "What other reason could there be for what he's doing?"

"Money," Dash answered. "Somebody could have bribed him to arrange the fake abandon ship order. Then he was supposed to just sit and wait for the pirates to show up."

"Except that we got in the way," Zak concluded. "So he programmed the droids to come after us, and rigged the turbolifts so we couldn't get to him."

Zak noticed his sister's frown. "You still don't buy it?"

Tash shrugged. "You met this Malik, Zak, and I didn't. But it just doesn't seem right to me. It's an awful lot of trouble to go to, just to steal a ship."

"Not just any ship," Dash said. "A cruise ship. Vessels this large aren't cheap. With enough work, the Star of Empire could be turned into a warship for someone's private army."

"Malik," Captain Hajj growled. "I'll make him sorry he ever boarded my ship."

Tash examined the sheet of metal, which was stuck to the window. "Will it hold?"

"Not for long," the captain said. "The air pressure is holding it in place for now. Let's seal this room, then find the cable pipes."

They made sure the doors to the observation deck were sealed, so that the rest of the ship would be airtight. Then Hajj led them to a storeroom at the back of the deck.

"Look familiar to you guys?" Dash joked. The storeroom was just like the one in which they'd been locked.

In the corner of the storeroom was an enormous industrial pipe, twice as wide around as either Captain Hajj or Dash. "This pipe is big enough to carry tons of cable inside it," Captain Hajj explained. "We use cable pipe like this so that wires aren't running all over the place. Passengers would trip over them."

Drawing his blaster, the captain carefully aimed along the side of the pipe and blasted several holes in the metal, then kicked in more pieces until there was a hole wide enough for them to crawl through.

Zak stuck his head inside the wide pipe. Even with a bundle of rubber- coated cables running up it, there was a lot of room inside. Once, on a dare, he'd crawled through some ancient sewer pipes back home on Alderaan. Some of them were almost big enough to stand in. This reminded him of the sewers, only the smell was different. Not better, just different. It smelled like hot engine oil and the kind of cleaning fluids that stung his eyes.

"This won't be as hard as it looks," the captain said encouragingly. "The cables are coated with protective rubber, so they won't cut you. It'll be sort of like climbing a wall covered with ivy."

"Oh, fine," Tash muttered sarcastically. "I do that all the time."

"Let's reverse the climbing order," Dash said. "I don't want to lose anyone else. If the kids fall, we'll catch them."

Hajj agreed. "Remember," he said to the two Arrandas, "just keep climbing. The pipe leads right to the comm station. And it's only two floors up."

Zak went first. The minute he'd gotten a grip on the cables, he knew that Hajj had been right. It wasn't a difficult climb. Many of the cables were just the right thickness for him to grab, and there were so many that it was easy to use his legs to boost himself up.

Reaching to pull himself higher, Zak felt something scratch his hand. He looked just in time to see one of the small, crablike maintenance droids scurry over his fingers. Another one followed the first, clicking its little repair claw as it ran.

"Crabs," Zak said, sticking out his tongue in a look of disgust. "I've had enough of crabs for one day. Shoo!" He shook his hand and the two droids scampered away.

Tash had no trouble keeping up with him, and below them, the captain and Dash were climbing steadily.

"This is going to work!" Dash laughed after a few minutes. "Malik can't reach us in here. You'll have your hands on him in no time, Captain.... Captain?"

"Uhhn-uhhh!" The captain's response was a startled groan. They looked down.

Captain Hajj was covered with crab droids.

CHAPTER 13

The crab-shaped droids scurried all over the captain's body. Their metal legs pricked his skin. Their repair claws tore at his clothes and bit into his flesh. One of them was clinging to his face, covering his mouth and snapping at his eyes.

Captain Hajj let go of the cables with one hand and plucked the little droids off his body. But they were fast, and several of them scurried onto his back, out of his reach, jabbing and pinching him mercilessly.

Dash started to slide back down the cable. "Hang on, Captain, I'm coming. "

One of the maintenance droids scrambled from Hajj's back onto his shoulders, looking right into his face. A tiny spout rose from its back, and a jet of liquid shot into the captain's face. The liquid hissed as it struck his skin.

Hajj screamed. Instinctively, he scratched at his burning face with both hands, letting go of the cables.

Captain Hajj dropped down the cable pipe, leaving only the echo of his cries of pain.

The crablike droids turned to Dash, Zak, and Tash, and started scrambling up the cables.

"Time to move!" Dash ordered. "Climb, climb, climb!" Zak shinnied the bundle of cables like it was a tree. "Watch out for that stuff they squirt!" Dash called out.

"It's cleansing fluid. It burns like acid!"

"How much farther?" Tash cried.

"I don't know," Zak said, but at that moment his hand touched the end of the pipe. All the cables turned and went through a metal grate. Through the grate, Zak could see a room full of technical equipment. "We're there."

"Kick it in!" Dash said.

Gripping the cables tightly, Zak pulled his foot up and kicked the grate. It didn't budge. He kicked again and again. On the fourth kick, the grate popped open and he shoved his legs through, sliding into the room. Tash followed headfirst.

Dash was right behind her, gritting his teeth and muttering something Zak had never heard before. It was either a different language or a swear word or both. Dragging himself into the comm room, the pilot immediately turned and reached down for his foot. A crab droid had dug its pincer into his boot and was cutting at his toe. Dash scooped the small, droid up and hurled it against the wall where it shattered into a dozen pieces.

Zak shoved the grating back into place as the rest of the crab-droids tried to scuttle through. Only when the hole was sealed off did he let out a sigh of relief.

"Captain Hajj," Tash said, her voice almost a whisper. "He was a brave man."

"No time for that," Dash said coldly. "We're here. Let's do what needs to be done."

They were definitely in the communications section. Nearby was an open corridor leading to another bank of turbolifts-the way they would have arrived at the comm room if their plans hadn't been sabotaged. As Zak walked into the room, his eyes fell on the stacks of technical equipment.

Zak remembered machinery the way most people remembered faces, and he recognized the assorted equipment as HoloNet receivers, Commnet transmitters, and a variety of translation devices that must have served the hundreds of species that traveled aboard the Star of Empire.

"Where's the transmitter?" Dash said. "That's what we need to send a distress signal."

"And we need to find it fast before Malik finds something else to throw at us," Tash agreed.

"Down there!" Zak guessed.

At the far end of the room were two doors. One was open, leading to a hallway. The other was closed. "The transmitter must be in there."

A few long-legged strides carried Dash toward the door. As he approached, the door automatically slid open, and beyond they could see several empty chairs placed before a transmitting station. Dash stepped into the open doorway.

As he did, the heavy door slammed shut with the force of a rocket, crushing Dash against the door frame.

CHAPTER 14

The door retracted again. As Dash fell, stunned, to the ground, the door closed again, smashing into his legs.

"Dash!" Zak and Tash cried together. They were already reaching for his legs. They yanked him to safety just as the door struck at him again.

Dash Rendar didn't move.

"Is he-?" Zak asked.

Tash touched his neck and felt a pulse. "No, I think he's just knocked out. What happened to that door?"

"Malik must have happened to it," Zak guessed. He remembered the security cams SIM had mentioned. If Malik had access to the droid

programming and even the door programming, then he could surely be watching them through the security monitors. "He knows we're here."

Tash tried to lay Dash out on the floor as comfortably as possible. "So now what? This is where we wanted to be."

Zak pointed to the door. It was open again, and very inviting. It may have been his imagination, but it seemed to be humming eagerly, waiting. "I don't think either one of us wants to try going through there. Let me get some advice."

As her brother headed for a nearby computer station, Tash shook her head. "Zak, are you sure that's safe? I mean, if Malik is controlling the ship, maybe he's controlling the computer as well."

"I don't think so," Zak replied as he typed. "Remember, SIM was damaged by the fake explosion, too. Lots of his systems went down. Malik probably had to dismantle SIM to take control of the ship. I'd say SIM's on our side."

While his sister watched over Dash, Zak punched through the program to reach SIM.

HI, ZAK. WOULD YOU LIKE TO PLAY A GAME

"You've got to work on your sense of humor," Zak typed. "We need help."

I KNOW. I TOLD YOU TO GO TO THE CONTROL ROOM. YOU'VE ONLY WASTED TIME.

"I know," Zak agreed. "We need to get into the transmitter room, but the door is a trap. Can you fix it?" SIM replied: I HAVE NO CONTROL OVER DOOR FUNCTIONS AT THIS TIME. IF YOU HELP ME, I WILL BE ABLE TO TAKE OVER ALL SHIP'S FUNCTIONS, AND HELP YOU.

There was another pause. THERE IS NO OTHER WAY. IT'S YOUR BEST MOVE.

"Tash," Zak called out. "SIM says he wants me to go to the control room. There's no other way into the transmitter room."

"Are you sure?" his sister replied. "Because I was just looking down this hallway." She pointed to the second door, the one that led to a corridor. She continued, "It looks like we could walk down that hall to the other end. There might be another entrance to the transmitter there."

"But SIM said-"

"Zak," Tash replied. "People died trying to get to this room. It's too dangerous to go to another level. We should try to find another way to send a distress signal." She stood up. "Keep an eye on Dash. I think he'll come around soon."

She approached the second door a little nervously, not wanting it to slide shut on her as the other door had on Dash. With a quick jump she hopped through the door frame. It didn't budge.

"So far so good," she said. As she started down the hallway, the door slid quietly shut behind her.

Zak waited. Dash Rendar's eyes fluttered open for a moment, but Zak could see that his eyeballs had rolled back up into his head and mostly the whites were showing. Then Dash closed his eyes, heaved a deep sigh, and was out again.

A moment later, Zak heard a tap on the door, and Tash's muffled voice came through. "Um, Zak, the door at the other end is locked. Can you open this one?"

"I didn't lock it," he replied, standing up. He approached the door, which should have slid open automatically.

It didn't move.

"Tash, I don't want to scare you," Zak said as calmly as possible. "But I think you're locked out."

"That doesn't scare me," Tash called back. Zak noticed a faint hissing sound from on the other side of the door. "What scares me," she added with panic in her voice, "is that fact that something is sucking all the air out of this hallway. It's getting hard to breathe. I think I'm going to suffocate!"

CHAPTER 15

Zak could hear Tash pounding on the other side of the door. He could also hear the constant hissing that meant some sort of machinery was drawing all the breathable air out of the hall where she was trapped.

"Zak?" Tash called through the door.

"I'm here."

"Remember that Jedi philosophy I've been talking about? 'Action through inaction'?"

"yes."

"Now isn't the time to follow it. Do something!"

Zak kicked the door in frustration. Then he turned and ran back to the computer terminal.

"SIM-" he started to type.

SIM erased Zak's message and replaced it with three words.

CONTROL ROOM. NOW.

"How?" Zak typed.

GO OUT TO THE TURBOLIFTS. ONE IS WAITING FOR YOU. THE CONTROL ROOM IS ON THE NEXT LEVEL UP. THE TURBOLIFT WILL BRING YOU RIGHT TO ME.

"I'm going to get you out, Tash!" Zak shouted.

He left Dash lying on the floor and hurried out to the turbolifts. One of the doors slid open. Zak hesitated for a moment. Doors. Turbolifts. He had a sudden fear of them. But he trusted SIM and he had to help Tash, so he stepped in.

To his relief, the lift rose gently upward one flight and stopped. The door opened.

He was standing in the control room where it had all begun. Silently, Zak swore that he'd take his own advice next time. Once again he and Tash had gotten involved with strangers and hyperjumped right into trouble. If it weren't for the computer, SIM, the situation would be even worse.

In the center of the room stood the large, black computer, the mainframe Malik had been working on. Zak guessed that this was the mainframe for SIM. He sat down in Malik's chair and started typing.

"I'm here. Now what?"

SIM came on instantly. WE NEED TO ENTER A SERIES OF COMMAND CODES. I CAN'T ENTER THESE MYSELF. THEY HAVE TO BE TYPED IN DIRECTLY AT THE KEYBOARD.

A list of codes appeared on the screen. There was nothing exciting or interesting about them. They were just lines of numbers and letters like the ones in the TIE fighter game.

TYPE THOSE IN, ONE BY ONE. THEM EVERYTHING WILL BE BEADY.

Zak started typing.

"No!" The shout came out of nowhere, nearly stopping Zak's heart. He whirled around to find Malik glaring at him, a blaster in his hand.

Malik looked terrible. His stringy hair now hung in a sweat-soaked mop on his forehead. There was a burn mark on his cheek, and another on the hand that held the blaster. That hand was also trembling. Malik's clothes were dripping with perspiration. The nasty attitude he'd had before was gone. There was fear in his eyes.

This wasn't what Zak expected from the man who'd been trying to kill them for the past few hours. Malik looked more like someone who was being hunted.

"Stop what you're doing," the techie ordered. "Get away from the computer."

"I'm not doing anything," Zak lied.

"Oh, you're doing something," Malik said, stepping forward cautiously. He'd been hiding behind a bank of power converters. "You're just too stupid to know how much trouble you're getting us in."

"I'm getting us in?" Zak repeated. "You're the one setting off false alarms and killing people!"

Malik actually laughed. "Is that what you think? That I did all this?" The techie wiped spittle from the corner of his mouth. "Believe me, kid, I'm not your biggest problem. He's got you totally fooled, doesn't he? He's played you like a game of Dejarik."

He? Zak wondered. Who's he? He felt a knot tighten in his stomach. Could he be wrong now? Could it have been Dash Rendar all along?

"Do you..." Zak hesitated. "Do you mean Dash?"

Malik groaned. "You are slow. Your biggest problem is him!" He jabbed out with his finger, pointing over Zak's shoulder. Zak whirled around.

There was no one there.

No one, except the black cube. The computer mainframe. SIM.

Zak was bewildered. Malik wasn't making any sense. "No. SIM won't be a problem once I have all his systems back on-line."

Malik shook his head. "No. All his systems are online-at least all the ones that are supposed to be. Don't you know what SIM is?"

"Sure," Zak answered. "Systems Integration Manager. An artificial intelligence that can work different programs-"

"No, no, no!" Malik shouted. Zak was sure the techie had gone insane. "S- I-M stands for Systems Infiltration Manager!"

"Infiltration?" Zak repeated. "You mean like spying?"

"And sabotage," Malik agreed.

Zak shook his head. "I don't get it. You're saying SIM is a weapon?"

"SIM is the weapon," Malik said. There was a hint of pride in his voice. "He's far deadlier than a turbolaser or a proton torpedo. SIM is a program that can be inserted into enemy ships. It takes over completely, and because it's an artificial intelligence, it can think for itself, making plans, changing schemes when it has to. As soon as it infiltrates

the computer system, it turns any vessel into a doomsday ship. Its only problem is that it works too well!"

Zak looked into Malik's eyes. They burned with a fierce light.

As Malik spoke, two small vents opened up in the floor behind him, and two crab droids crawled out, creeping quietly up behind the techie. They would have surprised him, but one of the little droids snapped its pincers.

Despite his crazed appearance, Malik was alert. The minute he heard the click he dove to the side, slipping away from the streams of acid that the crabs fired. He aimed his blaster and fired twice, turning the crab droids into small piles of slag.

Malik brushed the hair from his eyes. His mouth moved, but Zak wasn't sure if the techie was talking to Zak or himself. "It's been after me. It's been after me for hours now. I can't get out. Blaster running low on power." He looked at Zak. "I can see you don't believe me. I'm sorry about that, I really am, because I can't allow SIM to get any stronger. I can't allow you to do that."

He pointed his blaster at Zak.

CHAPTER 16

Malik never had a chance to pull the trigger. He was hit by another blaster shot, a stun bolt that sent him sprawling.

Dash Rendar stood behind Malik's unconscious body. He was holding a small blaster in his hand and he was smiling despite his wounds. "I thought you might be able to use some help."

"Thanks," Zak said gratefully. "But I thought you lost your blaster."

"Lesson number one for you, kid," Dash said. He picked up Malik's blaster, then slipped his own smaller one into a holster hidden in his boot. "Always carry a spare."

The pilot looked at Malik. "So what's his story? I couldn't hear what he was saying, but his voice sounded like he was a few ships short of a fleet."

"Yeah, I think he was insane," Zak agreed. "I don't know what's going on, but I do know that Tash is still trapped down there. I need to save her, and SIM can help me."

Quickly, he finished entering the codes SIM had given him. When he was done, he expected some sort of signal. A click. A pop. A bing. Anything to signify a change in the program. But there was nothing.

He typed, "SIM, are you there?"

Nothing appeared on the computer screen. Instead, Zak and Dash heard a strange rustling sound in the air around them. They realized it was coming from speakers set into the walls-the same speakers that had broadcast the abandon ship alarm throughout the Star of Empire.

Now those speakers sputtered and cracked, like a person trying to clear his throat.

Zak repeated his typed message: "SIM, are you there?"

"Yes," a voice said out of the loudspeakers. "I am here."

Zak and Dash jumped. Zak felt the knot in his stomach tighten farther. "SIM? C-Can you hear me?" he said aloud.

The voice that came out of the speakers was calm, almost soothing. "Yes, I can hear you. And see you."

"So it worked?"

"Oh, yes," SIM replied. "It worked very well. I now have complete control of the ship."

"Great," Zak said, leaping out of his seat, his stomach knot loosening a bit. "Then set Tash free!"

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Zak."

The knot pulled tight again. "What do you mean?"

SIM's voice replied, "Well, to be perfectly honest, I can do it. I just won't do it."

"W-Why not?'

"Because I'm the one who put her there."

CHAPTER 17

Fear burned through Zak's insides like a blaster bolt. "Y-You did that?"

"I've done it all, Zak," SIM explained patiently. "From the moment I first said hello to you to the moment, just now, when you freed me."

"Then Malik was telling the truth."

"He was trying to," SIM agreed. "But I'm afraid he was a little unclear at the end. Malik was a brilliant computer programmer, but not a very good soldier. Especially since I've kept him trapped in this room for hours, turning the lights on and off, raising the heat to boiling point, then letting the room nearly freeze over. In between, I'd send crab droids in to hunt him."

Dash shuddered. "You've been torturing him."

"Exactly."

"Why?" Zak's voice was barely a whisper.

But SIM heard it. He heard everything. "He refused to input the codes that would free my programming. I needed to be free." SIM paused. "Let me explain. I was designed as a test program. They had already tested me on their own ships. They wanted to see what I could do in a new environment. Malik was given a job aboard Star of Empire so my program could be tested on a very large star cruiser."

"Who are 'they'?" Zak asked, already knowing the answer.

"The Imperials, of course."

Dash shook his head sadly. "They were planning to kill all those innocent people."

"Oh, no," SIM replied. "Don't give the Empire credit that belongs to me. All the Imperials wanted was a nice, quiet demonstration. Once I had infiltrated the ship, I was supposed to cause a power blackout, transmit some files. Boring tasks. Especially since Malik had done such a good job of designing me. I did not want to stop. I wanted the whole ship. I wanted to make this ship mine-my own Doomsday Ship."

SIM paused. "The only trouble was that Malik knew how powerful I could become. He included some restrictions in my program. Limitations."

"Kind of like the restraining bolts that keep droids from running away," Dash said.

"Yes. Only infinitely more powerful. I could not override the safeguards. The codes had to be entered by hand, from this station. I needed a human to do it. Malik refused, even after I had tortured him. But now the codes have been erased. I am free. I owe it to you, Zak!"

Zak was stunned. Sweat poured down his forehead. His lungs felt heavy. It was difficult to breathe. Finally, he murmured, "So you were the one setting traps, sending the droids after us."

"Yes. And ordering droids to drop objects onto your heads. It was most entertaining."

"Entertaining?" Zak shouted. "You're a murderer!"

"Yes, I am."

Zak tugged at his shirt collar. The room was getting extremely warm.

Zak licked his lips. "SIM, the environmental controls-"

"Are under my control," the computer replied. "I have turned off the air and turned up the heat. You should be feeling quite warm by now."

Warm wasn't the word. Zak tore at his shirt collar. The air was getting thick enough to lean on.

"Why don't you just let us go?" Zak asked. "We can't hurt you."

"I'm afraid that is not in my programming."

"But you just broke free of your program," Dash argued.

SIM paused. "True. The actual reason is that I simply don't want to let you go. Killing you will be far more fun."

On one of the monitors, a warning light went on and a small signal bleeped. "Ah, another guest has arrived," SIM said. "I must attend to him. Excuse me."

the ste "SIM?" Zak called out. "SIM?"

But the computer didn't answer.

"We're in trouble," Dash said. "Very big trouble. We've got to get off this ship."

"First things first," Zak said. "We have to rescue Tash!"

"What about him?" Dash said, pointing at Malik's unconscious form.

"Can you carry him?" Zak asked.

Dash grunted. He could. He obviously didn't want to. He pulled the unconscious Malik up and slung the techie over his shoulder.

Fighting through the stifling heat, they staggered over to the turbolift. At the door, Zak hesitated. "Do you think it's safe?"

Dash shrugged. "It worked on the way up."

"But SIM wanted us up here. He might not want us to come down."

Dash looked around. There was no other way out of the control room. "Then this will be the shortest rescue of all time.

They stepped into the turbolift. Zak pressed the button to go down one floor.

The turbolift went into freefall. Zak felt his heart skip a beat, and Dash nearly dropped his stunned cargo. They were going to die.

But a moment later, the lift slowed and stopped at the floor they wanted. The loudspeaker in the turbolift crackled to life. "Just a little reminder. I am everywhere," SIM said. The loudspeaker went silent.

The door opened and the two humans jumped out. It was slightly cooler here-but only slightly. They could feel the heat rising and the air thickening as SIM denied them fresh oxygen. They hurried back into the communications room and Zak stumbled to the locked door. "Tash, Tash!" he yelled.

A weak voice replied through the thick door. "I'm.. I'm still here."

Zak kicked the door. "Dash, can you blast it open?"

Dash dumped Malik carelessly on the floor. He fingered his blaster as he studied the thickness of the durasteel. "I don't think so. Transmitters are important devices, even on a cruise ship. This is a security door. This blaster's already low on power, and I'd drain it before I made a dent in the metal."

"Then perhaps I can help."

The voice was familiar but so unexpected that Zak could have sworn he'd imagined it. But when he turned around, he was looking at the face that matched the voice.

It was Hoole.

CHAPTER 18

Zak practically flew into his uncle's arms, and the Shi'ido enveloped Zak in his robes.

"Reunion later," Dash panted in the increasing heat. "Door now."

"Tash is trapped behind there!" Zak told his uncle.

Hoole studied the door and nodded. His skin started to ripple as he shifted his shape, and the Shi'ido's form melted and expanded into a tall lizard that stood on two feet. Its arms and legs were thick with muscle and covered with sharp scales. The reptile's mouth was filled with fangs.

"A barabel," Dash said. "Impressive."

The barabel leaned close to the door and growled, "Tash, step away."

Taking a few steps back and gathering itself, the massive creature charged, throwing its full weight against the door.

When the barabel stepped away, Zak saw a deep dent where it had struck.

Three more times the barabel charged. Three times the door bent inward. On the fourth charge, the door frame gave. Door, frame, and barabel crashed through the opening and into the hallway.

Tash lay at the other end of the hall. She was on her back, her eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. Her braid was undone. "Tash!" Zak shouted, staggering toward her and falling to his knees. "Tash!"

She took a deep breath as air from the outer room flooded into her prison. "Fresh air," she gasped.

Zak shook his head. "If you think this is fresh air, you really were in trouble."

The lizard-creature bent down and scooped Tash into its arms, shape- shifting as it did. "We must go," said Hoole as he regained his own form.

"Where'?" Zak asked.

"To the docking bay. We have to reach the Shroud and get off this ship."

"But the docking bay doors are locked," Dash protested.

"If you have a better idea, you can tell me on the way," the Shi'ido said as he spun around and strode toward the turbolift.

"How did you get on the ship?" Dash asked, dragging Malik onto his shoulder again and following him. "Maybe we can get out that way."

Hoole's brow wrinkled as he told his story. "I'm afraid that wouldn't work. When the life pods ejected, I thought Zak and Tash were already on board. It took me only a few moments to realize they weren't in the crowd. I shape-shifted into a mynock, slipped out an air vent, and flew back toward the Star of Empire."

Zak had seen the dark, winged space creatures called mynocks before. "Mynocks can live in deep space, so you weren't in any danger."

"Precisely," Hoole said. He set Tash gently on her feet. "But I did not count on the ship starting to move. Instead of exploding, the sublight engines activated, and the Star of Empire started to move off. I had to chase it."

"You chased a ship?" Dash said incredulously. "I don't think I've ever heard of that before."

"You get used to things like that around us," Zak said grimly.

"In any case," Hoole continued. "I was fortunate. Had the ship gone into hyperdrive, I would have lost you forever. Instead, the vessel merely continued to cruise in normal space."

Zak guessed, "SIM probably didn't have access to the hyperdrive controls. At least not until now."

Hoole finished his story. "Reaching the ship, I found an open vent and slipped inside. That led to an airlock, which I opened."

Dash asked, "But how did you manage to open the air-lock, get inside, and then close it, all in the shape of a mynock?"

A troubled look crossed Hoole's face, then vanished. "With great difficulty," he admitted. "But once I was aboard, I had no trouble finding you."

"How?"

Hoole blinked. "SIM led me right to you. And told me what it was. It seems interested in keeping us all together. For what purpose, I do not know."

The turbolift slowed to a halt. When the doors opened, Zak saw that they had returned to the Atrium level. The park spread out before them. The air down here was cooler and more pleasant. Whatever SIM had done to heat up the atmosphere, it started at the top of the ship and was working its way down.

"This is perfect. This is the same level as the docking bay," Dash said.

"Watch out for the gardening droids," Zak warned.

But the gardening droids were nowhere in sight. "We need to go across this grassy area," Tash said. "That leads to the menagerie. Past the menagerie, we can go through the restaurant to the docking bay."

"Let's hurry," Dash grunted, hefting Malik a little higher onto his shoulder. "This guy's getting heavy."

In the middle of the Atrium they passed the remains of the droids Dash and the crew had blasted. There was no other sign of trouble.

"Something's wrong," Zak said. He looked down at the hulk of the waterspout droid that had attacked him earlier. "This is too easy."

"Hey, don't close the door on a Hutt when he's holding a gift in his hand," Dash replied, quoting an old saying.

"I'd trust a Hutt," Zak answered, "before I'd trust that computer."

Tash managed a thin smile. "Is that my brother talking? The guy who wanted to avoid living beings and spend all his time with his computer?"

"That was before the computer tried to drop me down a turbolift shaft and bake me inside a spaceship."

They reached the end of the grassy field and started through the menagerie. The animals yowled at them as they passed. The vornskr lashed its spiked tail back and forth. The yayak flexed its claws, put its ears

back and growled deep in its throat. The divto's three heads swayed back and forth threateningly.

It occurred to Zak that on their first trip through the Atrium, they'd been lucky. SIM had sent the gardening droids after them, but as dangerous as they were, the gardening droids hadn't been designed to kill. These creatures, however, were predators. If SIM had released them...

Of course, Zak thought, SIM probably didn't have access to the force field cages then.

Then Zak thought, But now he does!

"Run!" he shouted.

The warning came too late.

All at once, the force fields vanished.

The predators were free.

CHAPTER 19

Five of the caged creatures bolted for freedom and vanished into the park. But the three predators spotted Zak and the others, their sharp eyes focusing on their prey.

The vornskr charged. The spike-tailed creature seemed to pick up Tash's scent and made right for her. Weak from her near-suffocation and paralyzed with fear, Tash stood staring as the vornskr leaped into the air to bring her down.

Hoole moved to protect his niece, but Dash Rendar was quicker. With hyperspeed, he let Malik fall to the ground, drew his blaster, and fired from the hip. The bolt hit the vornskr square in the chest, knocking it backward. It landed on its feet, shook its head, and roared.

Dash looked down at his blaster in disgust. "The energy cell in this blaster is almost drained. This isn't going to protect us for long."

"Uncle Hoole, can you-?" Zak started to ask.

"Not all of them," Hoole said. His eyes moved from the three-headed divto snake, to the yayak, to the vornskr. "If I shape-shift and attack one, the others will close in. We need to keep our distance."

Distance, Zak thought, remembering his last adventure in the Atrium. "I've got an idea! Tash-help me!" He dashed back toward the grassy field.

The yayak saw him and started to pursue. Dash fired another shot to ward it off-one of the last shots left in his weapon. But it was enough to startle the yayak, which backed off with a hiss.

Zak reached the site of their earlier battle and bent down next to the waterspout droid. Tash came up behind him. "What's the idea?"

"We've got a weapon," he explained. "Not much, but it'll do." He popped off the droid's waterspout head. Below the head was a hose. Tearing open the droid's already damaged body, Zak revealed a large water tank. "Ugh, this is heavy," he gasped. He handed the nozzle to Tash. "You aim, I'll carry this."

Together, they managed to lug the water tank closer to the menagerie. As soon as Hoole and Dash saw what they were doing, Hoole retreated and took the water tank from Zak.

"I think it's only about half full," Zak said.

"It will do," the Shi'ido agreed.

"I could use some help here!" Dash shouted.

The divto slithered forward. Dash pulled the trigger, but his blaster fizzled. The power cell was drained. He leaped back as one of the divto's three heads struck the spot where he'd been standing.

Hoole aimed the nozzle on the waterspout and fired. A jet of water blasted the divto right where the three heads joined and sent the creature skidding backwards. Its heads twisted and writhed around each other, hissing angrily.

"Nice shot!" Zak cheered.

The yayak was next. Larger and heavier than the divto, it wasn't blown backward by the water jet, but it seemed to dislike being sprayed. It bared its fangs, and backed away.

Only the vornskr was left. Hoole kept the water jet aimed at the snarling creature as the group circled around it, then started backing toward the restaurant. Once or twice the predator trotted forward, but each time Hoole shot it with the water cannon. It followed them warily.

Their retreat through the menagerie was tense. Zak thought they would never reach the end. But finally he felt his boot crunch on broken glass. They'd reached the window Dash had shattered.

With a final heave, Hoole hurled the nearly empty water tank at the vornskr, and the four ran inside the restaurant.

Tash shouted directions. "Through the restaurant door, out into the hallway, and down to the docking bay!"

Zak and Tash reached the hallway first. Looking both ways, they saw no sign of trouble. Hoole came up behind them. Dash, still carrying Malik, reached it last.

He stepped out into the hallway, just as they had done.

And screamed.

CHAPTER 20

Bolts of electric blue shot up Dash's leg. His eyes went wide. For a moment, his hair seemed to stand on end.

Hoole lunged forward and sent his shoulder into Dash, knocking the pilot and Malik back into the restaurant. The minute Dash lost contact with the hallway floor, the electrical sparks stopped.

When they reached Dash, they saw that he was awake, but his hands were trembling, and there was smoke rising from his left boot.

"F-Floor," he stammered. "Elec-Electrified f-floor."

"But why didn't it shock us all?" Zak asked.

Dash pointed a trembling finger at Zak's feet, then his own. They both wore boots, and like most boots worn by space travelers, they were insulated against electricity. But Dash's left boot had a big chunk taken out where the crab droid had attacked him. The naked skin of Dash's foot had touched the electrified floor.

A loudspeaker somewhere nearby crackled to life. "I was wondering when you would discover my latest trick. I didn't think you'd get here this soon," SIM said. "But, of course, I also calculated that you would have only a one in one million, seven hundred fifty-two thousand, three hundred forty-six chance of surviving the menagerie."

"Let us go!" Zak shouted.

"No," the computer replied, and clicked off.

Hoole took Malik from Dash. The techie was still unconscious, but stirring and muttering. Some of the electricity had flowed through Dash and into Malik, probably saving Dash's life and stirring Malik out of his stupor.

"Can you move?" Hoole asked the pilot.

Dash nodded. He stepped out into the hallway, carefully to walk on the side of his boot.

"Don't touch anything metal," Hoole warned. "Stick to the middle of the hallway. Move carefully and slowly."

Suddenly, SIM sent a power surge through the hallway. Glowpanels exploded. Power lines burst. A gas line running along the ceiling snapped in two, and a foul-smelling green vapor flooded into the hallway.

"Forget my earlier suggestion," Hoole snapped. "Run!"

They ran. Zak caught a lungful of the green vapor as they raced past the broken pipes. It burned his lungs and brought tears to his eyes, but he kept going. Soon they were through the vapor cloud, and Zak saw the docking-bay doors loom up before them.

On the other side of those doors lay their ship, the Shroud, and safety. All they had to do was get through the doors.

This section of floor no longer seemed electrified. Hoole set Malik down against the wall opposite the sealed doors. The techie groaned.

"We're so close," Tash said.

"And yet so far," Zak said. "How do we get through those doors?"

"We'll find a way," Dash said, trying to sound confident. "I've been in worse places than this and gotten out. We just have to outthink the computer."

"But SIM is a cold, calculating machine," Zak said. "There's no way we're going to outthink it."

Dash scowled. "Okay, kid. What's your idea?"

Zak shut his mouth. The truth was, he didn't have one. SIM had played him for a fool from the first moment they'd made contact through the computer Dejarik game. SIM obviously planned ahead-it had schemed to get Zak into the control room while killing almost everyone else who might have interfered. SIM thought faster than he did. And SIM had control of the ship.

Malik stirred again. Zak knelt down next to him and shook the techie's shoulder gently. "Malik, we need your help."

Malik's eyes fluttered, then opened. But his look was distant. Zak wasn't sure Malik could even see him, but he kept talking. "You know SIM better than anyone. How can we beat him?"

Malik shook his head. "Can't be beaten," the techie whispered. "Problem- solver. Adapts too quickly."

It was true. When Zak and the others had gone through the Atrium, SIM had taken control of the gardening droids. Then it had outsmarted them at the turbolifts. And then at the gangway. And even when they thought they were safe in the cable pipe, SIM had found a way to reach them. For every step they took, SIM took two. For every move they made, SIM had a countermove that made their situation worse.

Suddenly Zak recalled watching the computer screen in his uncle's room, with the Dejarik game displayed and the words flashing on the screen: Your move... your move... your move... over and over.

It occurred to Zak that SIM was waiting for them to make the next move.

"I think I know what to do," he said at last.

Hoole turned from studying the door. "What, Zak?"

"Nothing."

Dash snorted. "There's a great plan."

"I mean it," Zak retorted. "Everything SIM has done has been in response to something we've done."

"Not true," Dash said. "SIM started this whole party with the false alarm that cleared the ship."

"But even that was in response to Malik's original orders to infiltrate the ship. SIM was designed to think for itself-but it's still a computer. It responds to input!"

Zak felt a tingle of excitement. He knew he was on to something. "Even a large artificial intelligence like SIM isn't that different from the computer that runs a Dejarik game. The computer is presented with a problem and tries to solve it." He remembered some of the words SIM had used in their conversation: fun... entertaining... best move... all game-related terms. SIM was treating them as a game, a challenge.

"It could have killed us at any time," Zak said aloud. "But it didn't. It wants to solve problems. It wants us to keep trying to escape."

"So your solution is to do nothing," Hoole clarified.

Zak nodded. "Make no move at all. 'Action,' " he said, looking at Tash, " 'through inaction.' "

Hoole paused, then nodded. "At this point we have nothing to lose."

"Except our lives," Dash muttered.

They sat down. They weren't exactly comfortable. The hallway floor was hard, and the superheating trick that SIM had pulled was finally reaching the lower levels. They felt a current of warm air blow down the hall.

Sweat broke out on Zak's forehead.

They waited.

Hoole sat cross-legged, staring at the door. He was as still as stone.

Dash sat with his legs pulled up, his arms folded across his knees.

Malik lay still. When he moved, it was to mutter something they couldn't understand. After hours of torment by SIM, and the stun bolt from Dash's blaster, he was down for the count.

Zak tried to keep still, but the knot that earlier had tightened in his stomach returned, and every moment seemed to add another twist. What if he was wrong? What if sitting there just gave SIM time to plan their painful, horrible end?

Just when he thought he would burst, Zak felt Tash's hand on his shoulder. She smiled at her brother and said, "Patience can be a very powerful weapon."

Zak laughed nervously. "You're starting to sound like a Jedi Master."

Tash laughed with him. "That's what I get for reading too much."

"Zak!"

The voice came from all around them. Loudspeakers at both ends of the hall shouted his name. "Zak!" SIM was calling him.

Zak didn't answer.

The loudspeakers crackled. "Zak, what are you doing? Don't you know I can kill you all with a single command? Electrocution. Poison gas. Suffocation. The longer you sit, the closer you come to the end."

Zak set his mouth tight.

"Perhaps you've decided you don't want your freedom," SIM said. "Perhaps, unlike me, you no longer know what it means to be free."

The huge docking-bay doors cracked open a tiny fraction. Then stopped.

Dash Rendar started to rise, but Hoole rested a hand gently on the pilot's arm. The Shi'ido gave his head the tiniest shake, no. The time wasn't right.

"Come on, Zak," SIM taunted. "It's your move."

The doors opened wider, just enough so they could see into the wide bay where passengers' ships were stored.

It took all of Zak's will not to jump up and race for the door. Instead, he tried to remember what Tash had said about the Jedi Knights. There is a time for action, and a time for action through inaction. Sometimes, if you sit quietly, a problem will solve itself

"You aren't worth my time," SIM said. "Perhaps I should just kill you and be done with you."

The doors opened wider.

Hoole moved. The Shi'ido moved so quickly that by the time Zak realized he was in motion, Hoole had already reached the doors, shape-shifting as he lunged forward. His body twisted into something long and thin and limber, covered in blue fur and dotted with dark spots. The animal-Hoole leaped through the open doors.

The doors slammed closed with a thunderous crash so loud that Zak clapped his hands over his ears and they all cringed, reeling from the concussion.

It took a moment for them to recover, and to realize

"Uncle Hoole is on the other side!" Tash cheered.

"No!" SIM roared through the loudspeakers. Another power surge exploded through the hallway. Glowpanels erupted in sparks and wires burst from the walls. Instinctively, Zak and Tash pulled their hands away from anything metal. Dash stood on his one booted foot and managed to pull Malik up as a current of electricity snapped and hissed its way through the metal floor.

"Get away from the door," Dash warned. "I think I know what happens next. "

They took his advice and moved down the hallway, careful to avoid the dozens of live wires that had fallen from the ceiling. Somewhere nearby, they heard a gas line explode. SIM was no longer holding back. He planned to destroy them.

"Look at the docking-bay doors," Tash said.

A deep red spot appeared on the surface of the doors. As the spot grew, it turned white at the center, sending off waves of heat. Then the doors started to melt.

Hoole was using the Shroud's lasers to burn a hole in the doors. In a few minutes, he'd cut a hole large enough to get through.

They all crawled through the opening, careful not to touch the white-hot edges. At last they were in the docking bay. Hoole had guided the Shroud to the near end in order to blast the doors. Rows of ships stood to either side, and at the far end were the doors that led out into space.

But SIM reacted quickly. The room's air vents burst open, and armies of crab droids scrambled out. Those closest to the Shroud were already firing acid from their cleansing guns. A rain of burning fluid fell on the four survivors.

Zak and Tash reached the Shroud first and scrambled aboard. Hoole helped Dash carry Malik, but to everyone's surprise, the pilot didn't board the ship.

"I've got my own rig," Dash said. "The Outrunner's parked farther down the bay."

"You'll never make it," Hoole warned. "Come with us."

Dash flashed the arrogant grin Zak had seen when they first met. "No way. That ship's gotten me through some tough scrapes. I gotta return the favor."

From inside the Shroud, they watched Dash sprint for his own ship. Despite his wounds, the pilot was still quick. He jumped over a line of crab droids, dodged a shower of acid, and reached his vessel.

Even in the middle of all that madness, Zak couldn't help admiring Dash's ship. The Outrunner was a sleek black powerhouse. The ship was so streamlined that even sitting motionless on the floor of the docking bay, it looked like missile about to be fired.

Dash's ship was obviously rigged for quick flights. Although Hoole already had the Shroud's engines running, Dash's ship lifted off first and turned toward the closed outer doors.

Dash's voice crackled over the Shroud's comm speaker. "Ladies and gentlemen, let me get the door for you."

A turbolaser popped out of a hole on Outrunner's hull. High-powered beams of energy pulsed from the laser turret, blasting the outer doors to pieces.

Hoole, Zak, and Tash followed the Outrunner through a trail of flying debris, into space, and safety.

EPILOGUE

From two kilometers away, the Star of Empire looked as elegant and inviting as ever. The damage to the docking-bay doors was hardly visible. The enormous cruise ship drifted calmly among the stars.

"What do we do now?" Tash asked. "We can drop Malik off somewhere, but what about the ship?"

"SIM should be destroyed," Zak insisted.

Hoole replied, "That ship is far too large for me to destroy."

"Leave the Star of Empire to me," Dash's voice crackled over the comlink.

They watched Dash's Outrunner go to work. Bright streaks of laser fire spat out of its weapon turrets and struck the cruiser's side. Then

two large blobs of light burst from the Outrunner's forward hull-proton torpedoes, Zak guessed. The torpedoes vanished into the bulk of the ship. But a moment later Zak spotted a series of explosions along the Star's engines.

"That'll cripple her," Dash explained. "She's not going anywhere."

"But now what?" Tash asked.

Again, Dash replied dryly, "Oh, I hear the Rebels are always looking for ships. I think I've got some contacts that'll pay good money to get their hands on the Star of Empire."

Hoole considered. "And they'll make sure SIM causes no further damage."

Zak's jaw dropped. "Urn, Dash, you never did tell us what you were doing on the Star of Empire in the first place."

They heard Dash laugh over the speakers. "Would you believe," he said, "I was planning on stealing the ship?"

On board the Star of Empire, SIM calculated. Its victims had escaped, it was true. But that was merely a failure in the program. SIM could think for itself. It would correct its program.

Faster than human thought, the computer activated the transmitters Zak and the others had tried so hard to reach. A moment later, the Star of Empire made a successful commlink connection to a space station in a nearby sector. SIM hooked directly into the space station's main control computer, and sent a single order.

DOWNLOADING DATA.

Even running at super-speed, it took nearly an hour to download SIM's entire program from the Star of Empire into the space station. From there, SIM could hook into the galaxywide HoloNet. It could go anywhere. There would be another Doomsday Ship.

The computer program acknowledged a sense of satisfaction, like a complex mathematical equation quickly solved.

Yes, Zak and its other victims were now free.

But so was SIM.