

GEORGE NEVER DIES

A Grand Undertaking in the Art of
Nonsensical and Confusing Storytelling by

STEPHEN

ALTERNATE TITLES

The Adventures of George

The Story of George

The Grand and Lengthy Saga of George

It's All About George

A Weird Future

Blame It On the Dark Matter

A Lot of Pages of Stuff Going In Really No Direction At All

Abnormal Happenings, A (Mostly) Normal Guy

It's All, You Know, Stuff

TITLES FOR A SEQUEL

More George

George II

The Son of George Never Dies

The Return of George

Another Bout of Rambling Storytelling That Wanders Aimlessly...About Some Guy Named George

George Still Doesn't Die

George Lives Again

George, Round 2

Some More...Stuff

**This book may contain instances of graphic violence and/
or other situations inappropriate for young children.
Please keep this in mind as you read.**

Doug Adams—I'm very sorry about how much I ripped off your book (Mostly Harmless) in this book of my own. After finishing it, I've realized that I pretty much stole your whole "illogical-universe" idea and acted like it was mine. I'm very sorry about it, and have to point out that I am not in the habit of (intentionally) ripping off good authors...especially dead ones.

— *Stephen*

P.S.: I really liked your book.

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PART ONE

Landfall

“George, my sensors are detecting an imbalance in the true velocity supervisor. I think you should have a look at this.”

Grumbling, George swung his legs out of bed and shuffled down the hallway. Yawning, he was rubbing the sleep out of his eyes as he crossed the cockpit threshold. The door hissed shut quietly behind him.

“Okay, Bob. What’s the problem?”

“Our true velocity supervisor. The sensors indicate that its reading is stuck on 3.2. It should be reading 1. This is most likely an effect caused by the conjunction of various trans-dimensional vertices, five-dimensional solids, micro-particles of dark matter, sub-space anomalies, and assorted miniscule real-space wrinkles in our immediate vicinity.”

George drummed his fingers absentmindedly on a console, thinking. “Well, you’re programmed to handle all that, aren’t you? Can’t you just fix it?”

Bob sighed. “It isn’t that simple, though—any unauthorized modification of the true velocity matrix without the consent of the true velocity supervisor would most likely cause the supervisor to lock us out and shut down the matrix.”

“In which case we would be toast,” George muttered as he absentmindedly scratched his unshaven chin. “What happens if we just leave it at 3.2 until we get to TYRO-Op 1001101?”

“I’ve already throttled back 9.8% on the engines, and the matrix didn’t show any signs of returning to normal. I tried to talk to the supervisor about it, but you know the way he is—he never stops to talk to us, he’s got much more important things to do.”

“Like supervising the true velocity matrix?” George rolled his eyes.

“What else?”

George sighed, thinking again. “So we don’t know what would happen if the true velocity factor rose to, say, 5?”

“Not really.”

“Let’s try it,” George said, a mischievous twinkle in his eye. “I’m sure the supervisor will tell us if anything gets out of hand.”

“I like the way you think, George. Give me a few seconds, and I’ll get us back up to speed.”

George sat in silence as Bob fiddled with some settings. Maybe I’ll have a ham and cheese sandwich for breakfast, thought George. Heaven knows Martha isn’t here to stop me.

George presently became aware of the fact that Bob’s attention was resting on him once again. “You know, I’m sure Jenny’s parents understand,” Bob said. “An accident like that could happen to anyone—I’m sure airlock malfunctions happen to loads of people. Heaven knows there’s worse ways to go than an accidental exposure to vacuum.”

“Mm . . . so, have you figured out how far it is to 5 yet?”

“I’m ready when you are. Another 10% ought to do it.”

“Go ahead.”

Looking back on it a few weeks later, George realized that, if he had his life back to do over again, that would be *exactly* what he wouldn’t have done.

As soon as Bob throttled back up, he noticed that the core temperature in the main fusion reactor was creeping up a bit. And the supervisor promptly started objecting.

“Hey hey hey, Bob, buddy, what’cha doing? I mean, I thought we had an agreement here—you leave me alone, I do my job, we both stay in one piece, everybody’s happy? But now, Bob, I mean, hey—look what you’re doing. Overloading me like this, bad things could happen . . .”

But, seeing as the supervisor didn’t tell him to stop, Bob dismissed his words as the usual fast-talk objections, not really meaning anything in particular . . . they all knew that the supervisor liked to talk, and if anything had been *really* wrong, he would have told them . . .

But, as the reactor temperature climbed, Bob realized that a mistake had been made somewhere. Not necessarily by him, mind you, but *somebody* had made a mistake.

Keeping an eye on the reactor-temp readout, Bob examined the auxiliary reactor.

Not good—the aux reactor read at 105% already, and it wasn't even supposed to be running at all . . . not when the main reactor was doing a casual 75% . . .

Bob decided that the situation was a little too sticky for comfort, and pulled back on the throttles. They didn't respond. Hmm . . . never thought that would give me any real trouble. Trying to haul them back to a lower gear, Bob couldn't budge them at all.

Not good. Bob's low-level blue alert clicked up to green. He tried to bypass the throttle, going straight to the engines to slow down, but that didn't work—the engines weren't really made to be used that way, and they wouldn't cooperate. Times like these were *always* when the parts of the ship wouldn't cooperate . . .

A small light began blinking persistently on the control panel. Yellow alert. The engines were straining, and the true velocity matrix seemed to be flickering. The supervisor chose this moment to pipe up. “Hey Bob, hope you know what you're doing up there, because the true velocity matrix is starting to unravel. You'd better cut me some slack down here before you burn something out.”

Orange alert. Engines were critical, the true velocity matrix was fluctuating dangerously. “Hey Bob, you'd better hurry up—I can't hold things together down here for much longer.” Bob cut out the engines, but they weren't cooling down. Just what they needed, the engines on a self-sustaining reaction—this was really too much . . .

The true velocity matrix blew. They were instantly smote by a rushing mass of blackness, and invisible, hazy *somethings* battered at the hull. Red alert. Locate the nearest planet, and get down *fast*.

Bob was really worried on this one. George said nothing, sitting silently, hoping that Bob could save them. George knew if he asked what was happening, he would only distract Bob and doom them all.

“Hey, George, we're going down—I'm heading for a planet by the name of TERR-Ox 0000001—you'd better buckle up.”

George strapped in, and Bob cut them out of lightspeed. George was thrown forward in his harness as the G's slammed into him. Decelerating rapidly, the ship clawed desperately for atmosphere. Unseen things slammed into the hull, jolting them

roughly.

Screaming through the atmosphere, Bob said merely, “The natives call it Earth.” They plunged into the ground at only several hundred miles per hour, and there was a huge explosion. The world went black.

Explanation

George finally woke up. A pounding headache assaulting him, he tried to get out of bed, but couldn't. Then he remembered where he was.

Carefully surveying the cockpit, George felt the reassuring pressure of the safety harness against his chest, and everything looked okay. But he knew better.

He could see in his mind's eye what had happened, why the cockpit was still intact when the rest of the ship had most likely been destroyed in a huge fireball. The cockpit would have functioned as an emergency escape pod, ejecting from the doomed ship. Emergency thrusters would have burned to decrease their forward momentum, and a protective energy shield would have surrounded the spherical pod as it impacted the ground and finally rolled to a halt. Bob must have done an excellent job getting them down safely.

“Bob, are you there?” The huge viewscreen spread across the front wall of the cockpit was dark, and a scant few lights glowed on the console. Life Support was green, Hull Integrity was green, and a faint green light barely shone from Fuel. Looking at a nearby readout, George saw that they had only 6% fuel left.

George unstrapped himself and rose unsteadily, turning to the rear of the cockpit. Near the door stood an equipment locker that he had only opened a few times before, during routine maintenance checks in orbit. He unlatched the locker and opened it, looking in at the deactivated robot body standing inside. He turned it on.

Giving it time to warm up, George opened another locker and pulled on a plain gray ship jumpsuit, more suitable public attire than the pajamas he'd been wearing during the crash (barely controlled landing, some might say) last night. He dug a few granola bars out of a cabinet and returned to the first locker.

Sure that the robot had had enough time to get warmed up, George regarded it silently. The only sign that it was turned on was the faint yellow glow coming from its eyes. Something about it struck George as looking mournful.

“Bob?”

“Yes, George?” Bob replied reluctantly.

“Are you okay?”

A noise almost like a sigh seemed to escape from Bob as he stepped out of the locker and sat down in the other chair. “I lost the ship.”

George, munching on a granola bar, sat down and looked at his feet.

“Don’t blame yourself for it.”

“But it’s my fault. I ran the ship, I supervised it, and I crashed it. Now it’s destroyed.”

Awkwardly, George asked, “Did you manage to dump much into the robot?”

Bob looked at him for a few moments, regarding him silently. “*I am the robot now,*” he said quietly.

There was another pause. “You’ll get used to it.”

“Yes.”

* * * * *

Sitting in a clean white office, George realized that he must clash horribly with the furniture. Sitting there, all scruffy and not even shaved properly, he must be a good sight to see, sitting next to a tall gray robot, in the middle of a spotless, white, immaculately-cleaned office.

A man sat on the other side of the desk. Leaning back in his chair, he looked back at them, a wry smile on his face. “I’m sorry, Mr. Sheldon, but I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do. While it’s true that you can collect insurance payments after many mechanical failures aboard a starship, any problems involving the true velocity matrix are strictly outside consideration.”

Disappointed, George asked, “Why?”

The insurance agent sighed and leaned forward in his seat. “It’s rather difficult to explain precisely, but I’ll see what I can do.

“The true velocity matrix is the component onboard a starship that keeps the ship safely moving forward. Now, while it’s true that the engines provide the actual *physical* thrust while traveling at lightspeed, it’s a lot more complicated than that. Are you with me so far?”

“Yes . . .” George said.

“But, as the ship is hurtling along on its course at the speed of light, you are, of course, passing through millions of spatial distortions every second. Now, it’s even *more* complicated to explain how all those distortions got there, but basically they’re leftovers from all that dark matter mining in those wormholes near Zeta V. They’re all over the place, everywhere you could possibly want to be. Well, I take that back, there probably *are* a *few* places they aren’t where someone could *conceivably* want to be. But where was I?”

“You were explaining what the matrix does.”

“Ah yes. Thank you. The true velocity matrix maintains the ship’s true velocity while it is traveling through all the millions of spatial distortions each second. If you ran smack into a particularly big distortion, there’s no telling what would happen to your ship. All sorts of undesirable stuff like being shunted into a parallel universe, or compressed into a black hole, or getting thrown somewhere else in time, or being compressed into a two-dimensional object, or being replicated into a second manifestation of yourself—all sorts of nasty things like that.

“But, as I’ve said, it’s the true velocity matrix’s responsibility to keep any of that from happening. And it works—heaven knows it took the scientists long enough to design—that is, it maintains your forward momentum in *our* universe, in *our* time, in *our* three dimensions, and it generally keeps you from being terribly messed up with all kinds of parallel galaxies and probabilities and possibilities.”

Having finished his explanation, the insurance man leaned back in his chair, smiling contentedly.

“Oh,” said Bob.

New Life

George and Bob left the insurance agency somewhat depressed. George was depressed because he couldn't get any insurance money to buy himself a new ship, and Bob was depressed because, when the ship was destroyed, he had been forced to cram all his mental firepower into a small and rather more fragile robot body—not exactly an improvement over his “brain” living in a starship that was (for the most part) durable and not easily destructible. Now forced into the new body of a robot, Bob was rather more susceptible to death in that any random passers-by could easily blast him in the chest with a laser-sighted, high-powered, energy-bomb-shooting implement of death that people in the twentieth century would have naturally called a “shotgun.”

But, apart from the fact of his newfound mortality, Bob was beginning to realize that being a robot wasn't all bad. Sure, people could destroy him; sure, people could turn him off; sure, people could slap a device on him to take away his free will and force him to work in a factory doing mechanical labor that would wear out his joints pretty quickly and condemn him to the scrap pile, from which he'd be dismantled for spare parts, melted into his atomic elements for scrap metal, or thrown into a bonfire of fiery immolation, but he could *do* stuff—stuff that he'd never done before.

He could shoot people before they shot him. He could experience life at ground level, getting down on foot *on* the planets that he'd looked at from orbit, but never been able to traverse on foot. And, maybe more fun than either of those options, he could antagonize innocent bartenders by refusing to leave their bars.

Naturally, Bob chose to do this last thing first.

So he convinced George to head to the nearest bar, where he could drown his sorrows with “a few” mugs of cold, frothy, deeply satisfying beer. As soon as they walked in the door, the bartender reacted exactly as Bob had expected him to:

“Hey! We don't serve your kind here!”

Bob casually sidled up to the counter and leaned on it with a clank.

“And why not?”

The bartender looked at him, apparently annoyed at the ignorance of this

automaton of all the traditions laid down by wise people generations ago.

“Because they don’t do it in Star Wars.”

“And is this Star Wars?”

The bartender considered. “I don’t know, you’d have to ask the author.”

Bob waved a metal hand at the bartender dismissively. “No, trust me, this isn’t Star Wars.”

“Are you sure?” asked the bartender incredulously.

“Positive. And besides, why do the bartenders in Star Wars discriminate against robots, anyway?”

“Hmm . . . I don’t know. I’ve never thought about that before.”

“Well, there you go.”

The bartender stood silently for a moment, then asked,

“Well, do you want a beer?”

“Sorry,” Bob said, “can’t.” He gestured helplessly at his metal face, the mouth of which was quite unopenable. “But my friend might.”

The bartender turned his attention to George. “Do you want something?”

“Yeah, sure. Get me whatever I can get with . . .” George rummaged through his pockets. “. . . 02.38.” The bartender brought him a beer, and George retired with Bob to a corner booth.

Sitting there, Bob threw his eyes around the establishment, dreamily scratching the tip of his left pinky finger, under which lay a small and moderately powerful laser blaster. George sipped his beer quietly, and Bob said,

“I like bars.”

Encounter

George and Bob were out walking around aimlessly, thinking about stuff out in the countryside, when they ran smack into a particularly sticky and rather difficult-to-explain situation.

Coming around a bend in the narrow country trail, George and Bob emerged from the foliage atop a small hill, from which they could see . . . a crater?! And a *body* inside the crater!

Galloping down the slope, they rushed to see what had happened. When they reached the edge of the crater, the sight tugged vaguely at the back of George's mind for an instant or two before it hit him. "Oh, geez," George said.

Inside the rather sizeable crater lay a man who George thought looked suspiciously like a Star Wars character.

"He's breathing," Bob said. Just as he said this, the man groaned. He opened his eyes and stared weakly up at the sky. He was lying in a pool of blood.

"Coruscant," he muttered vaguely. "Have to . . . warn . . . Jedi Council—isn't . . . much time . . ."

Witnessing this, George couldn't help but blurt out, "You're a Jedi?"

The man weakly rolled his eyes to focus on George and Bob. "Yes . . . my name's . . . Rolff Olarema. What . . . planet is this?"

"Earth."

Rolff's eyebrows jumped up a bit. "Earth?"

"Earth."

"Drat. Knew something . . . screwy was . . . going on."

George looked at the pool of blood underneath Rolff. "Um, do you want me to get some help? Offhand, I'd say you don't look too good."

"No, I'll be . . ." Rolff's eyes widened suddenly. "Do the authorities know I'm here?"

George frowned. "I don't know . . . how *did* you get here, anyway?"

"Don't know. Your dratted . . . dark matter's fault, probably. Shouldn't have

mined it . . . out of those wormholes.”

“How do you know about that?”

“We’ve got . . . documentaries about *your* galaxy, too, you know.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t let the authorities find me—mustn’t let them . . . use my . . .” His strength seemed to be fading again.

“Take . . . my . . . lightsaber . . .”

“It’s on your belt?”

“Yes.”

George reached down, rather embarrassed, and carefully moved aside Rolff’s blood-stained robes. Rolff gasped in pain.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t . . .” Rolff seemed to be struggling to get the words out now. “Don’t . . . let . . . anyone . . . take . . . it”

George unclipped Rolff’s saber and turned it over in his hand, awestruck.

“Thanks.”

Looking at Rolff, George realized he was dead.

Another Encounter

Standing there, George and Bob were trying to figure out what had just happened. Naturally, Bob figured it out first. After all, he *was* a robot.

“Apparently our friend didn’t want the authorities to find him. But I wonder why?”

George frowned. “Cultural contamination?”

“Maybe.”

“But how did he get here in the first place?”

“He said it must have had something to do with our dark matter. Probably another of those irrational byproducts from the wormhole-mining near Zeta V. Heaven knows there are a lot of irrational things happening these days. All over the place.”

“Hm. Well, uh . . . what am I supposed to do with *this*?” George asked, helplessly shaking the lightsaber.

“Well, keep it, of course. He wanted you to keep it safe for him, evidently. You know what most people would do with a real, functioning lightsaber? What color is it, anyway?”

George turned the hilt over in his hand and pressed a button. The blade snapped on, glowing with a bright purple flame.

“Ah, purple,” Bob said. “I always liked that color.”

“Mm. I was always more for green.”

“You think it’ll actually cut stuff?”

“I suppose . . . here, let’s try.” George swung the blade at some nearby bushes, easily slicing through them. “Yep, guess it works.”

“Excellent.”

Suddenly, George was stopped by an abrupt tap on his shoulder. “I believe you have something of mine?” a voice said.

Turning around, George was rather surprised to find Rolff standing behind him. Rolff gestured to George’s lightsaber, then swept back the edge of his robe to reveal an identical hilt clipped to his belt.

“How the—but you—I just saw—don’t see—what’s your name again?” George finally managed to utter.

“Rolff Olarema.”

“How did you . . . well . . . get alive again?”

“Come again?” Rolff said mildly, then happened to glance over George’s shoulder, seeing his dead body lying in the crater. “Oh. Most curious. Is that really me?”

“Um . . . well, yes, I assume so . . .” said George.

“And I was just speaking to you a few minutes ago, I presume?”

“Yes . . .”

“Hm. Most curious.” Rolff looked at the still-activated saber that hummed in George’s hand. He had evidently completely forgotten about it.

“Are you going to turn that off?”

George looked at the quietly humming blade, surprised. “Oh—well, yes—I suppose. Uh . . . do you want it back?”

“Nah. You can keep it; I already have one.”

“Right.”

George and Rolff regarded each other silently for a few moments, wallowing in an awkward silence.

“Well, then,” said Rolff.

“Yeah,” said George.

“Well, I’ll be off, then.”

“Where are you going?”

“Oh, I don’t know, I guess I’ll find *something* to do.”

“Well . . . bye, then.”

“Yup. See you round.”

Looking back on it later, George realized that, if he had his life to do over, that would be *another* thing that he would have done differently—how many people in the world actually get a chance in their life to talk to a real Jedi?

The Weakest Ink

In hindsight, George realized that he had made a big mistake. And someone was dead because of it.

His parents had always told him to read the fine print, but he had forgotten to *just once*, and now he regretted it. Yup, he regretted it alright.

“So, Bob, what do you want to do?”

“ ‘I don’t know, what do you want to do?’ Man, we sound just classic, don’t we?”

“Well, we’ve already been to a bar, run into a dying Jedi, acquired a lightsaber, and run into the same dead Jedi again,” George said, counting on his fingers. “That pretty much wraps up *my* to-do list. What do you say to us getting a new ship, or, like, getting on a game show or something?”

“Better yet,” said Bob, “we can do both at once.”

* * * * *

“Alright, Mr. Sheldon, we’ve got everything arranged for you. Now all you have to do is ink your name right here on the dotted line.”

George unwittingly (and ill-fatedly) signed the paper, the fine print of which said, among other things, that “I hold the Galactic Gameshow Company of Earth completely blameless and unaccusable if and when I, or my second, receive such negative results that may result in personal unpleasantness, public humiliation, loss of life, liberty, limb, or pursuit of happiness during the course of the game which I have hereby agreed to play. I also acknowledge the fact that the Galactic Gameshow Company (of Earth) also has the right to change, during the course of the game, any rules that they see fit.”

* * * * *

“So, George, it’s your turn. Simply give The Wheel of Luck® a spin, and let’s see what you win!”

George gave the wheel a heave. It finally stopped on “\$900 OR A STARSHIP.”

“And which one do you want, George?”

“The starship.”

“Oh! Sorry, George, wrong answer. Now it’s your spin, Stephanie.”

And the game show went on, so on and so forth, until George once again spun, and the wheel stopped on “\$900 OR A STARSHIP.”

“So, George, it looks like luck is with you tonight—since you’ve spun the same result twice, we’ll give you the starship . . . *if* you can guess the number between one and three hundred thousand that I’m thinking. You have a margin of error of two thousand either way, and ten seconds to answer.”

“What were the numbers again?”

“One and three hundred thousand.”

“Three hundred thousand.”

“Correct! You’re a winner!” Plastic confetti rained down on George. “And, since you’ve won *one* starship, we’ll give you a chance to score another.”

George hesitated. Oh, what the heck, he thought. What have I got to lose?

“I’ll go for another starship.”

“Okay. But just to make it interesting, we’ll replace every third tile on the wheel with a Death Tile.” The audience roared with approval. “If you land on any positive money-scoring tile, you win a *second* starship. *But*, if you land on a Death Tile . . .” The game show host paused and the audience roared. Some cheered on George, some cheered on Death.

“If you land on a Death Tile, someone in this game will die.”

Over the roar of the audience, George objected. “Hey, I don’t want to do *that!* I changed my mind.”

“Sorry, George, can’t do that,” the host said, smiling evilly. “You signed a paper before you got here that said we could change the rules. You can’t back out now. And *we* can’t be taken to court if someone dies . . .”

George had no choice. He gave the wheel a gigantic heave, his heart thumping a

mile a minute. He watched the wheel spinning and thought, Not Bob, not Bob, not Bob, not Bob . . . He watched the wheel, and he could almost feel the forces of fate weighing down on him. He was saved or doomed. Not Bob, not Bob, not Bob . . .

The wheel slowed, and finally slid to a halt. George could barely bring himself to look at the result.

BOB DIES.

Before George could think, a huge shotgun dropped out of the ceiling and blew off Bob's head. Staggering, with sparks flying from the stump of his neck, Bob fell over backwards and burst into flame. Automatic sprinklers popped out of the ceiling and doused the blaze.

All that was left of Bob was a headless, fire-scorched body. The air reeked of burned electronics and melted silicon. George thought he was going to be sick.

"Is that enough for you, George?" asked the game show host, his voice oily and threatening.

"Yes, it is."

"Have a nice day."

George staggered off the stage before he threw up. Crouching in the aisle, George heard another person spin, and more bloodthirsty cheering from the audience. He managed to raise his head in time to see the words "AUDIENCE MEMBER DIES" flashing on the video screen. A huge robotic arm popped out of the ceiling and grabbed someone. It threw him onto the stage, where the robotic shotgun blew his head off and emptied a few more loads of buckshot into his torso. The wheel was sprayed with blood. George threw up again, but this time he didn't stop in the aisle. He staggered out of the building, sick at heart as well as in his stomach.

Completely Unexpected

George staggered down the street. He had stopped throwing up, but dark thoughts still haunted his mind. I lost Bob. First, we lost the ship—that was bad enough, but now I lost Bob. He was my friend for . . . *years*, we were like brothers, even if he couldn't be like me until the last few days, even if he *couldn't* walk and talk and be a friend like a normal, earth-bound person. And he died in such a brutal way . . . he had his head blown off, standing there next to me, trusting me, never once thinking that I'd let him come to harm

George stopped, standing still on the sidewalk, aimlessly winding through downtown *someplace*, making for a bar, who knows? Sagging against a wall, he felt on his belt for the lightsaber Rolff had given him. He was so emotionally shattered he didn't know where he could go next, what to do to soothe his aching soul, his soul that screamed at him that *he* was guilty of Bob's murder, and that Bob's innocent life would be avenged by the spilling of his own blood. He put the hilt to his head and closed his eyes. Another instant and his conscience would be soothed—

—And something hit him in the side, knocking him over and sending the lightsaber hilt spinning from his hand. A hand caught it, holding on to it tightly in case George made a go for it again to drill a laser beam through the side of his skull.

George hit the pavement on his side, winded. He didn't move. Actually, the world looked better from this perspective anyway . . . it's not like he had anywhere he had to go or anything . . .

"I don't know why you wanted to kill yourself, mister, but I'm sure your reason isn't good enough. No life is worth ending that way." George listened vaguely to the voice, and there was something about it . . . some nerve ending twanging faintly in the back of his mind, stirring a distant memory . . .

The person dragged George into a nearby alleyway, and sat down next to him. "What was that all about?" she asked as she reached into a pocket, getting a cigarette to smoke. George sat up weakly. Looking over at the stranger sitting next to him, George did a double-take. It wasn't a stranger.

"Cheryl?"

She looked at him, lighting up, and frowned. “How did you—” She froze, and the cigarette fell out of her mouth.

“George??”

They looked at each other, memories trickling back, remembering long ago.

“I haven’t . . . seen you since . . . what was it, fifteen years ago?” George asked, surprised.

“Back during high school?”

“How could I have forgotten those years? You smoke?”

Cheryl looked down at the pack of cigarettes in her hand, hesitated a moment, and threw them across the alley.

She stopped and looked back at George. They looked at each other in silence.

“It’s been a long time.”

“George, what were you doing back there? Suicide?”

George looked down at his shoelaces, ashamed. “Yes, I mean, well . . .”

She looked at his face, fifteen years older than when they’d last met, and could only say, “You’ve changed.”

“Well, so have you . . .”

They regarded each other quietly, thinking.

“Yes, I never smoked in high school, did I?”

“Of course not. But *now*?”

“Mm. How times have changed. And look at yourself—pulling a weapon on yourself. Suicide? I know *I* always told myself I couldn’t kill myself even if life *was* bad, what with all the people back at school who’d have missed me . . . and what would they have thought?”

George still looked absentmindedly at his shoes. “Yes, I believed that—if one of *my* friends had . . . done it, I would have been . . . but we’re not in school anymore.”

“Yeah. Why, George? Why were you about to do that?”

“Well . . . it’s ironic, I suppose, but . . . my best friend just died . . . and why do you smoke?”

“Well, it’s been tough lately, making ends meet, and it relieves the pressure. . . .”

Their conversation halted again, awkwardly.

“Well, it’s different now . . .”

“I can almost remember those blissful, simple days . . .”

“Well, at least you’re still alive, and I . . . won’t . . . will *try* to stop smoking, I guess . . .”

“Yeah . . . well, it’s been nice meeting again, and thanks . . .”

“It was nice to meet an old friend . . . call me some time.”

“Yeah. . . .”

Cheryl walked off into the city, and George still sat against a wall in the alleyway.

That was pleasant, he thought. I guess I’ll have to . . .

Aw crap, didn’t even get a phone number. Rats.

Back Among the Stars

Well, after all that, you might be happy to learn (or, then again, you might not—it's your choice, after all) that George managed to get up, in a much better and altogether more wholesome state of mind that didn't involve suicide and/or dark, gloomy thoughts, and walk back down to the game show complex, where he received the deed to his new starship. It wouldn't relieve the sadness of being without Bob, and he'd just have to come to know a new intelligence like Bob, but he had to come to grips with it sometime. So George and his artificially intelligent ship-companion ranged out among the stars for times, time, and half a time, until such a time came when something happened that I deemed worthy to be written about in this book.

END OF PART ONE

PART TWO

Midnight Meeting

George stepped down the boarding ramp, humming casually to himself. It was night (at least where he was) and he had decided to head out on the town—find a movie, go to a bar, something like that. He didn't really have any specific ideas in mind.

All those nonexistent plans were thrown out the window the moment George stepped off the end of the boarding ramp.

The few streetlights (one might call them that, at least—this *is* some other planet, so they could quite possibly call them something completely different here, thought George) that had been burning with a subdued energy quietly faded. Hissing quietly as they turned off, their unexpected extinguishment plunged the landing pad into a chilly darkness.

It was summer (or, once again, something *like* summer on this planet), but George was chilled by a sudden breeze whipping across him. Standing there, George was transfixed by the unexpected stillness that surrounded him—he could hear nothing stirring, and a certain sense of foreboding permeated the air in his surroundings. He could almost *feel* an indefinable . . . *something* resting in the very air that he breathed, whispering in a sort of quiet, almost-menacing way in his ear.

Presently, George became aware of a loose semicircle of . . . *some things* spread out before him. He could count . . . six things standing in the darkness—human or inhuman, live or artificial? He couldn't tell . . .

His attention was suddenly drawn to a space hardly three feet in front of him by a sudden noise, sort of like a softened *clank*. “Who's there?” George could see, dimly, a pair of soft blue pinpricks floating in the darkness, about a few inches below eyelevel.

“May I come in?” a voice said quietly out of the darkness.

George drew his gun out of its holster. He raised it, carefully pointing it at the pair of blue lights. Backing up a few steps, slowly, until he was standing on the edge of the boarding ramp, he said, “Yes . . .”

Out of the shadows emerged a slightly small, thin robot, its eyes gleaming faintly blue. The metal of its body was black, and a series of thin scratches crisscrossed its torso,

contrasting silver with the black metal. It smoothly stepped forward a few paces, then looked up at George expectantly.

“You should not stay here. This planet can be quite hostile towards the ones it does not know.”

George backed up the ramp slowly, keeping his eyes (and pistol) on the face of the robot standing below. It didn't move.

“May I come in?” the robot repeated.

“Yes. Come in.”

The two of them walked up into the ship, and the boarding ramp closed silently behind them.

Still keeping a silent vigil, the black shapes remained, still arranged in a semicircle opposite the now-closed boarding ramp. Their eyes did not gleam in the dark, and they made no sound as they dispersed into the night. The ship lifted off and rose into the sky, returning to the vast reaches of space.

The way it was meant to be.

More Explanations

George sat uneasily across the table from his new robot acquaintance. He no longer held his pistol pointing straight at the robot's head, but it lay instead on the polished pseudo-wood of the table. George looked at the robot, and wondered many things.

"I am a robot, of course—I thought you knew that."

"No, not *what* are you—*who* are you? A name?"

The robot sat there silently for a few moments in thought. "You may call me Three. And are you going to put that away?" Three asked, nodding at the pistol.

"Mm. Yes." George said. He slipped it back into its holster, still looking at the being opposite him. "Why did you come here?"

"The night hides many secrets—and many dangers. You realize what probably would have happened to you if I had not been here?"

George frowned. "No. What?"

Three sat silently, regarding him silently for a long moment.

"Many things may happen to those who do not know . . . and those who are not prepared."

George frowned. Something about those faintly-shining blue eyes unnerved him, looking back at him from the perfectly innocuous face of a robot that did not sound perfectly innocuous . . . not to mention evasive.

"You still haven't said why you showed up at my ship."

"True, I have not. There are many reasons for the things that happen in this universe—some may be attributed to fate, others to religion, others to foolishness, intelligence, ignorance, or knowledge. And there are others that the mortals attribute to the reasons of the universe that they cannot see . . . or understand."

George frowned, trying to think. "So basically, you won't tell me?"

Three looked back at him wordlessly, then said, "I have gone to many places, and done many things. Some of them I may attribute to decisions, my mind guiding me to take certain actions, form certain thoughts. But many of them I cannot. Often, I am guided by . . . what is the human word? 'Fate,' perhaps . . . the influence of the unknown

upon the mind of every intelligent being.”

George and Three regarded each other in silence for a few minutes.

“I am here because I am here. More than that is not for me to explain. You may choose to believe that I cannot, or I will not—it is your choice.”

George sighed, thinking he was in way over his head. “Okay, I think I’ll go with ‘will not.’ ” Looking at Three, he thought he saw him smile slightly, but maybe it was a trick of the light . . . after all, everyone knew robots didn’t have facial muscles . . .

“So, where are we going?”

George smiled, finally able to engage in a conversation more on his *own* intellectual level. “Good question—I don’t really know. Where do you want to go?”

“Then I may remain with you?”

“For the time being, at least.”

Three rose from his seat. “I will converse with your ship, then.”

“What, you can’t tell me?” George was surprised.

“Would you like to be surprised?”

Original Contact

“So, where are we going, Bob?” George asked, looking at the somewhat small, curved viewscreen. The ship and Three knew where they were going, and he was the only one who didn’t.

“Can’t tell.”

“Why not?”

“Don’t you want it to be a surprise?”

George sighed and flopped down in a chair. “I don’t really like surprises . . .” He looked around the cockpit lazily, vaguely recalling those days past when he had had a bigger ship. Not much bigger, mind you, but bigger nonetheless. Those days of yesteryear when he had had Original Bob (as he liked to think) for company, and the ship had just felt more . . . like home. Now, *this* ship he had gotten from that game show, and it was different from his old ship—this one was more compact, more . . . *cramped*, maybe. Or maybe he was just used to stuff more spread out, more spaced apart.

George was roused out of his vague, rather unnecessary thoughts by the entrance of Three. “Three,” George thought. Now what kind of a name is that? I suppose it’s just some “audible representation of his True Self” or something . . . why does he make everything so complicated?

“We are almost there, George.”

“Almost where?”

“You’ll see.”

* * * * *

The ship dropped out of lightspeed near an asteroid belt. Three promptly asked Bob for the ship-to-ship comm and started talking.

“This is Two, come for business. I know you guys have lots of customers, but may I come in and look around anyway?”

While he was waiting for a response, Three explained to George and Bob, “I suppose you two would call that a ‘code conversation.’ They know me as ‘Two,’ though,

because I'm only the second one to stop by here and find them in the last . . . well, I don't know how long they've been out here."

Rather (understandably) confused, George opened his mouth to ask a whole boatload of questions, but was abruptly cut off. On a viewscreen where there had been an image of an innocent-looking asteroid field, there was now a drastically-changed image.

Floating silently near the asteroids was a gigantic ship, a classic example of the popular stereotype of aliens—an enormous flying saucer. It utterly dwarfed George's ship, and he guesstimated that it must be easily one hundred times as big.

George was still speechless as he realized that their ship was silently gliding forward, drifting silently towards one of the myriad lumps on the hull of the alien starship. George didn't think Bob was driving.

"Um, guys, are we in a, uh, tractor beam or something?"

Three looked unconcernedly up at the ceiling of the cockpit, and George wondered if he was actually scanning the ship with some sort of gadget built inside his head. "I suppose so."

Three remembered something and took his eyes off the ceiling just as suddenly as he had directed them there in the first place. "When we get inside, just follow my lead, and for heaven's sake, *don't* do anything stupid."

"Can I come along?" Bob asked.

"Sorry, I'm afraid not. I may only take one guest with me."

"Oh." Bob sounded disappointed.

Finally recovering his voice, George said, "Is this the first time that we've—I mean, humans—have actually made contact with aliens?"

"Probably," said Three. "Well, actually, it depends . . . if you count Garth, you'd be the second human . . . but I don't know what happened to him, and he wasn't exactly a human anyway . . ."

George was about to ask another question, but he was cut off by the thud of the ship coming to rest inside a vast alien docking bay.

"Time to go," said Three.

Galactic Hermits

Three and George walked down the boarding ramp. Three wasn't impressed, but George was. Staring all around himself with a sense of awe, George stared up at the ceiling of the docking bay, far above him, and strained his eyes to see across the cavernous chamber. A few things in the distance appeared to be other ships, George thought, but couldn't quite decide. Three directed him towards a doorway conveniently close to where their ship had been set down.

"Best not to be too nosy, George."

The door slid open, almost reluctantly, George thought. Compared to the doors of the ships *he'd* been on, at least. Even such a simple thing as that door seemed to hint at the oldness and dignity of an alien race, and most likely an aloof attitude as well. They went through.

Three sank to one knee with a metallic *clank*, and looked at George. George looked at the blank wall in front of them and followed suit, baffled. Down on one knee and with his head bowed in what he hoped was a thoroughly reverential manner, George heard Three say,

"May I have the pleasure of looking on your face, and conversing once again?"

"What?" said George, surprised.

"I wasn't talking to you!" Three hissed angrily.

"Oh."

With a slight hiss, George heard a door slide open. Instinctively, he looked up, and instantly wished that he hadn't.

An alien sat in a chair in front of him, and George tried not to grimace. The alien certainly wasn't the ugliest thing he had ever seen in his life, but it was on the list. Its face was old and wrinkled, with a bony ridge jutting out harshly from its forehead just above its eyebrows, thin and white with age. A few wisps of pure white hair trailed from the top of its head, and they were drawn together in a very thin ponytail. It wore a pure white robe, and its body looked thin and shriveled under it. Its hands were old and wrinkled, shriveled and thin from an extremely advanced age, an age the years of which George did not want to even guess at.

“Two. It is good to see you again,” the alien said, speaking slowly, and yet (George thought) with an inexpressible sadness that fit so perfectly with the age.

“Rise. Let us sit and talk,” it said, gesturing slightly with a wizened hand. Two chairs rose out of the floor, and Three sat down carefully. George followed suit.

“They let women be the welcoming party?” George blurted out before he could stop himself. Three looked at him angrily, and George could imagine that he probably wanted to strangle him.

“Yes. Is that unusual?” replied the alien, a wry smile creasing her wrinkled face.

“Well, I always thought that—I mean, in books—it always seemed to me that . . . the alien who first greeted the human race was . . . well, male,” George managed to finish, embarrassed.

She smiled faintly, and turned to Three. “Who is this visitor you have brought with you?”

“An acquaintance, merely—I met him a few days ago.”

“And I suppose he would like to know?” she said slowly.

“I would assume.”

She turned to George, and asked, “Are you wondering how we came to be here, and how long we have been here, and why we have not . . . *swooped* down on earth, carried off your women and children, set fire to your cities, and destroyed your way of life?”

“Well . . . yes,” said George weakly.

“Well, some of those will remain our secrets, but others I can tell you. Let me explain . . .”

The Story

“My people and I journeyed here long ago—you might call us emigrants, pilgrims, wanderers, or gypsies. We left our own galaxy for many reasons, just as there are many of us on this ship: Some of us wanted more freedom, the freedom that one can only have out among the stars. Some of us wanted to get away from our civilization, make a new home somewhere else, somewhere that we would find only after much searching, and it would be like Eden. Some of us were tired, weary of society, and wanted to go out alone to the stars and found a sort of traveling monastery. Some wanted to search out and make contact with other cultures, other species. Many of us wanted to do many different things.

“So we struck out across the galaxies, journeying for many centuries in search of many things. A few of us died, a few were born (and I mean *a few*, for we are a very long-lived people), and still we flew across the stars, until finally we were weary. It had been many years, and we were tired, bone-tired, tired of journeying, tired of living, tired of eating and drinking and sleeping . . . so we finally chose a place and settled down.

“That place, as it were, was in *your* galaxy, of course, and we have done many things here, pursued various activities, enacted many projects, and strived toward many things. But still we remained. We remained here, hovering beside these pieces of floating rock and ice you call asteroids, silently listening to your civilization, young and brilliant as it is—brilliant as a shining star, that is, shining with life and vitality—and we learned many things about you. Many, many things.

“We watched your planets, and your ships, and monitored your messages, and examined your culture, your way of life, very intricately. We watched you because you interested us, and you reminded us of ourselves, many eons ago, untold centuries in the past . . . even the oldest of the old, those ancient even by *our* standards could scarcely even remember the memory of *their* ancestors speaking of *their* ancestors who knew of times like yours, many, many millennia ago.

“And we watched, but we never changed. For that was the lesson that we learned, long ago—to contact another culture, to influence another culture, to *change* it, *ruin* it forever, is a thing that cannot be undone. And we did not interfere with yours, for we

knew the results of those actions if we did . . .

“So, we have been living out here for centuries, and have not revealed ourselves to you ever, except for a minute few individuals over time, time spread out greatly . . . and we have revealed ourselves to *you* now, and told you our story, though I know Three has heard it before.”

“But it is still as beautiful now as ever,” Three said.

“Thank you,” she breathed.

There was a long pause, and she gestured finally to George’s belt. “Is that a lightsaber?” she asked quietly.

“Yes,” George said, and handed it to her. She took it in her hands and slowly turned it over in her hands, examining it carefully.

“Are you a Jedi?”

“Um, no. I got it from one.”

“An interesting device, I must admit. It can swiftly end the lives of many—and yet, it has a certain aura of grace and respect to it, associated with those who wield it.

“We traveled through the galaxy of the Jedi, and we met a handful of them, and monitored their messages, bouncing around the galaxy with wild abandon, and we learned much about them.

“The Jedi are—or were, if indeed they still exist—a kind of people which were quite similar to their weapons. They earned the respect and admiration of the peoples that they served in millennia of service, and they earned the fear and hatred of the peoples that they stopped in their evil deeds. The one group respected and looked up to them because of their power, and the other feared and loathed them for it. As indeed is the way many things happen in our lives—all the actions that anyone takes are seen in different lights by all. Young people’s actions are seen by old people, and they envy them, or, if they are of more noble character, they are happy for the young people; glad for what they can do. Old people’s actions are seen by young people with respect, and maybe longing—they desire to see the times that *they* will do actions such as those. Enemies’ deeds are seen by people as evil, and friends’ as good, when seen by their friends. And on and on it goes—the web of interactions, emotions, and thoughts which connects us all, binds us all

together, joins us as one body.

“And, as happens in every society, some choose the good, and some the evil—that is another reason for the admirability of the Jedi: They chose to use their gifts and their powers for the good of the masses. They helped the downtrodden, protected the defenseless, and persecuted the evil; did what they could to prevent them from carrying out their wicked deeds.

“And yet, as often happens with the good in our societies, they were almost wiped out, all but annihilated by the overwhelming crush of evil. Their numbers were decimated by those who would do harm to all people . . . for reasons that seem perfectly logical to them, but most people call evil, malevolent, wicked, and insane. And yet, their flame was not extinguished . . . a tiny number remained, and, when the opportunity presented itself, they rose again, to serve and protect the inhabitants of their galaxy once more, and to again take up the fallen standard of all that is good and right in the galaxy of their homes.”

She paused for a long moment, and handed the saber back to George. “And, after hearing all this, I hope you will have a greater appreciation for the thing which you have been given, and know that it is not merely an object . . . it is a symbol, also, of the good people which wielded it, and the tradition of their line, and the ongoing good in their establishment, the fact that they used what they had for good, rather than the selfish self-preservation, greed, and advancement of those who were unworthy to possess such a weapon. I hope that you might remember all this, and remember that with that weapon comes a responsibility—a responsibility to use it rightly, and for the right reasons. Always.”

George sat silently, looking at the pommel of his lightsaber. He looked up at the old alien woman, and said,

“Thank you.”

A smile spread across her face, and she replied softly. “I am only glad that I could tell you.” She gestured with a wizened hand, and their chairs sank back into the floor. “And now I must go. The conversation has been pleasant, and, if you desire, you may come back to us at some future time. The only rule is that you must bring but one person with you. I assume that you will come in peace, not after us with a fleet of

spaceships to destroy us, because of all that I have told you. We desire little but to remain here in peace to the ends of our days, and think about many things, and observe many things as well. Goodbye . . .” she said as the door slid shut quietly in front of her. Three and George walked back to the ship.

Back on board, they sat, thinking, as their ship was silently returned to the reaches of space and the huge alien vessel silently disappeared from view.

“Wow,” said George.

“And now that *I* have taken *you* somewhere, where would *you* like to take *me*?” asked Three.

“That’s a hard question, after what you just shown me. I’ll have to think about it.”

“I’ve got time,” Three said.

END OF PART TWO

PART THREE

A Completely Unanticipated Directional Change In the Plot

George went to bed that night and didn't wake up.

Well, actually, he *did* wake up *eventually*, or else this book would have ended right here on this very page, because the main character would have died, and everybody knows that most normal books don't kill the most important characters and haul in a new bunch a fourth of the way through a book. And besides, the title of this book clearly says that "George Never Dies," so it's obvious that George . . . well, never dies.

So anyway, George *didn't* actually die. He just went to bed and didn't wake up. For a month. And when he woke up, the world—er, the galaxy—was a very different place.

* * * * *

George woke up in a hospital bed, and he had questions. Three was standing next to his bed, so he asked him.

"Um . . . why am I in a hospital?"

Three looked at him silently for a few moments, incredulously. "You don't remember anything?"

"Remember what?"

"You really have no idea what happened?"

"To who? Me?"

"Yes, you!"

"Um . . . no . . ."

Three sighed, and George waited patiently for an explanation.

"Well, we really have no idea why most of it happened, but . . . well, here's what we *do* know:

"One night you went to bed on your ship, and you didn't wake up the next

morning. I thought you were just sleeping in—I have heard you humans like to do that—so I didn’t think twice about it . . . until about 24 hours later, when you still had not woke up. So I told Bob to set a course for the nearest planet, and went back to keep an eye on you. And then, it started getting even stranger.

“Sitting in your bedroom, monitoring you, I saw that you were in a deep sleep—quite definitely asleep, and I could not awaken you. And you were in a coma, most definitely *not* a vegetative state, because your EEG readings were off the charts almost continuously for the duration of our entire trip to port.

“Once we got to the nearest planet (TERR-Ox 0000001, as it were, though the natives tend to more commonly call it “Earth”), I took you in to a hospital, and a team of doctors set about trying to revive you. They were entirely unsuccessful in all their attempts to restore you to consciousness, though they *did* discover surprising activity in you brain in the process. They say that a significant portion of your brain seems to have been reorganized.

“And then—without any warning, and without any apparent reason—your brain activity started tapering off, and you woke up. On the whole, the doctors have been completely unable to offer any explanation whatsoever as to why all this happened. I don’t suppose you would have any ideas?”

George sat in bed, blinking and thinking for a few minutes. “I don’t suppose it could have anything to do with that tuna salad and liverwurst sandwich I ate before I went to bed?”

“Offhand, I’d have to say no.”

George and Three sat silently for a few minutes.

“Wow,” said George.

“By the way, do you have any recollection of Bob?” asked Three.

“What, Bob, as in my ship?”

“Yes.”

“Um . . . yeah . . . ?”

“No, not the Bob *now*, the Bob on your *last* ship.”

“What, you mean I had a ship before this one?” George looked confused.

“Yes, don’t you remember when it crashed?”

George’s eyes clouded over temporarily, remembering. “Oh yeah . . . now that you mention it, I remember a crash . . . but wouldn’t *that* Bob have died with the ship?”

“Well, it’s possible, but that’s not what happened. Do you remember when Bob and you ran into a certain character by the name of Rolff Olarema?”

“Yeah, I remember him . . . but I was alone, I don’t think Bob was with me . . .”

“And do you remember when Bob and you went to that bar and Bob talked up the bartender?”

“Well, I remember the bar, but . . . I only remember going in there, I don’t remember Bob being with me . . . and besides, how do *you* know all these things? *You* weren’t with me when I did all that!”

Three ignored the question. “And you don’t remember when Bob died? That game show?”

George wracked his brain, trying to remember.

“No . . .”

Three sat back, satisfied. He watched George silently for a few minutes. “So you have no memories whatsoever of Bob Number One?”

“Not if you aren’t talking about the Bob right now . . .”

“Strange . . . very strange . . .” Three muttered. “All your memories of Bob seem to have been . . . *overwritten*, or . . . *deleted*, or something while you were in the coma . . . So you feel no guilt about how he died?”

“*How who died??*” George finally yelled angrily. “*If you aren’t talking about the Bob I’ve got now, I don’t know who you’re talking about!*”

“There’s no need to yell,” Three said quietly. “I’m just trying to figure out what’s going on.”

“Well, that makes two of us, doesn’t it?!” said George, exasperated. He slumped back in bed suddenly. “All this makes my head hurt, and I had a splitting headache *before* you started spouting nonsense at me. Go away and let me sleep.”

Three looked at George silently . . . much *too* silently for George’s liking.

“What?” George finally asked.

“I may not go away.”

“And why not?”

Three sighed impatiently. “George, I may not explain this to you—it’s just the same as last time: Some call it fate, others religion, others go insane trying to figure it out, atheists and agnostics and religious people . . . I may not because I may not. I may not explain it to you, and you wouldn’t understand me even if I could . . .”

George sighed, a stiff headache pounding in his head as he tried to think about Three. It was all so confusing. “And you still haven’t told me *why* you showed up in the first place, coming aboard my ship and hitching a ride . . . no, don’t start again, I know—you ‘may not explain.’ Yeah, fine.”

They were silent for a bit, Three looking at George quietly.

“You’re not resentful of me coming along with you, are you?”

“No,” George sighed. “You’re just . . . a little hard to live with sometimes, with all your wacko explanations . . . but shoo, I want to get some sleep.” George gestured at the door, and it hissed open. Three looked at the door and looked back at George, slowly.

“Do that again.”

Another Surprising and Unexpected Change

“Do what again?” asked George, frowning in confusion.

“Close that door,” Three said quietly.

“I opened it?” George said, surprised.

“Yes, I think you did.”

George gestured at the door again, and it easily slid shut. George frowned, and looked at his hand. “How am I doing that?”

George looked at Three, and he thought it looked like Three was frowning, except for the fact that Three couldn’t possibly frown because his face was a solid sheet of inflexible metal. I must be losing it, George thought worriedly. This really is too much to absorb in one day . . .

“Open the door, but don’t move your hand,” Three said.

George looked at the door, and it hissed open again. Three looked at him intensely, and his face seemed to have a strange look on it.

“Um, Three . . . what’s going on . . . ?”

Turning around, Three looked around the room, searching for something. “Can you knock that clock off the wall?” George looked at the clock obediently, and it fell off the wall. It crashed on the floor, and George looked at Three, flabbergasted.

“Uh, is it just me . . . or do I have . . . uh, ESP, or . . . the Force, or something?” Three stared at him silently, and George applied his mind to the clock again. It hovered off the ground, then zoomed around the room, bouncing lightly off the walls and weaving overhead, performing loop-the-loops and spinning around near the ceiling. George finally set it down with his mind on the bedside table. Three was staring at him.

“Wow,” said George.

“Do you want to leave?” asked Three.

“What?” said George, stunned. “You don’t think we should tell someone about this?”

“Quite simply, no, I don’t.”

“Why not?”

“George, how many times do I have to tell you . . .” Three said, annoyed.

“Oh. I suppose you can’t explain it, then?”

“No. I just know . . . that you may not tell anyone about it. Think about it: Why did Rolff give you his lightsaber?”

George frowned, thinking. “Um . . . well . . . because he didn’t want people to know about it?”

“Exactly.”

“But why not?”

“George, come on, *think*—what would people *think* if *they* could get a lightsaber and the Force?”

“Well, I don’t know . . . it was what *I* dreamed about when *I* was young . . .”

“But what kind of uproar would it cause? The world would be changed, society torn up violently by its roots—what would people *do* with the Force, or lightsabers? Fight each other, abuse the weak, use their power for all the wrong purposes, all those bad things that humanity tends to gravitate towards if left alone.”

George sat in silence for a few moments, digesting this. During this silence, a person stepped through the door that they had accidentally left open.

“I rather hope no one saw or heard any of that just now,” Rolff said.

The Return of Rolff

“Rolff!” George exclaimed, surprised. “What are you doing here? Where have you been?”

Rolff quickly sat down on an open chair and looked at the open door, then George. “Would you mind closing that?” George closed the door.

Rolff leaned forward, looking intensely at George. “Back where I came from, we call that the Force.”

“Yeah?” said George, somewhat dazed after all the hard thinking he’d been forced to do over the course of the last fifteen minutes. “So? Do you, like, want me to be your apprentice or something?”

Rolff chuckled for a second, but abruptly stopped. “Well, not exactly . . .”

“Oh boy . . .” said George. “I don’t like the sounds of this.”

Rolff suddenly turned and looked at Three, a slight frown on his face. “Do I know you?”

Three looked at him slowly, evidently thinking. “I don’t think so . . .”

“That one time on Dantooine?”

“No . . . well, maybe . . .” Three said, evidently quite unsure of his memory. Rolff abruptly turned back to George.

“Okay, George—I have to explain some stuff to you, and we don’t have much time. Are you in any condition to travel?”

“Uh . . . well, I think I’m okay . . .”

“Great,” Rolff said, and instantly launched into a full-blown explanation at lightning speed:

“I need your help, George. I’ve only got one other person who can help me with this other than you, and I’ve called her already, but she won’t be here for a little while yet, so I need to explain some things to you and ask for your help.

“Even as we speak, there’s an alien mothership busy annihilating the various planets that humans have colonized in this galaxy, and we need to stop it. I’ve gathered that you people haven’t run into any aliens yet—well, at least the vast majority of you haven’t—so you probably are a bit lacking in the repelling-an-alien-invasion-force

department.

“As if it wasn’t bad enough that you’ve got an extremely hostile alien invasion force breathing down your neck, they’re about as well-prepared in their invasion as it’s possible to be—it’s a minor miracle that we even know they’re coming, because they’ve succeeded in utterly disrupting all communications from the planets they’ve invaded, as well as blockading the said planets, so no one knows that planets are falling left and right, and if somebody doesn’t do something soon, the entire human race will be enslaved.

“The only reason we know they’re out there is that a single ship managed to escape from one of the doomed planets and got the word out to the galactic news stations. Unfortunately, I don’t know if the normal human space fleets will be effective in stopping them at all, because I’ve seen the kind of technology they have, and it’s absolute top-of-the-line material.

“I already went to the Sardanians sitting near that asteroid belt, but they won’t help us—which isn’t surprising—because of their non-interference policy. So basically, we three (you, me, and my associate) have to get up to the alien mothership and go through it deck-by-deck until we can disable it. Can you come?”

George’s mouth was hanging open. He finally managed to shut it, but couldn’t say anything for a minute or two in which he opened and shut his mouth several times, making small incoherent noises. He finally managed to say,

“You’re asking *me* to do this why?”

“Well, you’ve got the Force . . . or something, right?” Rolff said, looking at him somewhat worriedly as if he might have gotten some crucial fact wrong.

“Well, yeah. . . um, I guess . . . but I’m the only person you could get for the job?”

“Well, you’re one on a very short list of people, and I’ve already called all the others. So can you come?”

“Uh . . . sure, I guess”

“Excellent. Let’s go.” With that, Rolff grabbed George, hauled him out of bed, and grabbed his bag, heading for the door.

“Hey! Can I come?” Three said as they ran out the door.

“Sorry, Three, I’m afraid not—Jedi job!” Rolff yelled over his shoulder as they

ran out.

Cher and Onboard the Jedi Spaceship

“So, who’s your partner?” George asked Rolff as they strapped in in Rolff’s spaceship. Rolff punched the controls and the ship jumped off the ground, slicing through the atmosphere.

“Name’s Cher,” Rolff said as he piloted.

“As in *the* Cher? The music artist?”

“Nah, just Cher. Same name, different hair. This Cher’s blonde.”

“I thought Cher *was* blonde,” said George.

“She is. Oh, you mean the famous Cher. No, I think she actually had black hair, originally.”

“Are you sure?”

“Not really. Could be wrong.”

“So, how do you two know each other?” George asked.

“We go back to the Jedi Order—and Temple—of course. Both ended up here in *your* galaxy somehow. Something about—”

“—dark matter mining in wormholes. Yeah, I know,” George interrupted. “I wonder why nobody knows what the deal is with that?”

“Oh, they know what’s going on,” replied Rolff. “It’s just extremely difficult to explain to the normal people on the street. I understand some of it—just enough to know that I’m in over my head asking questions about it.”

“Mm,” said George. “So we’re the only three going to the mothership?”

“Who? Oh, you, me, and Cher? Yeah—I tried to get Matchlock and Dean, but didn’t have any luck. Matchlock got tangled up in some nebula over near SELT-Tn 1101001—I heard something about space monkeys, don’t know what that’s about—and Dean is . . . well, it’s hard to explain, as usual . . . he’s not quite 100% human, don’tcha know, and he has trouble with Cass a lot of the time . . . mighty temperamental for a species like that, and that’s not even counting the vacuum pressure when it’s not constant . . . but of course none of that means anything to you. Ah, here we are,” Rolff finished as he swooped down to land the ship outside a nondescript gray apartment.

“Where were you since the last time we met? I mean, what do you do, being a Jedi and all?” George asked as he looked at the apartment complex. Rolff looked at his watch impatiently.

“I’ve got myself a nice place over in Town C, not much to look at, though . . . I was watching old “Touched By An Angel” reruns on the tube this afternoon . . . that show cracks me up . . . but I suppose you want to know what I do on a normal day? Well, I just keep an eye peeled for government corruption, racial inequality, corporate nonsegregationist movements in the legislature, that sort of thing . . . you know, it’s really not that hard to fit in here,” he said, looking at his watch again, impatiently. “Come on, Cher, hurry it up.” He drummed his fingers anxiously on the control panel. “You know, those documentaries you have on us are a little off-base . . . I could show you guys quite a few places where you fudged, but I’m not a nit-pick . . .”

They saw Cher come running out the front door and Rolff punched the landing ramp shut almost before she got on.

“When are you guys from, anyway?” George asked. “Like, Episode I, or what?”

“Well, I’m from about Ep. I, I guess, but I think she’s from a little later . . . probably II or something.” Cher ran in and Rolff lifted off, forcing the ship up through the atmosphere.

“But I thought you said you went back to the Temple? Like, as in the same time?” George said, a little confused.

“I did? Eh, whatever. More of the dark-matter nonsense, probably—whole universe is probably screwed up by it by now, anyway. What’s up, Cher?” he said, switching topics abruptly.

“Mother called—I had to get her cooled off again, and she’s not supposed to use the phone, you know.”

“Mm,” Rolff said. He noticed George giving him a funny look and explained. “Nah, we’re not related or anything, ‘Mother’ is just this one . . . but I can’t tell you, really—Jedi business, and we’re not exactly legally justified in doing it either, what with the Parliament these days and all . . . but like I said, we’re not actually related or anything, just ‘colleagues’ or ‘acquaintances’ or what-have-you . . .”

“Friends,” said Cher.

“Yeah, probably,” said Rolff.

“Um . . . so . . . are you guys going to give me any more information about what we’re actually doing?” asked George.

“Oh, that reminds me,” said Rolff, still maneuvering the ship out through orbital traffic, “that you guys haven’t been introduced yet. At least, officially. George, you already know this is Cher—”

“—what, you already told him?” Cher interjected, faking surprise. “Honestly, Rolff, no manners at all!”

“—and Cher, this is George.”

“Well, at least now I know who *he* is . . . why are we taking him, again?”

“Well, he’s, like, got the Force . . . or something. I’m not quite sure, but he’ll be good for a third person.”

“If you say so,” she said, sizing up the rather-not-powerful-looking George.

“Um, anyway . . . we’re basically just planning to go in ‘with lightsabers flashing,’ then?” asked George.

“Yeah, basically,” said Rolff, throwing a glance back over his shoulder. “Hope you can use that thing . . .”

“Hey, where’s he get one from, anyway?” said Cher, frowning.

“I gave him mine.”

“What?? Just like that?”

“Well, no . . . I died, so I gave it to him to keep for me . . . sort of.”

“You gave it to him after you died?”

“No, before I died. Honestly, Cher.”

“Hey, just checking—bloody dark matter complicating everything these days—and besides, now do *you* have one?”

“Yeah, I’ve still got mine.”

“But I thought you gave it to George!”

“Well, yeah, but I ended up here twice, so now there’s two of them . . . sort of.”

“ ‘Sort of?’ What?”

“Dark matter again.”

“Can’t stand that stuff. Makes life so bloody complicated.”

“Yeah, but what can you do?”

“Hate it.”

“Well, yeah, but constructively . . .”

“So how the heck are we supposed to destroy it?” interjected George.

“What?” asked Rolff.

“Hey, stay with the conversation, kid,” said Cher.

“If I stayed with the conversation, we’d probably still be talking about underwear sizes or something!”

“Whose?” said Cher.

“It doesn’t matter!” bellowed George. “I’m trying to figure out how to stay alive, not to mention save the galaxy—or galaxies, for all I know—in one fell swoop, with no planning beforehand! Do we even have a plan?!”

“Well, not really,” said Rolff. “We basically just run in and see if we can destroy it. I think Cher brought some det packs, too.”

“Explosives?” George said. “At least *now* we’re getting somewhere.”

“Yeah, I had some spares lying around after the last mission,” said Cher.

“Which was when? And you just have them ‘lying around?’ ”

“Oh, I don’t know, good question . . . probably about . . . what, four years ago, Rolff?”

“Speak for yourself. Time’s different for me,” Rolff threw over his shoulder. “We’re almost there.”

“Yeah, we’re from different time periods, as far as we can tell,” Cher said, throwing a glance sideways at George. “Four years for me, six for him? Who knows. . .”

The ship landed with a *thump* on the alien mothership.

“. . . and besides, it’s more like four *thousand*, give or take a few . . . with time dilation, and all—”

“My head hurts,” said George.

“Stop talking, Cher,” said Rolff. “Let’s get to work. Dibs on the red space suit!”

“Oh, sure, same as always,” grumbled Cher.

“Are you guys always like this?” George said.

“Like what?” Cher and Rolff asked at the same time.

“Do you always talk this much!?” George almost yelled.

“Yeah, pretty much. We’re friends, we go way back,” said Cher.

“Something like that,” said Rolff.

“You always say that.”

“Whatever.”

“So!” George said loudly. “Let’s go! Get at it!”

“Okay, no need to shout,” Rolff said.

“When you’re with us, you’re one big happy family,” said Cher.

“Apparently,” muttered George quietly.

“Go Time”

George, Cher, and Rolff were clambering into their spacesuits to go outside the ship. “So, we’re going to cut in from the outside?” said George.

“Yup,” said Rolff.

“Finally, a plan,” said George.

“Hey, no complaining. Let’s keep morale high.”

“Well, ignoring the fact that one of us is likely going to die . . .”

“Why do you say that?” asked Cher.

“What, haven’t you read any of this author’s other books?” said George. “It’s pretty much a given that *someone* dies by the end.”

“But didn’t Bob die already? And Rolff?” said Cher.

“Well, yeah, Rolff died already . . . who’s Bob?” said George.

“Oh, yeah, you don’t remember him—sorry.”

“What?”

“I read the script. Sorry. Couldn’t help myself.”

“You did what??”

“I read the book. You know, the book we’re in?”

“You read it?” George said in disbelief. “Isn’t that illegal or something?”

“Hey, I didn’t read the whole thing! Gimme credit, I stopped right after this conversation!”

“That is weird in so many ways,” said George.

“You tell me,” said Rolff. “And you know how often I have to be around her?”

“Hey, you know me by choice,” protested Cher.

“Maybe,” shot back Rolff, sawing through the alien mothership hull with his saber. “Don’t hit me, or I’ll botch the cut,” he added defensively as Cher moved towards him.

“Let’s not forget the whole little thing called ‘death,’ ” said George.

“Hey, don’t bring down the happiness level here,” said Rolff. “Gotta keep the book nice and light for the happy readers.”

“But still . . .”

“Okay, fine,” said Cher. “How about this . . .” She thought a moment.

“Whoever dies, the other two split up his/her stuff.”

“I don’t know if I like that,” said Rolff. “I might not want you to have my stuff. Now, George, on the other hand . . .” Cher moved to hit him, and he hurriedly finished, “. . . hasn’t been with us long enough to be sure yet. Cut’s almost done,” he finished, abruptly switching topic again.

“Do you realize that we’ve been in your guys’ ship and talking out here on the hull for, like, forever?” said George. “These two chapters are like the longest yet!”

“Okay, fine, stifle all our fun,” said Cher. “You go in first,” she said, pointing at the cut in the hull, with the hull plating still in place.

“Fine,” said George, and jumped on the circle of metal. It caved in, he fell into the ship, and was blown apart by a huge flying gob of energy.

“Oops, forgot about those,” said Rolff. “Probably should have warned him.”

“Mm. Yeah, I guess we should have,” agreed Cher, examining the small chunks of George-ness in the hole.

“George Never Dies”

“Thanks to you guys, I just died!” George shouted from behind them. “Now the whole book is wrong because ‘George Never Dies!’ *How* are we going to explain this to the readers?!”

“Well, for starters, how are we going to explain that you’re standing behind us?” asked Cher, looking at George with a bemused grin on her face.

“Okay, good point,” agreed George. “I suppose we can just blame it on the dark matter again . . .”

“Sounds fine to me,” said Rolff confidently. “It’s just vague enough to keep on working all these times, and it sounds kind of mysterious and cool. At least, it does to me,” he added when Cher gave him a strange look.

“I think we’re overusing it a bit much,” said George. “We should get something new. Something better.”

“Oh well. If the readers are with us this far, I guess they can take a little more,” said Cher, with a blank, distant look in her eyes. “I mean, this *is* ‘A Grand Undertaking in the Art of Nonsensical and Confusing Storytelling by Stephen Rahn’—it says so in the title. And if the ‘Nonsensical and Confusing’ bit doesn’t explain it, then the author certainly does . . .”

“Speaking of the readers, I bet they’re getting pretty tired of our witty banter,” said Rolff.

“Very true,” said George impatiently. “So, can we have someone *else* go through the hole this time? Like Cher?”

“Oh, sure,” said Rolff, and pushed her in. “Watch out for zooming energy blobs!” he yelled after her merrily. She fell through the hole and landed flat on her face with a *thump* and a stifled, slightly-British-sounding curse. “It’s fine! Come on down, the floor’s wonderful! Just the right mixture of plastic and synthetic alien metal to give some coolness appeal to it.”

“All right already, we’re coming down,” Rolff said as they jumped down. “No trouble with the zooming energy blobs, eh?”

“Nah, you just have to keep an eye out for—” Cher said as an energy ball

smashed into her forehead. She was thrown backwards and landed flat on her back.

“You okay?” asked Rolff, leaning over her.

“Yeah . . . actually, that felt pretty good . . .” George jumped down and accidentally landed on top of Rolff. They both fell to the floor in time to avoid another energy blob.

“As long as you don’t really fear them, they’re actually kind of good,” said Cher airily. George wondered fleetingly if the energy blobs were drugged.

George got up and pulled Cher to her feet, shaking her a bit. The cloudy look in her eyes faded a bit. “What was that for?” Cher asked indignantly, shaking her arm free from George’s grasp.

George’s response was cut off when he noticed Rolff had already set off a fair distance down the hall. Cher and he ran to catch up.

“We’ve got an alien mothership to clean up.”

“The Cleansing Starts Now”

“So, what makes these aliens so dangerous?” George asked as they walked down the hall. Rolff stopped at a random spot and carved a hole in the wall so they could get out of the passageway with the zooming-energy-blob thingies.

“Well, their weapons are basically just really good,” Rolff said with a grunt as he kicked the circle of metal out of the wall and stepped through into the new hallway. “They’ve got some disruptor-type things that are really dangerous—you get hit by one of those, you’re *out*—rips right through you; you’re not gonna survive being hit with one of those. And they’ve got these huge-energy-blob launchers on top of the disruptors that—well, you saw what happened when you went through the hatch.”

“But it didn’t kill Cher,” George observed.

“Well, no, but . . . ah, who knows,” Rolff said. “Cher’s a bit different from us, I guess.”

“Uh, thanks . . . I think . . .” said Cher.

They kept an eye out for aliens as they moved down the hallway. “So, are we heading for the center of the ship, or what?” said George. “I mean, it would make sense if the important stuff was in the middle . . .”

“True,” Rolff agreed. He abruptly stopped and carved a hole in the floor. “Let’s go down a level,” he said as he kicked out the metal.

“Are you just carving holes at random??” George said.

“Yeah, pretty much . . . it’s called ‘instinct.’ Besides, if we’re heading for the middle of the ship . . .” Rolff casually dangled his humming saber blade through the new opening, and it was instantly assaulted by bursts of disruptor-fire. “Ah, what the heck, *I’ll* go in first this time,” he said.

“Fine by me,” said Cher.

“Hold on a sec while I give you some Force-assistance,” added George. George “looked” at the deck below and pushed over the aliens with his mind. “All clear,” he said, and Rolff dropped down through the hole. Some hacking and slashing noises followed, then Rolff said, “Come on down!”

George and Cher dropped down. Rolff stood there, casually swinging his

lightsaber around, standing over several dead aliens. They set off down the curving halls once again.

“Hey, has anybody noticed that these passageways are all curving, and they all seem to be shaped like big circles?” asked Cher.

“Well, it would make sense,” said Rolff. “If it’s a flying saucer, then it would logically follow that everything is arranged in big circles.”

“Kind of like an onion, or a tree trunk,” added George. “Concentric circles radiating out from the center.”

Rolff and Cher looked at George silently.

“Um,” said Cher.

“Right,” said Rolff.

“Oh, never mind,” said George.

“Hey, here’s a door, finally,” said Cher. “And it looks like it goes straight in towards the center of the ship.” She was about to cut through the door when George stopped her.

“Hey, it looks like there’s a button here. Maybe this is like a . . . horizontal elevator, or something . . .” George pushed the button and they waited. After a few minutes, the door opened, and they found themselves face-to-face with a bunch of aliens. They dispatched them hastily with their lightsabers.

Piling in to the elevator, Rolff looked at the control panel. “Looks like this goes vertical *and* horizontal,” he observed, looking at the buttons arranged in a big +. “I suppose we want the middle deck, and the smallest-numbered horizontal corridor?”

“Mm,” said George. “I guess that makes sense. Assuming they number from the middle-out . . .”

“Well, I suppose they *could* start at 40 and go down from the middle-out, then start over at one part-way through and go back up,” said Cher, rolling her eyes. George and Rolff both looked at her, trying to visualize what she’d just said.

“Never mind, I was being *sarcastic*,” she muttered. “Geez, can’t I crack a joke now and then?”

The elevator stopped. “I don’t think we’re there yet,” said Cher.

“Well, of course not,” said Rolff, looking back at her. “Normal elevators make midway stops, too.” The door opened and an alien blasted Rolff in the head with a disruptor beam. He fell heavily to the floor.

George and Cher dispatched the aliens quickly with their purple and blue lightsabers, dodging disruptor-fire and Force-pushing energy blobs back at their enemies. It didn’t take long before all the aliens were dead.

They looked at Rolff, and he didn’t look good. He was slowly starting to disintegrate from the point of the shot, his head evaporating. “Any last words?” Cher asked quietly.

“Ow,” said Rolff. “George gets my stuff. . . .”

Cher frowned and turned away angrily. “I can’t watch this . . .” George watched silently as Rolff slowly evaporated, leaving his robes and lightsaber behind. The door of the elevator hissed shut and they started moving again.

“Crap,” said Cher.

“What?”

“Oh, never mind,” said Cher angrily, holding back tears. “You wouldn’t know, you haven’t been with him as long as I have.”

“Oh,” said George. “Sorry.”

“Thanks. I guess.” Cher slumped against the wall of the elevator and slid down to sit on the floor, her face in her hands, crying. The elevator stopped again.

Before the doors could open, George Force-pushed the aliens he felt on the other side. When the doors opened, he dashed out and chopped them up with his saber. He ran back into the elevator. Cher hadn’t moved.

The doors hissed shut, and they were back on their way. Cher was still sobbing into her hands.

“You know, it’s quite possible that he’ll come back,” George said awkwardly. “I mean, he’s already come back once . . . sort of.”

“No,” Cher managed to say. “I’ve got the . . . feeling that . . . he won’t come back.”

“Oh,” said George. They rode the elevator in silence for a while, and George kept his finger on a convenient KEEP DOORS SHUT button for the rest of the ride. They finally

stopped, and the glowing number indicated that they were at Level M, Corridor 1. George kept his finger on the button.

“Are you up for this?” he asked Cher, rather doubtful as to the fact that she was ready to “go, kick butt, and save the universe” right now.

Cher chocked off a sob. “Yeah, I . . . think I . . . can do this,” she managed to say. “Just . . . give me a minute.” George’s finger was starting to hurt from holding the button in forever.

“Okay,” said Cher. George helped her up, and she picked up her lightsaber. Taking a deep breath, she turned on her saber and nodded to George. He took his finger off the button and the doors opened.

They were instantly assaulted by a furious fusillade of weapons-fire from the swarm of aliens that had undoubtedly been tipped off by the fact that the elevator hadn’t opened for about five minutes after its arrival. Besides, by now, somebody had probably found the bodies of all the aliens they had killed, so they most likely knew that someone (or at least *something*) hostile was on their ship.

George and Cher didn’t have time to think. Instead, they jumped out of the elevator and gave themselves over to the Force. Spinning around the room without thinking, they vanquished their enemies by instinct, lightsaber blades flashing mercilessly around the room. The air was filled with the hiss and crackle of their spinning blades, and a multitude of disruptor beams sliced through the air.

They spun around the room, whirling through the air like two whirlwinds of death, spinning and slashing through the swarms of enemies like adrenaline-juiced harvesters hacking maniacally through a field of wheat. Enemies fell before their blades, and the chamber was cleansed at last of all opposition. George and Cher slumped against a wall, exhausted. They slid to the floor side-by-side and looked at each other.

“Well,” said George.

“Wow,” said Cher.

“That was a lot of work.”

“Oh yeah. Exhausting.”

“Yup.”

Now finally having time to look around the room, they noticed that this room wasn't the same as all the corridors they had come through. Instead, this was a large, circular chamber, with sixteen doors in the walls and an elevator tube standing in the middle of the room, reaching from floor to ceiling. Eight of the doors in the walls looked like elevator doors, and it reminded George of the eight cardinal directions on a compass. The other eight doors were slightly thinner and taller, and tinged a pale blue.

"Well, I guess we have to see what's behind those other eight doors," said Cher.

"Yeah," said George. "Okay, let's go." They got up and walked to one of the doors. It hissed open, revealing a chamber shaped much like a piece of pizza with the tip cut off. It was filled with transparent, roughly-human-sized cylinders full of liquid.

An alien floated in each one of them, and there were a lot.

A lot.

"Cloning," George said in wonder. "I suppose that's how they can invade all kinds of planets—they have a pretty much inexhaustible supply of troops."

"Ooh, bad news," said Cher, accessing a console at the far end of the chamber. "You should see this," she called over her shoulder to George.

George joined her at the console, and she pointed to some numbers. "These guys are set on a half-hour rotation." A glowing count-down clock spun, slowly working down to zero.

"Great," said George, looking back at the rows of cylinders with cloned aliens in them. Now that he looked at them for a longer period of time, he could see that they were growing so fast he could actually *see* them maturing. "So we have to destroy this whole room in half an hour?"

"Plus the other seven," Cher said quietly.

"Oh, geez," said George. "We've got a lot of work to do."

"You can say *that* again."

"Well, let's get cracking." George and Cher rushed down the rows at lightning speed, hacking apart all the cylinders. A thick gel oozed out of the shattered cylinders, creating a thick layer of Jell-O-like stuff on the floor. "Mmm, looks like lime," Cher said. "Tasty."

"Somehow, I don't think it's edible," George said. He continued hacking through

cylinders, now ankle-deep in the gel. They finally finished, and leaned against the wall on opposite sides of the door, breathing heavily. “How many do you think there were?” said George.

“Probably about a hundred.”

“And there’s another seven chambers to go.”

Cher considered. “Well, yeah, assuming the other levels don’t have more.” She looked at George and they both groaned.

“Do we even have enough juice in our lightsabers for that much work?”

Cher tapped the handle of her saber lightly with a finger. “Probably not. Not if there’s more levels.”

George thought for a moment. “I suppose we could use the energy-blob launchers from the dead aliens that we killed. Heaven knows, those energy blobs are big enough to take out a cylinder or two at a time.”

“Okay, let’s go.” George and Cher ran out of the door, to another one—but not before Cher had slashed a cut into the one they’d just exited.

“So we know which ones we’ve done,” she explained.

“Good thinking,” said George.

They picked up an energy-blob launcher in each hand (still plenty full of ammo) and dealt with the other seven chambers. It took a while. Exhausted, they got into the elevator in the center of the room and punched it down a level. The doors opened, and in front of them was another chamber identical to the one they had just left, likewise full of a large number of hostile aliens.

“Crap,” said Cher.

More Cleansing and a Lot More Work

Cher and George once again dealt with the onslaught of a plentiful number of aliens, exterminating them with extreme prejudice, although not extreme enough to violate any of the Jedi Code. Once they were done, they grabbed a couple more energy-blob launchers and opened up on the cloning cylinders in the eight rooms. It was getting pretty tedious. Once they had finished, Cher said,

“I wonder how many more levels there are.”

“Hmm . . . well, they need enough soldiers to subdue and conquer pretty much every planet with humans on it in the galaxy, so . . . I’d have to say a lot . . . if there’s eight rooms off each of these big chambers, maybe there’s eight levels, too . . . ?”

Cher groaned. “Oh boy. Talk about a lot of work.” They hopped back in the elevator and punched the button for the next level down. “So you think there’s, like, 6400 aliens being cloned every half-hour?”

“Probably,” said George as the doors opened and they exterminated another gaggle of opponents. “but I hope not.” They grabbed a few more energy-blob launchers and flooded the cloning rooms with energy blobs. They sat down and rested a few minutes.

“I suppose, as we’re talking here, these aliens are probably exterminating a bunch more people and occupying another planet?” said George.

“Yeah, probably. Too bad we can’t really work any faster than we already are.”

“Mm. Well, there’s another level waiting. Let’s go.” They got into the elevator yet again and descended another level. But on this level, the doors opened, and they sprang out with their lightsabers swinging wildly, only to find four opponents standing in a room almost completely different from the last three. Needless to say, the four aliens were quickly eviscerated.

Standing in the room with humming lightsabers, George and Cher looked around and saw that they were standing in a medium-large room with what looked like a reactor in it—the main reactor.

“Finally,” said Cher. “Just when I was starting to get bored.”

“Yeah,” George agreed. “The readers were probably starting to, too.”

“Probably. So how are we going to blow up this thing?”

“Well, I’m no scientist here, but I’m pretty sure you can’t just blow up a nuclear reactor without getting hurt.”

“You people still use nuclear reactors?” Cher asked, surprised. “We stopped using those millennia ago . . .”

“Who?” said George.

“We people in ‘the Star Wars galaxy.’ ”

“Oh.”

They stood in thought for a few minutes, trying to figure out how to disable a nuclear reactor with only two lightsabers, a few alien-energy-blob launchers, and some explosive packs without absorbing massive amounts of radiation and . . . well, being killed.

“Well, maybe we could try that big ON/OFF switch over there,” George said finally.

“Hmm . . . I guess. But we might as well cut out the whole switch so they can’t turn it back on . . . of course, they can probably turn it back on from somewhere else anyway . . . or just replace the switch and *then* turn it on . . .” said Cher thoughtfully.

“Well, it’s worth a try, I suppose . . .” George flipped the big switch and they were instantly plunged into darkness.

“Oops,” said George. “Didn’t think about that.”

“Well, at least we can use our sabers for light.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

George and Cher got back in the elevator and went down another level, but when the doors opened, they just found themselves in another corridor, so they took it back up.

“Which level was the first one we tried?” George asked.

“M, I think.” They went up to level L. The doors opened, and they strained their ears to hear any sound from the dark room. Cher raised her saber in time to deflect a disruptor beam aimed straight at her.

“Great. Now we have to go in and chase them around in the dark.” They got out of the elevator and crept around the edges of the room, rounding up and killing the aliens that were inside. The room looked vaguely like a command center, or a “bridge” on a

capital ship.

“Hmm . . . you know, it would be really cheesy and utterly predictable if there was a big red self-destruct button around here somewhere . . .” Cher said as she looked around the chamber. “Hey, wait a second—if we turned off the main reactor, how come the elevator still worked?”

George was hunting around for a big red button and not really listening to Cher. “I dunno, separate power supply in case someone turns off the power . . . or maybe there’s an auxiliary reactor somewhere . . . who knows, we can probably just blame it on the dark matter again. That, or sloppy writing by the author.”

“That last option sounds more likely.”

“Here—found it. Come over here,” said George, looking at a big red button that had the words SELF-DESTRUCT printed neatly and conveniently right on it. The button was lit up with a pulsing red light from underneath. “This is, like, so clichéd that it’s not even funny,” he said as he tried twisting the button a bit, Cher looking over his shoulder. A blank readout just above The Button came to life, displaying a helpful time until destruction. George set it for thirty minutes and pushed the button.

They got back in the elevator as a voice began speaking calmly:

“The self-destruct sequence has been activated. All personnel and passengers are advised to proceed to the nearest exit immediately. Escape pods are located on decks A through K and Q through Z. For maximum efficiency, please exit the ship with no less than four persons per escape pod. All those wishing to remain on board are reminded that this guarantees their personal extinction—anyone intending to ‘go down with the ship’ are requested to please stay out of the way of those who are attempting to preserve their own lives. Detonation will occur in twenty-nine minutes and counting”

“Oh, shoot, do you remember what deck we came from?” George asked, trying not to panic.

“Yeah, I can get us there,” Cher said as she punched buttons calmly. George kept his thumb pressed down tightly on the KEEP DOORS SHUT button as they zoomed along.

“Detonation will occur in twenty-three minutes and counting . . .” the voice said as the doors finally opened and George and Cher ran along the corridors, hopping through the holes Rolff had cut on the way in.

George didn't like the look on Cher's face. "Don't think about Rolff until we get off of this ship, there isn't time."

Cher's eyes were getting moist. "If we want to get off alive . . ." She was slowing down, falling into a walking pace. George grabbed her by the arm and tried to haul her along.

"George, there's no point . . . Rolff died here, I want to die with him . . . I can't. . . I can't leave . . ." She wasn't even trying to move at all, now. Aliens rushed past them, ignoring them in their haste to get to the escape pods. All things considered, George had to admit it felt like he was in a movie. Time was running out, the voice over the intercom was counting down to destruction . . . he almost thought that his hearing would go funny, until he could only hear his own breathing and heartbeat . . .

"Nineteen minutes and counting . . ."

"George, just leave me here . . . I won't . . . just let me die here, I don't want to. . . I can't just leave . . ." George was dragging her along bodily, and he wasn't a strong guy. They still had two corridors to go.

"Cher, come on, just because Rolff died here doesn't mean *you* have to—we'll be heroes when we get back to the planet!"

"It doesn't matter . . . I don't care anymore . . . I just want to die here . . . with him . . . just leave me alone . . ."

George hauled her through a hole. One corridor left to go.

"Fourteen minutes and counting . . ."

"Cher, come on, you're not thinking! Be rational, there's no reason for you to die here . . . there's no reason for *me* to die here!"

"Then just leave me . . . stop trying to drag me back to the ship . . . just leave me alone—" She jerked out of his grasp, falling to the floor and folding up into the fetal position. "Just go away . . ."

George grabbed her by the arm again and hauled her to her feet. She was crying, and didn't resist as he dragged her through another hole. "You'd better seal your space suit." She made no move to do so, so George pushed a switch on her suit, and it sealed with a hiss, oxygen flooding the inside. Her pleas were cut off.

“Eleven minutes . . .”

George staggered under the weight of hauling two bodies through the corridors. And he still had to get Cher into the ship, he realized—*up* through the hole in the hull.

“Cher, listen to me!” he said, pressing their suit faceplates together so she could hear him. “Don’t go to pieces on me now! We need to get off this ship before we both die! There’s no time for this!”

Cher seemed to be struggling to control herself. “I—I don’t—I don’t want—why won’t you—let me—”

“Cher! Just get up out of the hole, get into the ship, and we can get out of here! Come on!” George boosted her out of the hole with difficulty.

“Nine minutes . . .” George managed to jump high enough to grab the edges of the hole and struggled to haul himself over the edge. It wasn’t working.

“Cher, come on! Give me a hand here! We don’t have time!” She looked down at him faintly, thinking some distant thought. She swayed slightly, tears still on her cheeks.

“Eight minutes . . .” She slowly reached out a hand, and George grabbed it desperately, pulling to get himself onto the hull. Just as he got up, he heard a *pop* and faint *hissss* of escaping air. He had punctured his suit.

“Seven . . .”

He rushed forward, dragging Cher after him. His vision was starting to get hazy, and shapes swam before his eyes. He staggered up the open ramp of Rolff’s ship.

“Six . . .”

He slapped a button and the ramp closed, the ship filling with oxygen. He was on the verge of blacking out, swaying dangerously on his feet. “Start the ship . . .”

“Five . . .” He staggered to the cockpit, yelling with the last of his strength,

“Bob! Bob, get us out of here!”

The ship began powering up, much too slowly for George’s liking.

“Four . . .”

The engines kicked in, and the small ship jolted upward suddenly, throwing George out of his chair. He could hear Cher sliding around in the back of the ship.

“Three . . .”

The ship was accelerating away from the mothership, slowly gaining speed on a long arc away from certain death.

“Two . . .” The ship was slowly speeding up, putting precious distance between them and certain destruction. “One . . .” The mothership was receding more quickly from them, falling behind with growing speed.

And then it blew. Explosions tore its hull, tearing it apart into huge chunks of metal and plastic, scattering some alien bodies among the stars. Debris flashed past their ship, rocking it with impacts the shields absorbed.

But they were alive.

Aftermath

George managed to drag himself back into his chair, and he could feel consciousness coming back more firmly into his reach. He was feeling better already. The space-radio sprang to life.

“Unidentified ship, identify yourself immediately. Time is of the essence, mister—identify yourself!”

“Um, this is George—I—I mean, we—my passenger and I—we destroyed the mothership, and—um—we’re trying to . . . um . . . I don’t know, get away?”

“Well, you’d better listen up: You’ve got two minutes to get through that portal we opened just about in front of you. When the mothership started losing power, we detected another five decloaking and coming towards us. There’s no possible way we can stop even one of them now, and, if you didn’t know, this is the last planet we’ve got a settlement on right here below us. We opened a portal as fast as we could to another corner of the galaxy, and we’re all diving through it before any of the alien ships can get through. Once we get all our ships through, we’re closing it down so they can’t follow us, and we’ll be safe on the other side, but I can’t explain how now. You’ve got a minute and a half to get through that portal, buddy, if you ever want to see humanity again!”

Stunned, George looked at Bob. “Can we make it?”

“In a minute, yes. But get Cher strapped down.” George ran back to the rear of the ship and dragged Cher to the cockpit. He strapped her into a chair, and turned off her suit. She was staring at the ceiling sadly and making tiny sobbing noises. On the whole, George was tired of this whole business. He strapped in.

“Get us through that thing, Bob!”

“Can do. Hold on.”

They flew into the portal, and space twisted around them as they were thrown through the galaxy. The portal twisted and tore behind them, collapsing back into normal space. Their ship spun crazily, and Bob starting trying to stabilize them.

Apparently they were safe *now*.

Finally.

* * * * *

George talked to the person on the space-radio, trying to forget about Cher, who was somewhere else in the back of the ship getting out of her space suit . . . he guessed. But who really cared?

“The reason we chose *this* solar system is because of its location right on the edge of the Milky Way—that, and the fact that the black hole and stars nearby make it virtually impossible to get in or out of the system. And even if *somebody* can get in or out, those alien motherships are way too big to fit between them without being torn apart by the gravitational forces. So—for now at least—we’re safe from them, though I pity all the humans stuck out there on all those conquered planets . . .

“At first, we thought the Space Navy would be able to take care of the mothership, but then they were all being systematically annihilated by these huge energy beam things from the mothership—capital ships falling left and right, and there was nothing we could do to stop the aliens. So we opened a portal to here and started cramming all the ships we could through it while our heavy Navy ships were being obliterated. I hate to think how many good people died on those ships, holding off the enemy . . .

“You said you were *on* the mothership just now?”

“Well, yes,” said George, somewhat embarrassed. “When we first got on, we thought that there was only one of them, so we were going to try to destroy it from the inside, since Rolff didn’t think the Navy would be able to do it—”

“Who’s this Rolff?”

“He was the third person on our team—him, Cher, and me.”

“And who are these people?”

“Simply? Jedi.”

“Uh, did I hear you right? ‘Jedi?’ As in, like, from Star Wars, or what?”

“Um, yeah, actually.”

“And how did they get here? Wait—don’t tell me—dark matter?”

“And the associated spatial disturbances and wacko stuff as well, all originating (we think) from the wormhole mining we did near Zeta V.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah. Unfortunately, Rolff died in the process of our attack on the mothership, so he can’t explain everything—”

“You know, you guys are going to be heroes. We’ll have to do, like, a 21-gun salute or something for Ralph—”

“Rolff,” George corrected.

“Yeah, whatever. I mean, you guys pretty much saved the human race—”

“—well, that was pretty much what we were *trying* to do—”

“—If you hadn’t destroyed the mothership, delaying them long enough for us to get a portal thrown up, humanity probably would have been destroyed. What was your name again?”

“George—”

“We’ll have to get interviews with you and Shar—”

“*Cher*, but I—”

“I can see it now, you’ll be heroes, and we’ll get all the details from you, and the President of something-or-other will give you a big, fat, gold metal—heck, platinum, maybe even—”

“But I don’t—” George was cut off when the line went dead. He was chewing his lip nervously when Cher came in, nonchalantly brushing her hair.

“What’s up?”

“They want to do interviews with us,” George muttered nervously.

“About what?”

“Destroying the mothership, of course!”

“Oh, that. I’ll handle it,” Cher said coolly.

Interviews

“Ladies and gentlemen, tonight I have with me here Cher . . . sorry, but what *is* your last name?”

“Cher.”

“I’m afraid I misunderstand—your *last* name is Cher?”

“Yes.”

“But what is your first name, then?”

“Cher.”

“So your first and last names are the same?”

“No.”

“But that’s what you just said.”

“Whatever.”

“Anyway, I have a few questions I want to ask you tonight . . . Cher.”

“Shoot.”

“Okay. First: How did you disable the alien ship?”

“Oh, we just pretty much walked in and sabotaged some things, pushed a self-destruct button, and walked out. And by now, of course, you know how *that* turned out.”

The host smiled. “Yes, of course. But could you elaborate a bit more?”

Cher leaned back somewhat in her chair. “Oh, you want the longer version? Well, first we flew over to the alien ship and cut our way inside. Then we headed to the center of the ship, where we thought there were probably some important things we could put out of commission. When we got there, we first found a series of chambers containing cloning equipment, which we destroyed. That took a while. But then we went down a few levels in the ship and found the main reactor, which we turned off. Next, we went back up and found what we thought was possibly the bridge of the ship, where we found a self-destruct button, which of course we pressed. Then we backtracked back out and managed to escape before the ship blew itself up.”

The host smiled widely. “You make it sound so easy.”

“We do what we can.”

“But, I believe there was a third member of your team that didn’t come back from the alien mothership?”

Cher’s eyes clouded a bit. “Yes, a man by the name of Rolff Olarema. He was shot part of the way to the center of the ship and died.”

“And what did you do with him?”

Cher frowned. “*Do* with him? What did you expect us to do with him? Bury him?”

The host laughed nervously. “No, of course not. In spite of this, though, rumor has it that you three were—are—what people call ‘Jedi?’ ”

“Yes. Why?”

“Well, some people are just surprised that . . . a Jedi was killed just like that.”

“What, you mean easily?”

“Well, yes.”

“Mm,” Cher responded, noncommittally. She was looking at something off-camera.

“And can you tell us anything about yourself—being a Jedi and all?”

Cher looked back at the host. “Well, not really . . . I mean, you already know some general stuff about us from your documentary movies on us, and the associated literature . . .”

“So you can’t . . . tell us how to get ‘the Force’ or anything?”

Cher frowned, looking at the host irritably. “Even if I could, I wouldn’t.”

The host’s smile fell a bit. “Why not?”

“Well, for starters, we’re not exactly the same . . . we’re both humans, yes, but I’d have a much harder time reading *your* midi-chlorians than someone from *my* galaxy.”

The host smiled broadly. “And what *are* my midi-chlorians?”

Cher closed her eyes and was motionless for a long moment. “Very low,” she said finally, with a slight smile. She opened her eyes.

The host’s smile seemed particularly forced. “And did you have other reasons for keeping your Force a secret?”

“Well, it’s not exactly a *secret*, is it?” Cher said. “I mean, you *know about* it and all . . .”

“Well, yes, but you won’t tell us how to *get it*.”

Cher frowned again. “That’s exactly why.”

The host stopped smiling. “What?”

“Your whole attitude about it. You think of it as something to be *grasped at*, or *obtained*, something you can *bend* to your own purposes. Well, granted, you *can* do that a bit, but the idea is entirely different in your case—you would want to use it for fun—‘for kicks’—you’d use it all the wrong ways, and none of the right ways. You’d use it to threaten people, and you’d use it to spy on people, and use it for all the wrong reasons, all the wrong reasons of human nature. *We*—as in myself and the Jedi—always try to use it for the *good* reasons: helping people, protecting the innocent, righting wrongs . . . all the ways that you can use it for good purposes. If we just ‘*gave*’ the Force to the common man, he’d abuse it.”

The host smiled again. “Rather pessimistic there—you really think mankind is bad, and he’d abuse the power he got?”

“Well, I never said ‘mankind is bad,’ exactly,” Cher corrected, shifting a bit in her chair. “Mankind just has bad motivations, a lot of the time, a lot of the people—not *all* the time, and not *all* the people, I’m just talking about the general trend.”

“And you really think we would *abuse* the power if we got it?” the host said, zeroing in for the kill.

Cher looked at him slowly, and looked out across the audience, an unreadable expression flitting across her face.

“Yes.”

The studio was silent.

“Alright then, we’ve got another person tonight, and perhaps *he* can shed some light on this whole story. George, come on out!” The studio audience applauded, and Cher walked out. George walked on.

“So, George, *you* have a last name, right?”

“Yes,” George said.

The host waited a moment. “And what is it?” he prodded.

“Sheldon.”

“Okay, then. Next question: How did an ordinary guy like you get teamed up with a pair of . . . ‘Jedi?’ I mean, you *are* normal, aren’t you? You aren’t . . . from another galaxy?” The audience laughed, and George had the feeling that a lot of laughter was going to be going in Cher’s direction tonight.

“No, I’m just like you or anyone else in here . . . pretty much.”

The host smiled. “And that *‘pretty much’* makes a world of difference, doesn’t it, George?”

“Yeah.”

“So, what makes you different, George?” he said, leaning back a bit and warming to his target.

“Well, I guess you’d say I’ve got the Force . . . or something. At least, that’s what Rolff said.”

“Oh, and *you’re* not as—” The host made an exaggerated and thoroughly untranslatable gesture. “—about Rolff, are you?”

“No,” said George, quietly. He didn’t think he liked this host.

“But to get back to the point, how did you . . . ‘get the Force,’ as you said?”

“Well, I don’t really know . . . I just didn’t wake up one morning, and the next thing I know, I wake up a month later, and my brain was different. I really have no idea how or why it happened. I guess they say my brain got rewired or something.”

“And you know what many people would give to have that same ‘rewiring?’” the host said, smiling widely. The audience laughed.

“I suppose.”

The host switched tracks abruptly. “While you were up on your . . . *mission* up there, did you get along well with our friend Cher?”

George didn’t like where this was headed. “Well . . . yeah.”

Seeing his opportunity, the host pounced. “Why the hesitation there, George?”

“Well . . .” George hesitated again. “She kind of talked a lot at first . . .”

“And did you hate that, George?”

“No . . . she was okay.”

“Never irritated you, made you hate her?” the host said silkily.

“No,” said George firmly.

“Alright then, then let’s have a hand for our two guests tonight,” the host said, and the audience roared. “Thank you, George, and Cher, wherever you are!” he said, waving to the camera, a smile plastered on his face. “And good night!”

Cher turned off the TV and took out the disc. “He really didn’t like me, did he?” she commented to George.

“Well, I think he didn’t like it when you made that proclamation about the nature of mankind,” George said honestly.

“Yeah, well, the truth hurts sometimes,” Cher shrugged. “I really don’t care.”

George couldn’t help but smile. “Yeah. Well, at least only *one* solar system dislikes you now . . .”

She grinned. “Ah, well. Whatever.”

Wrap-Up

George sat on a bench in the newly-constructed spaceport. He had to admit, people were building up the planet fast. Well, they did kind of *have* to, to render the God-forsaken little ice-ball of a planet generally inhabitable for humanity, but still . . . they were getting things up and running pretty quickly.

George stopped looking up at the sky, waiting for his ship. Instead, he turned his attention to something closer to him and altogether more entertaining and interesting. He unclipped Rolff's saber from his belt, turning it over in his hand. He looked at the patterning on the grip, running his fingers over a series of nicks and scratches Rolff must have made on it over the years. How many lightsabers does a Jedi go through in a lifetime, anyway? wondered George silently.

He would have liked to turn it on and look at the pure purple blade, but George knew better than to pull a stunt like *that* in an airport, even if it *had* just been built a handful of days before. Heaven knows, there were enough people around who watched out for people with a weapon in an airport . . .

George looked up at the sky again, and then at his watch. He looked at his—yes, I suppose it *is* mine now, isn't it? he thought—saber for another moment and stashed it back on his belt. Suppose I shouldn't really be flaunting it too much, he thought as he glanced around the terminal surreptitiously. After all, Rolff gave it to me for safe-keeping, so "the authorities" wouldn't find it . . .

George's ship finally appeared, and George grabbed his bag, walking over to it. Jets of left-over gases from the ventilators discharged out the underside of the ship, and the boarding ramp popped open. Three looked down the ramp at George.

"Oh, you aren't bringing Cher along with you?" Three commented, with a hint of sarcasm.

George squinted up at Three while he walked up the ramp. "Well, hello to you too, buddy. How did you find me, anyway?"

Three glanced back at him for a moment, walking up to the cockpit. "Well, I have my ways . . . but you're avoiding the question, you know . . . honestly, George . . ."

George sighed. "No, I'm *not* bringing Cher along, Watson. I let her keep Rolff's

ship when you called me, and she's probably sitting in her new apartment thinking about him, or something . . .”

“About who? Rolff?”

“Who else?”

“Bit attached to him, wasn't she?” Three commented.

“Mm. Don't exactly know what that was about, on the whole . . . just friends, I guess . . . but who knows . . .”

“So you're not, like, traveling together, or anything . . . ?” Three prodded.

“Naw, just together for that job with the aliens . . .” George looked at Three, and frowned. “Oh, come on—that was completely a business relationship.”

“Oh, I'm sure. I'm sure you two must have gone through a lot together.”

“Yeah, so?”

“Well, I'm just saying . . .”

“What, that we're friends? That's what you want to hear?” George said defensively.

“Maybe . . .” Three replied evasively, adjusting a few things on the controls of the ship.

“You know, Bob can handle all that stuff. You can look at me while you're saying this stuff,” George said, slumping back in his chair. Three looked at him.

“Yeah, fine, we're friends.”

“Okay, then. All I wanted to hear,” Three said cheerily. “Where to now, captain?”

END OF PART THREE

PART FOUR

The House and the Hostiles

George liked his new house. Well, maybe *house* wasn't the right word for it . . . but *mansion* didn't quite fit, either. It *was* a rather large house, but George considered himself a (comparatively) simple man.

George hadn't accepted the medal they had wanted to give him, but he *had* accepted the monetary award they had given him for some new living quarters. A rather *sizable* award . . .

George didn't particularly want a *big* house, per se, just one with a lot of cool stuff—hidden passageways, spinning fireplaces, secret trapdoors, concealed stairways, fake doors . . . that sort of thing. And he got them all. It took a little while, but the builders finally finished it, and George had a nice place on the city limits. A big place, granted, but a nice one.

Like I said, George liked his house.

Of course, that all changed when George came back to his house one day after a few hours of doing stuff in town and realized he wasn't alone . . .

* * * * *

George crunched through the snow on his front lawn. He wasn't particularly a winter person, but the snow was nice for a change, and he told himself that he ought to enjoy it while it lasted—the terraformers and global landscapers would finish getting rid of it in a few days.

George stepped up onto his front stoop and rummaged in his pocket for his keys. He unlocked the door, grasped the knob to open it, and stopped. Something was wrong.

George stood there for a few moments, trying to grasp why his intuition was suddenly twanging. He hesitated, his hand still holding the doorknob, while his mind screamed at him silently. It was a lot like a broken TV cranked up and blaring static straight at him, with bits and pieces of sound, snippets of audio that his brain couldn't interpret fast enough.

It was downright weird.

George turned the doorknob and opened the door. A man standing a foot inside the doorway blew George's head off with a high-caliber energy shotgun.

Well, okay, that *wasn't* what actually happened. After all, the title of this book is "George Never Dies" . . . except for that one part where George got blown apart by a flying energy-blob thingy in the alien mothership . . . but he wasn't really *dead* dead, because he came back in under a minute, which we blamed on the dark matter. And besides, being dead in general in this book is not really a definite state of affairs, seeing as the deceased is somewhat prone to sudden resurrection . . . saying that someone is "dead" doesn't really mean much, because they're quite possibly alive somewhere *else* altogether, only we don't know that because *where* they're alive isn't particularly relevant to this book. (Note to readers: Unlike in this book, in the *real* world, people tend to stay dead when they die, barring miracles. So please don't do anything stupid.)

Anyway, George didn't actually die. He just saw a complete stranger (whom he correctly perceived as being hostile) pointing a shotgun at his face and had his death flash before his eyes. It was kind of like when your life flashes before your eyes, only a whole lot shorter. But anyway,

The man didn't shoot George. George stood there, surprised, and didn't move. Staring down the wide barrel of a shotgun, he started asking somewhat dopey questions:

"Who are you?" The shotgun man didn't respond, staring down the barrel of his gun at George.

"How did you get inside my house?"

The shotgun man smirked and said, "Picked the lock. Wasn't very hard."

"Mm. Typical for a book."

"More like typical for a movie."

"True."

The shotgun man realized what he was doing and stopped talking. George noticed and slipped back into seriousness. "Who are you with?"

"That will be explained to you later. Please come with me," he said, stepping slowly backwards from the door. George didn't move. The man stopped.

They looked at each other. George noticed that the barrel of the man's shotgun was wavering slightly in the air, but still pointed very much at his face.

"Who are *you* with?" the shotgun man said quietly.

"I'm alone." This answer evidently didn't satisfy the shotgun man, and the shotgun started shaking more violently.

Taking a deep breath, George knocked the shotgun out of the man's hand with a Force-smack and drew his lightsaber, cleaving the man in two from the bottom up. He fell silently, dead before he hit the floor. George ducked behind some furniture, quickly surveying the room. He was alone.

George looked at the glowing purple blade humming in his hand with suppressed power. George heard a slight noise from the next room and turned his mind out into the house. He could feel a lot of people throughout the house, each one glowing like fireflies on the gray field of the Force.

Great, thought George. There's a bunch of crazy yahoos in my house for who knows *what* reason—the very fact that they're in here *in the first place* demands a good one—and I suppose I have to go room-to-room getting rid of them. Just great.

George cautiously leaned through the doorway, looking into the next room. Another goon with a shotgun stared back at him, and he ducked back into the lobby. He directed his mind at the goon's shotgun, which promptly sprang from his grasp and smacked him in the head, knocking him out cold. George peered through the doorway again, and the goon was sprawled out on the floor.

George shoved his deactivated saber back onto his belt and looked around the room, trying to remember where he'd had all his fancy tricks installed. He opened a closet and pulled out some boxes of stuff. Removing a shelf, he dug his fingernails into a crack in the wall behind the shelf. A wood panel came away in his hands, and he crawled in, dragging the boxes of stuff in after him. There was no light, so he crawled through the small concealed passageway in darkness, trusting to his instincts to guide him through the house that he hadn't really become familiar with yet. George suddenly heard a voice from a small intercom on the ceiling above him.

"We've studied the blueprints, George. Do you really think that we would come in here without being familiar with your place? Crawling through a closet like that is a

nice trick, but it doesn't work, George. We know where you are.”

George reached the other end of the passageway and pulled out another wood panel with his fingernails. There wasn't anything on the floor or bottom shelf of this closet, and he took out the shelf. Reaching up, he slowly turned the doorknob and opened the door a crack. He crouched, listening.

George flung the door open and rolled out into the next room, throwing his saber at another assailant in the process. The man was cut in two by the spinning blade, dropping yet another shotgun when he died. George stood up, and his saber spun back to his hand. He looked around the new room, again absent of any more than one person. I wonder where everybody is, thought George.

Across the house, another man sat in one of George's chairs, comfortably relaxing in a room relatively far away and safe from George . . . for the time being.

“Tell the men to switch to their stun guns. What use are shotguns if the men can't fire them, and he kills the men?” he said, chewing lazily on a cigar. A henchman barked into a walkie-talkie, and thugs across the house holstered their shotguns, drawing stun guns instead.

“George, why don't you come to the library, and we can discuss our terms without any more bloodshed. I'm sure we can work out something . . . satisfactory . . . for both of us.”

George heard the voice crackling again from the intercom. Well, at least *someone* is getting some use out of those things, he thought. Never really knew if *I* would ever use them . . .

He didn't go to the library, though. Instead, he headed for the security and surveillance room. He clawed up a square of carpet from the floor, and pulled open a revealed trapdoor. He dropped through.

Two goons opened up with their stun guns, but George deflected the fire with his saber and Force-smashed their heads together. They fell to the floor unconscious, and George took one of their stun guns, sticking it in his belt for later—it might come in

handy . . .

He walked to another door. Opening it, he froze.

Inside the security room sat a man who looked like bad news. He was sitting behind a desk, casually smoking a cigar. Several men stood behind him, aiming rifles at George, and several more were scattered around the room, pointing stun guns at George.

“So, George, tell me—can you take us all without a weapon?” the leader asked quietly. “Pull some Jedi magic on us, and kill a room full of armed men in the blink of an eye?”

“I don’t need to kill you. And I’ve got weapons.”

“Oh? And where are they?” the leader asked, a bemused expression on his face as he looked at George’s empty hands.

“You know how long it would take me to get my lightsaber in my hand?”

The leader squinted at George, sizing up his opponent. “A second.”

“Less,” George said.

“Ah,” said the leader. He made a dismissive gesture with his hand, and some men that George had missed behind him shot him in the back. He really couldn’t do anything but pass out and hope for the best, and he did. The world went black.

Interview with The Man

George finally woke up in a semi-helpless position. He was tied to a chair, his pistol, stun gun, and saber taken away, and facing the leader, who was flanked by a pair of goons armed with more stun guns.

“I was expecting a headache or something,” commented George, whose head felt surprisingly good.

“Of course. But I’m sorry I couldn’t oblige . . . you know, the stun guns are quite good these days—nothing at all like the old ones they had years ago.”

“And, you know, I could get out of this chair without too much trouble.”

“Yes, of course. But we must keep up appearances. And besides, if you left early, you would never find out what we wanted,” the leader said, puffing lazily on his cigar. George didn’t say anything. “But where are my manners? My name is . . . well, I won’t tell you what my name is. But you may call me The Bob. And I already know that you are George.”

George looked back at The Bob across the table that *his* security head should have been sitting behind. But who knows what they had done with him . . .

The Bob opened a drawer on the desk and took out George’s lightsaber. He turned it over in his hands, studying it carefully. “A most curious and powerful device. And how did you come by it?”

George didn’t answer, and The Bob continued. “But of course, everyone knows how you came by it—handed it by a dying Jedi, so the story goes . . . a martyr, some would say, they’ve probably named a church after him or something . . .”

“Who are you, and what do you want?” George interrupted impatiently.

“Ah, the question of the hour. And you didn’t fail to ask it.” The Bob looked coolly across the desk at George for a long moment, lost in thought. He put George’s lightsaber back in the drawer and slid it shut.

“You correctly deduced that there was far more than one person at work here when you first entered the building. We are, in fact, an organization, of sorts, and we have a few most interesting objectives. First, we are in the service of . . . “the” aliens, as

you would call them . . . *we* call them the Tolians, if you were wondering. You probably weren't.

“Second, we are, of course, advancing their—the Tolians’—agenda, as well as ours. And third, we do rather want to deal with you for reasons of our own . . . *religious* reasons, you might say . . . though that's not precisely true.

“As for the aliens, I must admit that you have made yourself rather a stench in their nostrils,” he said, narrowing his eyes at George. “They desire you personally, and your colleague Cher has, of course, been dealt with already . . .”

“What? What did you do with her?”

“Patience, my good friend . . . everything will be explained in good time . . .” The Bob leaned back slowly in his chair and took a long puff on his cigar. He looked at George thoughtfully.

“The Tolians requested that I personally torture you and deliver the visual record to them, along with your body. They gave me full liberty as to *how* to torture you to death, only requiring that, at the end, I chop off your head with a 700-year-old medieval ax with the blood of a witch still crusted on it.” The Bob narrowed his eyes at George, looking at him shrewdly. “Somewhat strange orders, I would say, but, of course, I do not question . . .

“And as for *our* reasons, well . . . we very simply want you dead. Well, alright, it *is* more complicated than that: First,” he said, counting nonchalantly on his fingers, “I believe that our galaxy is simply not the proper place for Jedi to be gallivanting about . . . they may play their silly games all they want in the books, but they have no proper place in the real world. They have too much power.

“Second,” he said, counting off another finger, “In the same way, anyone with the resources to destroy an entire Tolian mothership single-handedly—well, *almost* single-handedly, you *did* have a colleague—obviously wields too much power, not the right way. Now, if you had tried to take over the world, *that* would have been a worthy enterprise . . . but I would have had to kill you anyway. But to use The Power to save the human race . . . well, that's up for discussion, but personally, I think it's not all worth saving,” he said, a glint in his eye.

“Third, also in the same vein as the previous, you—quite simply—have too much

power. One man like you, with the power to subdue the nations, conquer the universe . . . well, is one person too much. Oh, but we're forgetting Cher again . . . pity, I suppose you want to know what happened to her . . .”

George angrily struggled against his bonds, but didn't use the Force yet. Not yet. “So what do you want me to do? Fight you or something? Claw and struggle for my freedom?”

“No,” said The Bob. “I want you to give up. I want you to give up and die, knowing that no one is here to help you, and the odds are stacked against you, and it is futile to die trying to regain your lost freedom, which, I think, you will never get back.

“Give up and die, fool.”

Pushed over the edge, George snapped. In the next moment, he did several things at once—he threw himself over in his chair, avoiding stun gun blasts and freeing himself from the ropes that bound him, he threw open the drawer in The Bob's desk and called his lightsaber to his hand, he forced the two henchmen to the ground, and grabbed The Bob around the neck in a vice of Force-energy, lifting him out of his chair, his feet dangling in the air. The stun guns and shotguns of the goons flew to land at George's feet. George panted from the exertion, surprised that he had actually been able to pull off doing so many Force-actions simultaneously.

“See, that seems to be an ongoing trouble in literature these days. Let's hear *my* list now: First, the bad guys always underestimate the Jedi. Second, the bad guys always spill their evil plans. And third, you've just threatened my friend *and* me. Offhand, I'd call all those big mistakes.” George glared at The Bob, close to letting go and releasing his bottled-up rage. The Bob's eyes bulged as he made small, wheezing gasps, trying to force air into his lungs. His eyes glazed over, and he started to black out.

George swiftly flicked his saber blade through his torso, neatly severing The Bob into two pieces. It was clean, and there was no blood, naturally—George knew that lightsabers cauterized the blood vessels instantly. No surprise there.

George went to the desk and retrieved a stun gun and his pistol. Throwing a look at the now-weaponless thugs crouching on the floor, George walked out of the room.

Cutting through a few goons on the way, George left the house. Walking down

the street, he killed his saber and stowed it back on his belt. I'm out of here, he thought as he quickly walked away.

Followed and On the Run

George walked quickly down a street, glancing left and right nervously, on the lookout for danger. Striding down the sidewalk, George appeared almost oblivious to the passerby he passed, but was anything but that. He reached into a pocket, pulled out his cell phone, and dialed a number. It rang, and he waited.

Two rings.

Three rings. "Come on," muttered George impatiently. "Pick it up . . ."

Four rings. "Hi, this is Cher. If you've got a message, leave it after the beep, and I'll probably get back to you." *Beeeeeep.*

George hung up, disgusted. Well, that told me a lot, George thought as he continued walking. Alive or dead—that's the question, isn't it . . .

George eventually arrived at Cher's house. She didn't have as big a place, but George suspected she probably had a Jedi training room or three out back—something like that. He rang the doorbell.

Waiting, George casually looked at his face in a window in the door. He saw a reflection of a car pull up behind him, and heard a door opening. Acting as if lost in thought, George saw a man get out of the car and slowly aim a gun at him.

George's saber was in his hand before he even finished turning. Hurling it at the man with the gun, it spun tightly through the air and sliced through the man's arm. A single gunshot sliced through the air in a wildly off-target shot. The car tires screeched as the driver stomped on the gas.

The wheels spinning for a split second, the shooter lunged for the rear bumper and missed, falling flat on his face as the car accelerated away.

George registered this, and the world slowed down around him as he concentrated his will into the Force. He lunged off the porch and sprinted for the fleeing car. He could hear his heartbeats loud and slow in his ears as the distance shrank. He jumped on the back bumper, his hands scrabbling for a handhold.

George had a very difficult time staying onboard, what with the g-forces and all,

and the fact that the driver was swerving, trying to dislodge his unwanted passenger. George tapped the Force into the trunk, knocking a series of small dents into the metal. That would have to do for finger holds.

The driver headed out onto the highway. Clipping along a good ten or twenty miles per hour over the speed limit, the driver put one hand on the wheel while he rummaged in the glove compartment. George could tell that this wouldn't be good.

The man brought his hand out with a pistol. He started pumping bullets through the rear windshield, shattering it in his attempt to kill George. George ducked low to avoid the wild shots, but one of his hands got sliced. The gunfire continued, and George decided that he had to get *inside* the car.

He concentrated again, and time slowed around him. He could see the median flowing past sluggishly, and the bullets jumping from the driver's gun crawled reluctantly towards him. He slapped at the man's gun, and it jumped out of his hand, falling on the passenger's-side floor. George flipped his feet up over his head and hurled himself into the back seat. Letting go, the world returned to normal speed with a bang.

"Keep driving," George said as his saber's blade hung an inch from the driver's right cheek. "Don't stop."

The driver frowned angrily. "Very impressive, George," he spat back at his passenger. "Now where should I take you?"

"Wherever you were going anyway. Well, actually, let me rephrase that: Take me to your leader."

"But you have killed him, you must remember."

"What, you haven't had a new guy take over yet?"

"But of course. I will take you to him."

"Great."

* * * * *

The vehicle finally pulled to a stop in front of a large, shady-looking manor. The whole thing rather looked constructed to intimidate and repel unwanted visitors . . . and to

terrify those unfortunate enough to be taken inside. “Get out,” George told the driver. “Slowly.”

He got out, and George climbed out slowly, keeping his saber handy. He glanced once at the shattered rear window and turned his attention back to the mansion.

“Show me where I’m supposed to go in,” George said.

“We’ll go in through the garage.”

“Fine. Open it up.”

The goon walked to a keypad in a corner outside the garage and punched in a series of numbers. He kept his finger on the last one and punched in another three with his left hand. He looked back at George for a moment, and released the button. The door opened.

George suspected a trap, but the garage door opened rather faster than he was expecting. To make matters worse, a dozen men just inside the garage opened up on him with stun guns, and he didn’t quite manage to avoid the hail of angry blue lasers they poured in his direction.

A blue beam punched through his shirt and struck George smack in the chest, and a second one grazed his head. He fell slowly downward into a huge pool of blackness, and the stars swirled before his eyes for only a second before he lost consciousness.

Captured Again

George eventually came to, and wasn't surprised to find himself securely fastened to a chair. Only this time, he had a pounding headache.

"I thought those stun guns weren't supposed to cause headaches," George complained to a new man sitting in front of him, not surprisingly behind a semi-large, wooden desk.

"Oh, the guns don't cause the headache, *we* caused the headache," replied the man behind the desk with a thin, barely-perceptible smile. He was a tall and thin man, and when he talked, a slight facial tic twitched near his nose. George had to admit that he wasn't intimidated by his rather strange-seeming foe.

"So, am I the only one you're after now?" George asked, trying to ignore his aching head.

"Oh, yes . . . pretty much just you now," the man said, looking over George slowly. "And yet, one never knows . . . who might become a problem . . ." he murmured softly.

"So, you're the one in charge of this operation now?"

"I'm afraid so . . . though I didn't really want the job. You can probably understand why—dealing with *you* is going to be a challenge." His facial twitch continued on almost every other word, and George wasn't sure whether to laugh at or be afraid of the guy. "I considered myself better at being the second-in-command, but what can I say?"

They sat in silence, surveying each other quietly for a long moment. "I don't believe we've been introduced? My name is Harold," the leader said.

"What? Not . . . Vladimir, or Gustav, or something?" George said.

Harold smiled slightly. "No, I'm afraid I'm not from that part of the world . . . you'll find no Russian or German blood in me."

"That's a change."

"You know, if I were you, I'd stop making these wisecracks, George," Harold said, narrowing his eyes. "You *are* my prisoner, and I'm afraid I can do pretty much

anything I want with you now, really . . . inside certain limitations . . .”

“Except if I escape, which I’m sure you know I’m quite capable of doing . . .”

“Actually, George, for once . . . you’re wrong.” Harold leaned back in his chair, a small smile flitting across his face. “As you no doubt know, we’ve taken away your little weapons.”

“Here we go again, forgetting all about the Force . . . oh, oops, I suppose I’m not supposed to mention that? Then you’ll restrain me better, somehow?” George said sarcastically.

“Actually, George, I’m afraid the joke’s on *you* this time. If you were wondering about that headache you have . . . well, I suppose it’s obvious, now . . .”

George frowned, having a sudden thought. He tried to dip into the Force, concentrating on a pen on Harold’s desk. It didn’t move.

“Crap,” said George.

“Oh, indeed. You can’t use the Force. Nice little effect of the headache, that . . .”

George looked at Harold, the beginnings of genuine fear creeping into his mind. This was bad. *Very* bad . . .

“So you see, George, you’re now entirely at my mercy,” Harold said, leaning forward and cracking his knuckles gleefully, a smile spreading slowly across his face. “And don’t think I won’t make you suffer . . .” He snapped his fingers, and the two henchmen on either side of him drew disruptors from their leg holsters.

“A rather fine gift from our alien benefactors,” Harold said quietly. “And, with the power turned down, you’ll find that they’re somewhat less than lethal . . .” The four henchmen focused the beams of their disruptors on George, and George winced in pain.

A welt rose on his skin where the beams converged, and that wasn’t even the worst of it—George felt his legs going funny. The muscles started to twitch, spasming involuntarily as he watched. His face muscles twitched, and his eyes started rolling around randomly in his head. The whole effect was nauseous, and George couldn’t control any of it. It hurt.

George screamed, and Harold’s eyes suddenly jumped up. He jerked his hand at the henchmen, and they abruptly stopped. George twitched and moaned as Harold narrowed his eyes suspiciously at the garage door. No one moved for a long moment.

And then the door snapped up.

Three stood in the doorway, pouring gouts of laser-fire into the garage. The four henchmen went down in a matter of seconds, and Harold slammed his hand down on a button on his desk. Guards started pouring in through another door.

George, mostly just relieved that he now had control of his eyeballs back, watched as Three hosed them all down, lasers springing from his hands at lightning speed. Pretty soon, everyone in the room except George was dead. Three stopped firing, his fingers hissing and smoking with heat.

“Um, nice to see you, Three.”

Three walked over to George and looked him over. A small knife sprung out of his wrist, and he cut George free. George rose shakily, and leaned against Three for a moment.

“I have to admit, that was pretty good timing there. Thanks, Three.”

“I do what I can. Let’s blow this joint.”

Free Again

George and Three hurried to their waiting ship. “You really had this planned out, didn’t you?” remarked George.

“You think I would do anything without a plan?”

“Well, there was that whole thing about joining me in the first place . . . seemed rather spur-of-the-moment . . .” They ran up the ramp and stopped as Three slapped a control. The ramp closed behind them.

“You really think I didn’t have a reason for that?” Three said, disbelievingly.

“Well, not that you’d *tell* me, anyway . . .” George grinned.

“So anyway, where are you going now, George?”

“Hmm . . . well, I have to get all those guys off my tail . . . and just running around until they catch me again won’t help anything . . . I dunno . . .”

Three looked at him for a moment. “What do they want, anyway?”

“Well, me, pretty much . . . they’re mad at me for destroying the alien mothership, mostly . . .”

“But Cher did that, too, didn’t she?”

“Yeah, but they said they’d dealt with her . . .”

“*Said* being the important word. Didn’t you check?”

“Well, yeah—I called her, knocked on her front door, even. No answer either time.”

Three almost rolled his eyes. “That doesn’t mean she isn’t home . . .”

George frowned, then understood. “She just might not be answering calls . . . hiding . . .”

“Exactly.”

* * * * *

A short ride later, George hopped out of the ship and walked to Cher’s porch. He rang the doorbell, and nervously looked at his reflection again. Hopefully the *déjà vu* would hold off long enough for George to finish his errand . . .

George rang the doorbell again. No response seemed forthcoming, so he

unlocked the door with a twitch of the Force. He opened the door and stepped inside.

Closing the door behind him, George looked around. It looked like a nice place to live in, but the object of his visit was still to be found. He took a few steps into the room and said,

“Cher, are you around here somewhere? It’s George . . . I need to talk to you.”

Silence. George went into the next room. He ambled through the kitchen, the dining room, the living room, and so on, winding his way through the house. Still nobody home. George didn’t like it, but he wasn’t getting a sense of danger or anything, so he kept going.

“Cher, where are you? I know you’re in here somewhere . . .” George realized, on second thought, that he *didn’t* actually *know* she was home—technically, he was sort of guessing. Oh well.

He finally got to a bedroom, but the door was closed. He knocked, not really expecting a response. He didn’t get one. Opening the door, he found Cher sprawled out on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

“I thought I heard you,” she said faintly.

“Um, is something wrong?”

She made no effort to sit up, just moving her eyes to look at George. “It hurts.”

George frowned. “What? What hurts?” He looked at Cher more closely, and noticed cuts on her forehead.

“They tortured me.”

“Who? The alien people?”

“The ones who want us dead.” She tried to sit up.

“You want some help?”

“Please. Get me to that chair?”

“Sure.” George hauled her to her feet and steered her towards a chair. She collapsed into it heavily.

“They said you had been taken care of,” George said.

“Same here,” Cher replied. “Said they’d already . . . got you.”

“Mm. Three got me out before they could torture me much.”

Cher focused her eyes on him, a bit hazily. “Who’s Three?”

“A friend. He’s got a knack for showing up at the right time.”

“Uggh. Wish I had one of those.” She felt her forehead weakly with one hand.

“So . . . uh . . . how long . . . did they torture you?” George asked awkwardly.

Cher looked at him, thinking.

“Hours? Maybe a day . . .”

George winced. “I suppose they told *you* that *I* was dead and told *me you* were dead . . . to make us crack or something?”

“I guess.”

“So, why’d they let you go?”

“No idea. Maybe . . . they gave up. Hopefully.”

George looked at Cher worriedly, trying to think. “So how do we get rid of them? I already killed *one* of their leaders, but they just got a new one.”

Cher frowned, opened her mouth to say something, then stopped. “I keep forgetting . . . you’re not a Jedi.”

“Well . . . not exactly, no. Why?”

“You kill people.”

“Well, Jedi do, too, don’t they?”

“Well . . . yeah, but . . . not as many.”

“Um . . . I don’t suppose it would do anything if we sabotaged the rest of the motherships? You know, to get rid of those guys’ reasons to go after us? I mean, if they’re trying to catch us to satisfy their masters . . . or whatever, the aliens, I mean . . .”

“Worth a try,” Cher said, and managed to stand up. “You have a ship waiting?”

George realized his mouth was hanging open, and hurriedly shut it. “You mean you want to go? *Now?*”

Cher took a few unsteady steps towards the door before replying. “Might as well start right away . . . as soon as I can, I mean . . .”

George thought for a moment. “I’ve got a ship out front. You really want to do this?”

Cher grimaced. “Kind of have to, don’t we?”

“You don’t seriously think you’re up to it *now*, do you?”

“No . . . give me a day or two, okay?”

“Well . . . if you say so . . .” George helped Cher out to the ship, and they went up to the cockpit. Three glanced at Cher and looked like he wanted to say something, but didn’t.

“We should beat it out of here before someone shows up,” he said.

“Can we find someplace to park the ship for a few days where no one can find us?” asked George skeptically.

“Yeah, probably. Out near one of those stars, maybe—the ones that keep us bottled up in this solar system?”

“How would that keep people from finding us?”

“The interference from the stars and the black hole could shield us somewhat from detection.”

“Do it,” Cher said.

Down Time

“Come in,” Cher said. The door hissed open, and she let her robe fall back over the scars on her upper arm. George came in.

“How are you doing? Getting plenty of sleep in here?”

Cher grinned a little. “Sort of.”

“It’s been something like twelve hours since you passed out in here. You fell asleep almost before you hit the bed.”

“Mm. I feel a lot better now,” she replied, looking at the back of her hand. More scratches and scars crisscrossed the skin there.

“What did they do to you, anyway, that you’ve got scratches all over?”

“Ah, I dunno . . . probably thought I’d be more susceptible to physical pain . . . being a woman and all . . .”

Cher looked up, and it was silent for a minute or two. Finally, George said,

“I don’t suppose you still have your lightsaber?”

Cher checked her belt. “No, guess they never gave it back . . . rats.” She looked at the wall for a moment, lost in thought. “I suppose I could cobble together a new one from some parts . . . but I’d need to get them in the first place, we’d need to go back down to the planet . . .”

“Hmm. I suppose you could have mine,” George offered, tossing the pommel to her. She caught it and turned it over in her hands, studying it.

“It was Rolff’s originally, wasn’t it . . .” she said. “But I can’t take it, then *you* wouldn’t have one . . . and you’re not really even a real Jedi . . .”

“Oh, thanks,” George replied.

“No, that’s not the way I meant it. Sorry, I just meant that you haven’t had the training, and you can’t build a new one if something happened to yours . . .” She looked back at George for a moment. “If only we had thought to grab Rolff’s when he died on the mothership . . .”

“Mm. Then we wouldn’t have had this problem, I suppose.”

“Right.”

Three chose this moment to show up. “I don’t suppose this would be of any use

to you two?” he asked casually, and tossed Cher another saber, identical to the one she already held.

“This is kind of weird, holding two of Rolff’s sabers at once . . .” she said quietly. “They’re the same exact thing, and he didn’t even wield two . . . heck, I can hardly remember anyone who did . . . but where’d you get this?” she asked Three suspiciously.

“Got it from a friend of a friend. He must have picked it up somehow when the mothership blew up.”

George looked doubtful. “That’s a pretty slim chance . . . he would have had to have been in just the right place and time—not to mention he’d have missed the trip through the portal, because we were the last ones through . . . and how the heck would he get past the black hole and stars and stuff that keeps us isolated?”

“They said that the *motherships* couldn’t get to us—that doesn’t mean a *small* ship couldn’t sneak through somehow.”

“Then why hasn’t anyone gone out or come in in the—what, year?—since we’ve been here?”

“Why would anyone *want* to leave? It would be suicide, with the aliens sitting out there over a hundred conquered worlds. And if anyone managed to escape the aliens, they’d still have to figure out *where* we are . . . I mean, it’s doable, but it would take a while . . .”

“Aren’t you pretty much disproving your own story?” interjected Cher incredulously. “You said someone gave you this,” she said, waving the saber, “and they’d *have* to have come in after everybody else. Unless they were, like, invisible or something . . .”

Cher and George both looked at Three suspiciously.

“Hey, I’m not saying any more. Everybody’s got to have secrets, you know.”

“Yeah, but *you* have a lot more secrets than anybody else I know,” George objected.

“Hey, whatever happened to Dean and Matchlock?” Cher said suddenly.

“Talk about sudden topic changes,” George muttered. “How would I know? I don’t even know who those guys are!”

“Oh, that’s right,” said Cher, distantly. “You know, taking out those five motherships would be a lot easier if we had another Jedi or two . . . but I never liked Dean anyway . . . of course, he liked me, but that was only because I was the female . . . he didn’t really care what species, either . . .”

“Um . . . okay,” said George.

“Right,” said Three.

Cher looked up, blushing a little. “Well, hey, ‘tell it like it is,’ right?”

George finally interrupted the awkward silence. “So Cher, are you ready to travel?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Okay. Let’s get going, then.”

Solar System Escape and Battle Plans

“So, how are we going to get out of the system?” George asked Three.

“Well, that’s the whole thing with the stars that makes this place so hard to get to. Their gravity fields overlap quite a bit, so, for anything to get through, it has to walk an extremely thin wire—it’s a lot like a tightrope, because, if you lean too far to either side, you fall off. Except for the fact that what *we’re* doing is a lot more sensitive to failure. On a tightrope, when you lean a bit to one side, you don’t get your body ripped apart by tidal forces and sucked into a pair of suns. Or a sun and a black hole.”

“That’s encouraging,” commented Cher.

“Plus, the tightrope *we’re* walking on has a ton of little twists and turns and bends all over, so we won’t be able to just line up the ship and stomp on the gas.”

“Great,” said George.

“So, basically, it’s going to be really dangerous, but we think that Bob and I will be able to handle it.”

“All that stuff and you think you’ll be able to handle it?” George said incredulously.

“Well . . . yeah, basically.”

“And how long will it take you two to work out a course?”

“Another hour or two . . . we’ve already got most of it plotted out already. We were working pretty much non-stop the last twelve hours while Cher was sleeping.”

“Makes us look kind of lazy, doesn’t it?” George commented to Cher.

“So . . . um . . . is there anything you guys need us for, or can we leave you here and go in the back and . . . um, make our own plans . . . for the mothership invasion?”

“Uh . . . sure,” said Three. “As long as I don’t have to come back there and check on you two . . .”

“What?” George asked. “Hey, we *do* need to make plans. Cher and I are the ones doing the actual invading, you know . . .”

“Okay, fine. Go back there in the bedroom and make your ‘plans.’ I’m fine with that.”

“Hey, I never said bedroom!” George objected. “There’s more than two rooms back there, you know.”

“Yeah, fine. Whatever. Fine by me,” Three replied, turning back to Bob.

“Come on,” George said to Cher. He got up and headed back through the ship.

“So, which room are we planning in?” Cher asked.

“One of the bedrooms. Hey, *I’m* not about to sweat in the engine room just because Three cracks a joke at me.” George looked back at Cher, who was stifling a laugh. “Hey, don’t *you* start this, too!”

“Yeah, okay, fine.” They went into the bedroom and Cher sat down on the bed. George sat in the chair. “So, what are we planning?”

“Well, we’ve basically got to disable five alien motherships in something like . . . I don’t know, do we *have* a time limit?”

“Mm . . . good question. Not really. I guess we just have to do it before we get tired and sloppy and someone dies.”

“Of course.”

“Which leads us to the question of how to speed up our mothership-disabling operation,” Cher said thoughtfully. “Last time, we sabotaged the cloning machinery, reactor, and then pushed the self-destruct button.”

“It’s pretty much a no-brainer to eliminate the cloning stuff, because that took us, like, 80% of the time last time. The reactor and self-destruct button we could disable in minutes, and it doesn’t take *too* long to get to the central elevator in the first place.”

“Assuming one of us doesn’t get blown up again by a zooming energy-blob thing,” Cher said, looking at George. “And let me guess, now you’re going to say that one of us is going to die?”

“Well . . . not exactly. I mean, yeah, the author’s got, like, a penchant for offing people, but that doesn’t necessarily mean he’s predictable.”

“True.”

“Plus, think about it: What’s the title of this book?”

“ ‘George Never Dies.’ ”

“Exactly. So—excluding the energy-blob incident last time—who does that leave as likely to die?”

Cher frowned. “But you’re forgetting the constant variable. With all the dark matter and stuff, almost *anything* can happen in this book.”

“*Almost*, yes. But you have to admit it—who’s more likely to bite the dust, keeping in mind the title of the book we’re in? You or me?”

Cher frowned again. “I am.”

“Right.”

“Oh, great way to boost confidence there, George. Is telling me ‘you’re going to die on this mission’ supposed to strengthen morale?”

“Well . . . no, I guess not . . .”

“Then can we just forget this whole death thing?”

“Yeah. I suppose.”

Cher and George sat in silence for a long moment.

“Same as last time?” Cher asked suddenly.

“What?”

“The same policy as last time—well, pretty much the same—one of us dies, the other gets his/her stuff?”

“Oh. Yeah. Sure.”

“So anyway, what were we talking about before?” Cher asked.

“Um . . . how to reduce the time it takes us to sabotage the motherships.”

“Oh. Right. Well, the problem with not destroying the cloning tubes, though, is that one of them might survive.”

“Obviously.”

“Which means that, if a single cylinder survives, the alien species won’t be wiped out when we destroy the motherships. At least one clone will survive if we don’t destroy the cloning cylinders.”

“Oh. Rats.”

Cher thought silently for a moment. “But, then again, if we destroy the motherships, who really cares if one or two clones survive? It’s not like they’d be able to invade another planet or anything without ships . . . and we’re pretty sure the only ships they’ve got are the motherships . . .”

“You’ve got a point there . . . um, question, though.”

“Shoot.”

“Well, what are the actual chances that one of the cylinders survives? I mean, if it’s just floating in space, when it opens, the alien will, like, instantly die from the vacuum. And if the cylinder gets pulled into the gravitational field of a planet, it’ll probably burn up in the atmosphere, depending on what the cylinders are actually made of . . .”

“Mm. Not to mention, it would have to survive impact at ground level without a parachute or a shield or anything . . . at least, that we know of . . . you don’t suppose the aliens could have built in some safety feature like an early ejector seat or something, do you?”

George considered. “Well, I suppose it’s possible, but it didn’t look like there was much space for something like that. I mean, most of the cylinder is just a hollow container with an alien inside. There’s a little gear on the top and bottom of the tube, but would the aliens think they really *needed* life-saving equipment? I mean, if the mothership is destroyed, they’re pretty much screwed . . .”

“ . . . Yeah, because, to build a *new* mothership, the survivors would need, like, technology out the wazoo. To *develop* the technology would take something like . . . I don’t know, millennia? Starting from scratch, to build up to the former tech level?”

“Mm. Yeah, probably. And by then, someone easily could have come along and snuffed them . . . like, dropped an orbital nuke on the planet or something, so they wouldn’t have to hunt them down one-by-one in hand-to-hand combat—if they did *that*, the aliens would probably win, what with all their fancy guns and such . . .”

Cher flopped back on the bed, tired of thinking. “So, now we’ve decided that we can just ignore the cloning chambers, right?”

“Um . . . yeah. I guess.”

“Good. But I suppose we might as well still turn off the reactor, just to slow down the aliens?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“So, we’re ready to do this?”

“Yeah, just as soon as Three and Bob get us out of the solar system.”

There was a long pause. Cher was glad that all that thinking was out of the way, and George was inclined to agree. Finally, George asked,

“You want the red space suit?”

Cher looked at him lazily. “The what?”

“The red space suit. I thought you wanted it last time.”

“Oh, that.” Cher laughed. “Yeah, sure, whatever. Now that Rolff isn’t around, I guess I might as well.”

George grinned. “So you’re not going to break down on me again? You’re okay with Rolff and all?”

Cher sat up, frowning. “Gee, *you* sound real sympathetic.”

“Well, I mean . . . I’m just saying . . .”

“Yeah, I’m okay. I suppose there’re more important things to worry about now than somebody who’s already dead . . . namely, one of *us* dying . . .”

“Yeah,” said George.

“Go Time” Again

“So, how are we doing up here?” George asked as he entered the cockpit.

“We’re just about through. Hope the maneuvers didn’t distract you two back there,” Three said casually.

“Oh, shut up already,” George said grumpily. “Besides, why do *you* care so much?”

“Well, seeing as you’re the only two humans on the ship . . . and opposite genders . . . it’s only natural, isn’t it?”

“Three, shut up,” Cher said, flopping down in the second chair. “Nothing’s going on, except the mission. Now can you focus your brain on *that* for a change?”

Three turned back to the controls, shaking his head resignedly. “Yeah, well, like I said—we’re almost out. Another couple minutes and we’ll be through.”

Silence blanketed the cockpit, except for the occasional audio cues from Bob in regard to maneuvers. Cher looked at her fingernails. George was casually glancing around the cockpit, whistling a random tune. Three was looking at George and Cher.

“So, you guys have got it all planned out now?”

“Yeah, we’ve got it,” Cher replied, still studying her fingernails intently. “Run in, run out, and get on to the next four . . .”

“Which reminds me,” George said, stopping whistling and looking back at Three, “We’ll need you and Bob to do the flying. You know, keep the ship intact so we don’t accidentally blow ourselves up or something . . .”

“Yeah, sure. How long is it going to take you to disable a ship?”

George glanced at Cher, and she shrugged. “Twenty minutes? I dunno . . . you should probably assume a half hour or something . . . depending on how many aliens we run into . . .”

The conversation stopped as Bob said, “We’ll be through in a couple seconds. I’m putting it up on the viewscreen.” An image from the forward hull cameras appeared, a swirling miasma of plasma and electrical discharges manifesting itself on a viewscreen. It looks kind of cool, George thought to himself.

As they watched, the hazy clouds of electricity faded from view, and space

resumed its normal black color. They had made it through.

“Well, it looks like you did a good job,” Cher commented.

“Good enough.”

“So, any idea where the motherships are?” asked George. There was no sign of them on the viewscreen.

“Well, it would make sense if they were hanging around somewhere around here, I guess . . .” Three said, working the sensors quickly. “I mean, here is the only place they haven’t conquered yet, so I suppose they’re trying to find a way through the stuff we just came through . . .”

“I think I found them, guys,” said Bob quietly. The image on the viewscreen changed, and they were looking at a mothership slowly coming over the curve of a nearby planet. Spread out behind it followed the other four.

George blew out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. “Well, here we go. Get us over to the first one before they can blow us out of the sky with one of their annihilating laser thingies.” Even as he spoke, George saw a flash on the hull of the first ship, and a brilliant green beam of destructive energy raced towards them at lightning speed. Bob pulled the ship over in a hard turn just in time to avoid it.

“They’re shooting at long range, trying to knock us out before we can do any damage,” Three observed. “I’d bet good money that they’ve scanned us already and know the two guys who destroyed one of their ships last time are onboard.” Three looked back at George and Cher. “Or something like that. We just know they’re shooting at us, we don’t really *need* to know why . . .”

Another salvo of green energy beams jumped off the first mothership, burning out towards their little craft. Bob managed to dodge most of them, but one took a glancing hit. George had closed his eyes before it hit, convinced they were all going to die, but there was no explosion. George opened his eyes.

“What was that? Did we take any damage?” George asked, confused.

“I guess it bounced off,” Cher observed, pointing to a rapidly disappearing speck of green light on a monitor.

“That was one of our modifications at work,” Three said casually. “Bob and I

threw in a few gadgets while we were waiting before we went into the star field. That was a perfect demonstration of a reflective deception at work.”

“A *what?*” asked George.

“A reflective deception. It works like a mirror, but it isn’t actually there—kind of like a hologram or something, but it tricks the energy beam into being reflected away from the hull. Probably prevented us from taking some major damage.”

“Awesome,” said George, watching Bob putting the ship through some more evasive maneuvers. “And I suppose it makes it even easier for us to stay alive because our ship is so small?”

“Exactly. The aliens probably never expected to be attacked by a small craft. An assault by capital ships seemed much more likely to them when they built their weaponry.”

“Like the Death Star,” Cher said quietly.

“What?” asked George.

“Well, haven’t *you* seen the movies? ‘Star Wars?’ Grand Moff Tarkin and everybody else never expected the Death Star to be attacked by small fighter craft, so the onboard defense emplacements weren’t made to track them. They had to rely on the TIE Fighters, and they lost because the TIE Fighters couldn’t keep Luke from dumping a proton torpedo into the exhaust vent.”

“Oh,” said George. “Yeah, I remember that.”

“Anyway, Bob, can you get us over onto the hull of that first mothership?” Cher asked, pointing at the ship in the lead.

“Yeah, sure. Everybody strap in,” Bob said. Everyone looked at each other and snorted. They were all strapped in already anyway, what with the maneuvering to avoid the green energy beams.

Bob punched the engines, and the little ship sprang forward, green pulses of light bouncing off the hull. In no time at all, Bob had stomped on the brakes and landed on the first ship.

“Oh, um, Bob—could you get us in a little farther next time? So we don’t have to deal with the floating-energy-blob thingies?” Cher said.

“Sure thing. Would another forty feet do it?”

“Yeah, that sounds good.” The ship rose a few feet off the mothership hull and slid in forty feet towards the center of the ship.

“Thanks, Bob,” George said as Cher and he exited the cockpit.

“Your wish is my command,” Bob said amiably. “Literally, you know . . .”

George and Cher headed to the airlock and pulled on some space suits. They hopped out the landing ramp and tested their lightsabers for a moment.

“Never really thought that I’d be using a saber out in vacuum,” Cher commented over the suit intercom. She got down on her knees and cut a big circle in the hull of the mothership.

“This feels sort of familiar, doesn’t it?” George commented.

“Yeah, except this time, we don’t have any zooming energy blobs to contend with,” Cher said. “Not that that’s a loss . . .”

“No, definitely not,” George agreed. Cher shut off her saber and stood up. She looked down at the circle of cut metal in front of them.

“I have a bad feeling about this.”

“Oh, come on—we’re not in a Star Wars movie or anything. And besides, we’ve done this before, how much harder can it be?” George said.

“Well, considering that it was something like a year ago that we did it . . .”

“Stop worrying. I’m sure we’ll do fine.”

“Knock on wood,” Cher muttered sullenly. “You go first.”

“Okay, fine. If you insist,” George grumbled, and jumped on the circle of weakened metal.

Mothership Sabotaging

George fell through the hole and dropped to the deck, rolling to avoid the bursts of disruptor fire that clawed at the air where he had been an instant before. He jumped back onto his feet and flicked on his saber as he knocked over the aliens with the Force. He yanked their weapons out of their hands and ran them through with his saber. Looking out the hole in the ceiling, he motioned for Cher to join him.

Cher landed beside him and looked at the dead bodies. “Not taking any chances, are we?” she commented wryly.

“Well, what did you want me to do? Take away their guns and let them come at me again? They’ve probably got poison claws or something anyway . . .”

“. . . And besides, they’d probably puncture our spacesuits,” Cher said musingly. “You know, I just thought of something . . .”

“What?”

“Well, I never thought about it, but the same thing happened last time, didn’t it? We come in here, chop up some aliens, and it’s all fine and good. No big deal. But think about it—why aren’t they dead already?” Cher finished, gesturing up at the hole in the ceiling. Stars were visible through it.

“What? Oh . . . yeah . . .” George said, understanding. “Why aren’t they dead from the vacuum already, is what you’re saying?”

“Exactly.”

Cher and George looked at each other for a moment, thinking. Their lightsaber pommels hummed under their hands, but they couldn’t hear them hum in the vacuum.

“Dark matter?” said George.

“I was going to say,” agreed Cher. “Man, there’s a *lot* of stuff in this book we can’t explain, isn’t there?”

“Oh yeah,” agreed George. “But anyway, I suppose we should get going?” he said, nodding down the curving corridor they were standing in.

“Okay. Let’s go.” They walked down the curving passageway, until they suddenly came up against a wall with a door in it.

“Um, George?” I don’t remember any walls in these corridors last time . . .” Cher

said nervously.

“Well, it makes sense to *me*. I mean, if the horizontal elevator things run from the center to the edges—well, *almost* to the edges—then it makes sense that there’re doors in the side of the elevator cars, too. The elevator *we* found last time, we entered from the outside—sort of the opposite end of the radius from the center. You know what I’m saying?”

Cher frowned, trying to visualize it. “Yeah, I guess . . .”

“But now, since we *aren’t* in the outermost corridor with an elevator door, the door has to be on the *side* of the car . . . unless the aliens can defy the laws of physics or something.”

“Oookay . . .” said Cher slowly. “I think I get it . . .” George pushed a button on the door and waited for the car to arrive. “But how come the door didn’t open on the side last time, when we had to stop in the corridors partway to the center room?”

“It didn’t?” George said, frowning. He tried to remember. “Just must have been sloppy writing by the author.”

“Mm. Either that, or defying the laws of physics,” Cher replied.

“Or the dark matter,” George and Cher said in unison.

“Almost forgot about it for a moment there,” George said.

“Yeah. How can we forget?”

The elevator stopped. “Oh, shoot,” said George. “Forgot to hold down the button.” The door opened and they sprang out, dealing instant death to the aliens unfortunate enough to be waiting for the elevator. They got back in and George pushed his thumb down on the KEEP DOORS SHUT button.

“I just thought of another thing, too,” Cher said suddenly. “If the doors open on the outside—because that’s how we got in in the first place—*and* on the *inside*, because that’s how we got into the center room, *and* on the sides, then how can they put the controls on only one wall of the car? I mean, on a normal Earth elevator, the controls don’t move, but *here*, they’d have to be mounted on a door that opens. And we haven’t had the controls out-of-reach when the door opens yet.”

George frowned, trying to figure out what Cher was saying. “I’m kind of thinking

our readers aren't appreciating all these difficult visualizations that they keep having to make."

"Well, I bet they don't like all the big words we're using, either . . ." Cher said, grinning slightly.

"True," agreed George. "Oh well. I guess we can blame all the weird qualities of the elevator on the dark matter . . . or sloppy writing, more likely. Does he even *try* to make all this stuff logical?"

"Who?"

"The author, who else? I mean, all this stuff about people dying, but not really, because they come back . . . and the aliens not dying from the vacuum . . . and the wacko elevator that defies the laws of physics . . . there's a lot of stuff in here that doesn't make sense."

Cher considered. "That's true. Someone should beat some sense into the author."

"Hmm . . . I wonder if we're allowed to say that," George wondered.

"Insulting the author of the book we're in?"

"Exactly." Their conversation was interrupted by a tone signaling the arrival of the elevator at their destination. George kept his finger on the button. "Are we at the right *vertical* level?" he asked Cher.

"Well . . . what level are we at?"

George looked at the controls. "L."

"Hmm . . . wasn't P the level with the reactor? I think the bridge was on L . . ."

"I don't remember. It was an entire year ago, you know. And we kind of had more important things on our minds at the time."

"True. Okay, let's go down to P first. We should take out the reactor first, I guess."

"Any particular reason why?" George asked mildly as he pushed a button.

"Not really. Whatever."

The elevator arrived, and George took his thumb off the KEEP DOORS SHUT button. The door opened, and they were face-to-face with another horde of aliens.

"Oh, joy," Cher had time to say before they jumped out of the elevator and started chopping up the enemies.

They flew around the room like an angry tornado, a pair of angry ravaging winds conjured by the Force which they were now mostly controlled by. Enemies fell before them like leaves from a tree fall during a strong wind. Less than a minute later, all the aliens were dead.

“Tighter security than last time, isn’t it?” observed George, breathing heavily. “Last time, there were only four guys in the room.”

“Well, I suppose they don’t want to lose another mothership, after what happened last time,” Cher said as she walked to the switch and flipped it off. They were plunged into darkness.

“Gee, this feels familiar,” said George as they got back in the elevator. “The elevator car still works and everything. Say, did we ever explain that last time?”

“Yeah, probably an auxiliary reactor or backup power supply or something . . . or just crappy writing. Or dark matter, let’s not forget that.”

“Of course not. From now on, though, let’s just not question weird stuff, okay?”

“Okay.” The elevator arrived at the bridge, and George and Cher jumped off, rounding up the small number of aliens inside and subduing them. Cher set the self-destruct sequence for thirty minutes and pushed the Big Red Button. They both hopped back in the elevator.

“Hopefully it won’t take us as long this time to get back to the ship?” George commented. “No reason for you to lament the meaninglessness of life again, is there?”

Cher gave him a look. “No.”

“Just checking.”

The elevator arrived back at the first corridor, and Cher and George jumped up through the hole in the hull, running to the ship. They got inside and Bob lifted off, putting a good amount of distance between them and the mothership.

“That was a lot easier than last time, wasn’t it?” said George.

“Yeah. Don’t know if that’s a good thing or a bad thing, though—maybe they’re lulling us into a false sense of security so they can ambush us later when our guard is down.”

“Mm. Rather pessimistic outlook, there.”

“Well, it makes sense, doesn’t it?”

“Mm. Yeah.”

George, Cher, and Three watched the motherships on the viewscreens. The other four were slowly accelerating away from the one they had just sabotaged, and started firing at their ship again. Bob dodged the shots as they watched the last few minutes before detonation from a safe distance. “We sure got out in plenty of time, didn’t we?” observed George.

“Yeah. We can probably safely cut the count-down to 15 minutes next time.”

The mothership exploded, and Bob put their ship through a series of evasive maneuvers to avoid the flying debris. “Maybe the shields could handle one or two big chunks, but *I’m* not crazy enough to risk it,” he explained.

After the explosions had died down, Bob steered them in towards the next ship.

“We don’t really even need to bother with unsealing our suits on the ship, do we?” observed George.

“Which ship?” asked Cher. “The mothership, or ours?”

“Well . . . either,” George admitted.

“We could skip the reactor on the next few runs, too, couldn’t we? I mean, there’s no real reason to turn it off anyway, the way I see it . . .”

“Yeah. We’ll just go straight to the bridge next time, then.”

They did. George and Cher hopped into the next ship, rode the elevator to the center, killed a few aliens, and pushed The Button. They bugged out and watched the explosion from a safe distance again. Bob took them back in to the next ship.

“This is almost too easy, isn’t it?” said George.

“Yeah. It’s almost like they know that we’re going to destroy all their ships, and they’re not going to do anything about it . . . I mean, it doesn’t seem there’s much they *can* do, us being Jedi and all . . .” Cher mused.

George agreed, and it would have been difficult for anyone to *disagree* after the explosion of the fourth mothership.

“Something’s seriously wrong here,” said Cher, frowning. “This is way too easy. I mean, *way* too easy.”

“Yeah,” agreed George. “This *does* feel like something’s wrong. Maybe gives

you the feeling that this last ship is different, doesn't it?"

"It doesn't *look* different . . ."

"Well, if it *looked* different, that would give away the fact that it's the flagship. And any smart person wouldn't want to do that, would they?"

"No, I guess not . . ."

George could almost *taste* the sense of foreboding as Cher and he got out on the hull of the last mothership. Entering the corridors, they had to fight through a rather larger number of aliens than on the previous four ships. They got in the elevator and leaned heavily against the walls as the car sped towards the center of the ship.

"Man," said Cher, breathing heavily.

"Oof," concurred George, gasping for breath. "That was a lot of work."

"I'll say."

The elevator arrived with a *whoosh* and a sudden stop. George kept his finger firmly planted on the doors-shut button. "Is it just me, or does something feel really bad right now?"

Cher looked back at him tiredly, casually brushing hair out of her face. "Yeah, I've definitely got a bad feeling about this."

They looked at each other worriedly, took a deep breath, and George took his finger off the button. The doors hissed open, and George rather wished they hadn't.

Showdown

George and Cher stepped out of the elevator cautiously, their sabers in a ready defense position. A hulking behemoth stood before them, and a handful of weaponless aliens were arranged behind consoles around the room. No one made a move to attack.

“Would you allow my comrades to leave the room?” growled the behemoth in a heavily-accented, deep voice, speaking intelligible English. He snarled something in another language to the aliens in the room. George and Cher moved to either side of the elevator, which the group of aliens entered. The elevator whizzed off, and George and Cher once again focused their attention on the huge creature standing in front of them.

It bore a rather striking resemblance to an alien creature George had recently seen in a videogame: It was taller than them, so tall George imagined that its head could almost scrape the ceiling of the elevator car when it stood upright. Its body looked humanoid (two arms, two legs, in the same places as a human’s), but was muscular in the extreme. Its face was inhuman, twisted around a strange set of mandibles. It looked rather intimidating. The behemoth wore body armor and a pair of bandoliers across its chest, a lightsaber clipped to each.

“Um, are you sure you aren’t, like, a copyright infringement or something?” George asked uncertainly. The resemblance to a videogame creature was eerily exact.

“And who would prosecute me if I was?” rumbled the behemoth.

“Good point,” admitted George. “But . . . um . . . how do you speak English?”

“You humans call it the ‘universal language,’ don’t you?”

“Well . . . yeah . . .”

“Well, enough with the introductions. I suppose you would like me to gloat over my plans for galactic domination, revealing them in their entirety to you, after which you would fight and kill me and then thoroughly thwart my plans?”

“Um . . . yeah, something like that . . .” said George.

“Well, I suppose I can do something to that order. I am, of course, the final obstacle in your rather clichéd little quest to save the universe—you fight me and win, there is nothing stopping you from exterminating my people and saving humankind.

“But has it occurred to you what you’re actually doing? You are destroying *my*

species to save your own. And you can hardly blame *us* for attempting to destroy *you*, when *you* are in fact doing the exact same thing. In short, regardless of who wins this battle, one species will die, and one species will live. How is that for a moral quandary to complement the climactic battle to save the universe?”

“Mm . . .” said George slowly. “Pretty good point, there.”

“But I suppose you will still fight me, regardless of all that I’ve just said?” the behemoth said with a sigh.

“Yeah, basically,” said Cher.

The behemoth slowly and deliberately drew his twin sabers and ignited them. They shone with a deep red hue.

“Oh,” said George. “Red. How stereotypical.”

“Yes, quite. Am I correct in assuming that you are the only two enemies aboard this ship?”

“Yeah,” said Cher warily.

“And no more belligerents are forthcoming?”

“Um . . . no, probably not . . .”

“An almost perfect match-up: Two single lightsabers against one twin. Excellent.”

“And none of *your* friends will interfere in the fight, either?” Cher said suspiciously. Something about this fight didn’t feel good.

“Of course not,” rumbled the behemoth, slowly beginning to circle his foes. “We may be a hostile alien species that very nearly succeeded in wiping out your human race, but I *am* a man of my word. Barring the fact, of course, that I am not, strictly speaking, a man. But I assure you we are the only ones that will be in this chamber until the fight is over.”

“Okay, then,” George said.

“So—shall we begin?” The behemoth twirled his sabers and jumped at them.

It was a clash of the titans. Well, obviously, it *had* to be—two sides fighting for the fate of the galaxy, clichéd in the extreme, except for the fact that there were *three* combatants. It was a fight of the Jedi (even though we have no idea where the behemoth guy got his lightsabers), and that means that it would have been much easier to perform

this battle scene in a movie. Simply put, it's hard to describe a fight like this on paper.

But anyway, George and Cher and the behemoth went at it like there was no tomorrow. Of course, George and Cher *had* to, because of the rather glaring fact that the behemoth was an extremely muscular dude who had *two* lightsabers (and knew how to use them), as opposed to them, who only had *one* lightsaber each and weren't particularly muscular at all. Come to think of it, what *would* a fight with three dual-lightsaber-wielding opponents look like, anyway? I have a feeling that it would be crowded and extremely difficult to pull off without someone being chopped up in the first thirty seconds.

George and Cher fought the behemoth for quite a while without any real progress. The behemoth dexterously defended himself from their attacks, using one lightsaber to fight each of them, both at once. They tried moving on opposite sides of him so he couldn't possibly fight both of them at the same time, but he'd just spin around and back up a few steps, and it didn't help anything. The lightsaber fighting was really the only thing going on for a while—nobody really used the Force at all until something finally happened that required some fast Force-intervention.

All of a sudden, the behemoth managed to disarm Cher. As her saber-handle spun out of her grasp, the behemoth brought back his saber blade for a violent dismembering, disemboweling, and decapitation. Thinking fast, George slammed a Force-wall into the behemoth's hand, which sent *his* left-hand saber spinning out of his hand to crash into the wall. George grabbed the pommel with the Force and yanked it into his other hand, trying his luck at some dual-saber-wielding himself.

The behemoth, now with only one weapon, took a step forward and slashed a claw down Cher's chest in a nasty ripping assault. Spewing blood, Cher fell backwards, folding up into a sitting position as she landed against the wall, trying to staunch the flow of her own blood.

In that instant, George saw his opportunity and struck his foe in the moment when he was distracted, driving both of his saber blades through the behemoth's head. It loosed an unearthly screech and toppled to the floor, retching and twisting in the throes of death. It was but a moment before he stopped moving, his brain pierced through twice, once by his own saber. George took but a moment to make sure the beast was dead

before he threw his sabers away and ran to Cher.

“Cher! Are you okay?” George asked, realizing as the words escaped his mouth how dumb he sounded. Well *duh* she wasn’t okay, considering that she had four deep gashes in her chest from the behemoth’s claws. But at least she wasn’t bleeding any more. He guessed that she must have put some Force-pressure on the wounds before she lost too much blood.

“Not . . . going to . . . make it,” Cher said weakly. Her face looked rather gray, and George was rather inclined to believe her.

“Think that . . . his claws . . . were poisoned . . . or something,” Cher continued. “I managed to . . . slow the spread . . . of the poison.” She looked up at George and grabbed him by the shirt, pulling him down on his knees. Her eyes were wide, trying to make him understand something.

“Listen up.”

She paused for a moment, looking off at the far wall, before continuing. It seemed to be costing her a great deal of effort to talk.

“Keep . . . my saber. And . . . his.”

“Uh, Cher, you don’t have to—” George sputtered, embarrassed. She cut him off.

“It’s been . . . nice knowing you . . . George. I’m . . . glad that I . . . met you. Don’t . . . let me get you down,” she gasped, a smile twisting the corner of her mouth. “There’s . . . a lot more . . . life to live.”

“Um, I—I don’t—”

“Don’t . . . abuse your abilities—you have . . . much power. The Force . . .” Cher seeming to be fading fast.

“It’s been . . . a good trip. Bye, George . . .”

Cher’s eyes glazed over and her body sagged limply against the wall.

She was dead.

Outbound

George sat down with a bump, taking the pressure off his knees. He looked around the room, and called four sabers to his hand. Two were Rolff's, and two were the behemoth's. Strange how that works, George thought.

Looking around the room again, George got to his feet. He looked down at Cher and a sudden thought struck him—What am I supposed to do with her body?

Oh, shoot, thought George. Now isn't the time to think about these things—now is the time to *get out of here*. But what the heck am I supposed to do with Cher?

Haul her back to the ship? A funeral, maybe, or a memorial, at least?

Or leave her here . . .

That's probably what she'd want, George thought, his mind made up. Die on the mission, and keep it that way—no fancy service or anything . . .

George walked over to the self-destruct button, set it for twenty minutes, and hesitated. Ah, what the heck. Why hurry? He set it for thirty minutes, instead. He slapped the button and got in the elevator as the self-destruct announcement sounded. He couldn't really help but remember the dead alien's speech about destroying one species to save another . . . I wonder if this is going to weigh on my conscience a lot? He wondered silently.

But George didn't think about *that* particular thought for long. The elevator hissed to a stop, and he walked to the ship, pushing a button on his suit as he went. The suit activated, and oxygen flooded his suit, clearing his somewhat gloomy thoughts a bit.

Walking down the corridor, aliens ran past George without stopping, but he didn't notice, embroiled in one of those surreal movie moments again. The world seemed to slow down, and, looking down, he could see his feet slowly moving forward . . . And his heart seemed to beat sluggishly, thumping with an agonizing slowness.

He reached the ceiling-hole, and he climbed out onto the hull of the last alien mothership. The ramp waited for him, and he walked up it, into the ship. Proceeding up the ship's hallway, he heard the ramp finally close behind him, sounding almost uncertain and reluctant. He reached the cockpit, and pushed a button to open the door. The door hissed open, and he sat down in the open chair. Waiting a moment for the ship air to

become breathable, George deactivated his suit and lifted off the helmet. He didn't really want to look at Three, because he knew what was coming. Bob wouldn't say anything—he was nice like that—but there was no doubt that Three would ask. No matter how gently, he would ask . . .

“Where's Cher?”

“Get us out of here,” George told Bob, his stomach giving an awkward sort of heave inside him. “Cher's dead.”

Three looked at him silently for a long moment, and turned away. The ship lifted off gently from the mothership, accelerating away from the impending explosion, and George, Three, and Bob were alone once again among the stars.