INTRODUCTION

In December 1976, Ballantine Books published a paperback novel called Star Wars: From the Adventures of Luke Skywalker. The book was ghostwritten by Alan Dean Foster from my screenplay of the film. The cover painting was a piece of early conceptual art by Ralph McQuarrie. In small type on the back cover were the words Soon to be a spectacular motion picture from Twentieth Century Fox.

The world’s first glimpse of Star Wars happened with little fanfare, and this first edition of the novel sold modestly. It wasn’t until the official “tie-in” version of the book that it sold millions of copies and broke records, much like the film was doing in theaters. In a way, the original book performed as I had expected the film to do—a respectable showing, certainly nothing to set the world on fire, but hopefully enough to allow me to follow up with further stories of the saga. Happily, Star Wars exceeded my expectations.

As this Special Edition of the original Star Wars novel goes to press, I am once again immersed in writing new episodes of the saga. It fills me with a sense of déjà vu, because the outline for the new trilogy of prequels is actually contained in the first two pages of this book, the prologue. I suppose I have come full circle as I return to the beginning and start again.
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ANOTHER galaxy, another time.

The Old Republic was the Republic of legend, greater than distance or time. No need to note where it was or whence it came, only to know that ... it was the Republic.
Once, under the wise rule of the Senate and the protection of the Jedi Knights, the Republic throve and grew. But as often happens when wealth and power pass beyond the admirable and attain the awesome, then appear those evil ones who have greed to match.

So it was with the Republic at its height. Like the greatest of trees, able to withstand any external attack, the Republic rotted from within though the danger was not visible from outside.

Aided and abetted by restless, power-hungry individuals within the government, and the massive organs of commerce, the ambitious Senator Palpatine caused himself to be elected President of the Republic. He promised to reunite the disaffected among the people and to restore the remembered glory of the Republic.

Once secure in office he declared himself Emperor, shutting himself away from the populace. Soon he was controlled by the very assistants and boot-lickers he had appointed to high office, and the cries of the people for justice did not reach his ears.

Having exterminated through treachery and deception the Jedi Knights, guardians of justice in the galaxy, the Imperial governors and bureaucrats prepared to institute a reign of terror among the disheartened worlds of the galaxy. Many used the Imperial forces and the name of the increasingly isolated Emperor to further their own personal ambitions.

But a small number of systems rebelled at these new outrages. Declaring themselves opposed to the New Order they began the great battle to restore the Old Republic.

From the beginning they were vastly outnumbered by the systems held in thrall by the Emperor. In those first dark days it seemed certain the bright flame of resistance would be extinguished before it could cast the light of new truth across a galaxy of oppressed and beaten peoples ...

From the First Saga

Journal of the Whills

“They were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Naturally they became heroes.”
IT was a vast, shining globe and it cast a light of lambent topaz into space—but it was not a sun. Thus, the planet had fooled men for a long time. Not until entering close orbit around it did its discoverers realize that this was a world in a binary system and not a third sun itself.

At first it seemed certain nothing could exist on such a planet, least of all humans. Yet both massive G1 and G2 stars orbited a common center with peculiar regularity, and Tatooine circled them far enough out to permit the development of a rather stable, if exquisitely hot, climate. Mostly this was a dry desert of a world, whose unusual starlike yellow glow was the result of double sunlight striking sodium-rich sands and flats. That same sunlight suddenly shone on the thin skin of a metallic shape falling crazily toward the atmosphere.

The erratic course the galactic cruiser was traveling was intentional, not the product of injury but of a desperate desire to avoid it. Long streaks of intense energy slid close past its hull, a multihued storm of destruction like a school of rainbow remoras fighting to attach themselves to a larger, unwilling host.

One of those probing, questing beams succeeded in touching the fleeing ship, striking its principal solar fin. Gemlike fragments of metal and plastic erupted into space as the end of the fin disintegrated. The vessel seemed to shudder.

The source of those multiple energy beams suddenly hove into view—a lumbering Imperial cruiser, its massive outline bristling cactuslike with dozens of heavy weapons emplacements. Light ceased arching from those spines now as the cruiser moved in close. Intermittent explosions and flashes of light could be seen in those portions of the smaller ship which had taken hits. In the absolute cold of space, the cruiser snuggled up alongside its wounded prey.

Another distant explosion shook the ship—but it certainly didn’t feel distant to Artoo Detoo or See Threepio. The concussion bounced them around the narrow corridor like bearings in an old motor.
To look at these two, one would have supposed that the tall, humanlike machine, Threepio, was the master and the stubby, tripodal robot, Artoo Detoo, an inferior. But while Threepio might have sniffed disdainfully at the suggestion, they were in fact equal in everything save loquacity. Here Threepio was clearly—and necessarily—the superior.

Still another explosion rattled the corridor, throwing Threepio off balance. His shorter companion had the better of it during such moments with his squat, cylindrical body’s low center of gravity well balanced on thick, clawed legs.

Artoo glanced up at Threepio, who was steadying himself against a corridor wall. Lights blinked enigmatically around a single mechanical eye as the smaller robot studied the battered casing of his friend. A patina of metal and fibrous dust coated the usually gleaming bronze finish, and there were some visible dents—all the result of the pounding the rebel ship they were on had been taking.

Accompanying the last attack was a persistent deep hum which even the loudest explosion had not been able to drown out. Then for no apparent reason, the basso thrumming abruptly ceased, and the only sounds in the otherwise deserted corridor came from the eerie dry-twig crackle of shorting relays or the pops of dying circuitry. Explosions began to echo through the ship once more, but they were far away from the corridor.

Threepio turned his smooth, humanlike head to one side. Metallic ears listened intently. The imitation of a human pose was hardly necessary—Threepio’s auditory sensors were fully omnidirectional—but the slim robot had been programmed to blend perfectly among human company. This programming extended even to mimicry of human gestures.

“Did you hear that?” he inquired rhetorically of his patient companion, referring to the throbbing sound. “They’ve shut down the main reactor and the drive.” His voice was as full of disbelief and concern as that of any human. One metallic palm rubbed dolefully at a patch of dull gray on his side, where a broken hull brace had fallen and scored the bronze finish. Threepio was a fastidious machine, and such things troubled him.
“Madness, this is madness.” He shook his head slowly. “This time we’ll be destroyed for sure.”

Artoo did not comment immediately. Barrel torso tilted backward, powerful legs gripping the deck, the meter-high robot was engrossed in studying the roof overhead. Though he did not have a head to cock in a listening posture like his friend, Artoo still somehow managed to convey that impression. A series of short beeps and chirps issued from his speaker. To even a sensitive human ear they would have been just so much static, but to Threepio they formed words as clear and pure as direct current.

“Yes, I suppose they did have to shut the drive down,” Threepio admitted, “but what are we going to do now? We can’t enter atmosphere with our main stabilizer fin destroyed. I can’t believe we’re simply going to surrender.”

A small band of armed humans suddenly appeared, rifles held at the ready. Their expressions were as worry-wrinkled as their uniforms, and they carried about them the aura of men prepared to die.

Threepio watched silently until they had vanished around a far bend in the passageway, then looked back at Artoo. The smaller robot hadn’t shifted from his position of listening. Threepio’s gaze turned upward also though he knew Artoo’s senses were slightly sharper than his own.

“What is it, Artoo?” A short burst of beeping came in response. Another moment, and there was no need for highly attuned sensors. For a minute or two more, the corridor remained deathly silent. Then a faint scrape, scrape could be heard, like a cat at a door, from somewhere above. That strange noise was produced by heavy footsteps and the movement of bulky equipment somewhere on the ship’s hull.

When several muffled explosions sounded, Threepio murmured, “They’ve broken in somewhere above us. There’s no escape for the Captain this time.” Turning, he peered down at Artoo. “I think we’d better—”

The shriek of overstressed metal filled the air before he could finish, and the far end of the passageway was lit by a blinding actinic flash. Somewhere down there the
little cluster of armed crew who had passed by minutes before had encountered the ship’s attackers.

Threepio turned his face and delicate photoreceptors away—just in time to avoid the fragments of metal that flew down the corridor. At the far end a gaping hole appeared in the roof, and reflective forms like big metal beads began dropping to the corridor floor. Both robots knew that no machine could match the fluidity with which those shapes moved and instantly assumed fighting postures. The new arrivals were humans in armor, not mechanicals.

One of them looked straight at Threepio—no, not at him, the panicked robot thought frantically, but past him. The figure shifted its big rifle around in armored hands—too late. A beam of intense light struck the head, sending pieces of armor, bone, and flesh flying in all directions.

Half the invading Imperial troops turned and began returning fire up the corridor—aiming past the two robots.

“Quick—this way!” Threepio ordered, intending to retreat from the Imperials. Artoo turned with him. They had taken only a couple of steps when they saw the rebel crewmen in position ahead, firing down the corridor. In seconds the passageway was filled with smoke and crisscrossing beams of energy.

Red, green, and blue bolts ricocheted off polished sections of wall and floor or ripped long gashes in metal surfaces. Screams of injured and dying humans—a peculiarly unrobotic sound, Threepio thought—echoed piercingly above the inorganic destruction.

One beam struck near the robot’s feet at the same time as a second one burst the wall directly behind him, exposing sparking circuitry and rows of conduits. The force of the twin blast tumbled Threepio into the shredded cables, where a dozen different currents turned him into a jerking, twisting display.

Strange sensations coursed through his metal nerve-ends. They caused no pain, only confusion. Every time he moved and tried to free himself there was another violent crackling as a fresh cluster of componentry broke. The noise and man-made lightning remained constant around him as the battle continued to rage.
Smoke began to fill the corridor. Artoo Detoo bustled about trying to help free his friend. The little robot evidenced a phlegmatic indifference to the ravening energies filling the passageway. He was built so low that most of the beams passed over him anyhow.

“Help!” Threepio yelled, suddenly frightened at a new message from an internal sensor. “I think something is melting. Free my left leg—the trouble’s near the pelvic servomotor.” Typically, his tone turned abruptly from pleading to berating.

“This is all your fault!” he shouted angrily. “I should have known better than to trust the logic of a half-sized thermocapsulary dehousing assister. I don’t know why you insisted we leave our assigned stations to come down this stupid access corridor. Not that it matters now. The whole ship must be—” Artoo Detoo cut him off in midspeech with some angry beepings and hoots of his own, though he continued to cut and pull with precision at the tangled high-voltage cables.

“Is that so?” Threepio sneered in reply. “The same to you, you little ...!”

An exceptionally violent explosion shook the passage, drowning him out. A lung-searing miasma of carbonized component filled the air, obscuring everything.

Two meters tall. Bipedal. Flowing black robes trailing from the figure and a face forever masked by a functional if bizarre black metal breath screen—a Dark Lord of the Sith was an awesome, threatening shape as it strode through the corridors of the rebel ship.

Fear followed the footsteps of all the Dark Lords. The cloud of evil which clung tight about this particular one was intense enough to cause hardened Imperial troops to back away, menacing enough to set them muttering nervously among themselves. Once-resolute rebel crew members ceased resisting, broke and ran in panic at the sight of the black armor—armor which, though black as it was, was not nearly as dark as the thoughts drifting through the mind within.

One purpose, one thought, one obsession dominated that mind now. It burned in the brain of Darth Vader as he turned down another passageway in the broken fighter. There smoke was beginning to clear, though the sounds of faraway fighting still resounded through the hull. The battle here had ended and moved on.
Only a robot was left to stir freely in the wake of the Dark Lord’s passing. See Threepio finally stepped clear of the last restraining cable. Somewhere behind him human screams could be heard from where relentless Imperial troops were mopping up the last remnants of rebel resistance.

Threepio glanced down and saw only scarred deck. As he looked around, his voice was full of concern. “Artoo Detoo—where are you?” The smoke seemed to part just a bit more. Threepio found himself staring up the passageway.

Artoo Detoo, it seemed, was there. But he wasn’t looking in Threepio’s direction. Instead, the little robot appeared frozen in an attitude of attention. Leaning over him was—it was difficult for even Threepio’s electronic photoreceptors to penetrate the clinging, acidic smoke—a human figure. It was young, slim, and by abstruse human standards of aesthetics, Threepio mused, of a calm beauty. One small hand seemed to be moving over the front of Artoo’s torso.

Threepio started toward them as the haze thickened once more. But when he reached the end of the corridor, only Artoo stood there, waiting. Threepio peered past him, uncertain. Robots were occasionally subject to electronic hallucinations—but why should he hallucinate a human?

He shrugged ... Then again, why not, especially when one considered the confusing circumstances of the past hour and the dose of raw current he had recently absorbed. He shouldn’t be surprised at anything his concatenated internal circuits conjured up.

“Where have you been?” Threepio finally asked. “Hiding, I suppose.” He decided not to mention the maybe-human. If it had been a hallucination, he wasn’t going to give Artoo the satisfaction of knowing how badly recent events had unsettled his logic circuits.

“They’ll be coming back this way,” he went on, nodding down the corridor and not giving the small automaton a chance to reply, “looking for human survivors. What are we going to do now? They won’t trust the word of rebel-owned machines that we don’t know anything of value. We’ll be sent to the spice mines of Kessel or taken apart for spare components for other, less deserving robots. That’s if they don’t
consider us potential program traps and blow us apart on sight. If we don’t …” But Artoo had already turned and was ambling quickly back down the passageway.

“Wait, where are you going? Haven’t you been listening to me?” Uttering curses in several languages, some purely mechanical, Threepio raced fluidly after his friend. The Artoo unit, he thought to himself, could be downright close-circuited when it wanted to.

Outside the galactic cruiser’s control center the corridor was crowded with sullen prisoners gathered by Imperial troops. Some lay wounded, some dying. Several officers had been separated from the enlisted ranks and stood in a small group by themselves, bestowing belligerent looks and threats on the silent knot of troops holding them at bay.

As if on command, everyone—Imperial troops as well as rebels—became silent as a massive caped form came into view from behind a turn in the passage. Two of the heretofore resolute, obstinate rebel officers began to shake. Stopping before one of the men, the towering figure reached out wordlessly. A massive hand closed around the man’s neck and lifted him off the deck. The rebel officer’s eyes bulged, but he kept his silence.

An Imperial officer, his armored helmet shoved back to reveal a recent scar where an energy beam had penetrated his shielding, scrambled down out of the fighter’s control room, shaking his head briskly. “Nothing, sir. Information retrieval system’s been wiped clean.”

Darth Vader acknowledged this news with a barely perceptible nod. The impenetrable mask turned to regard the officer he was torturing. Metal-clad fingers contracted. Reaching up, the prisoner desperately tried to pry them loose, but to no avail.

“Where is the data you intercepted?” Vader rumbled dangerously. “What have you done with the information tapes?”

“We—intercepted—no information,” the dangling officer gurgled, barely able to breathe. From somewhere deep within, he dredged up a squeal of outrage. “This is
a ... councilor vessel ... Did you not see our ... exterior markings? We’re on a ... diplomatic ... mission.”

“Chaos take your mission!” Vader growled. “Where are those tapes!” He squeezed harder, the threat in his grip implicit.

When he finally replied, the officer’s voice was a bare, choked whisper. “Only ... the Commander knows.”

“This ship carries the system crest of Alderaan,” Vader growled, the gargoylelike breath mask leaning close. “Is any of the royal family on board? Who are you carrying?” Thick fingers tightened further, and the officer’s struggles became more and more frantic. His last words were muffled and choked past intelligibility.

Vader was not pleased. Even though the figure went limp with an awful, unquestionable finality, that hand continued to tighten, producing a chilling snapping and popping of bone, like a dog padding on plastic. Then with a disgusted wheeze Vader finally threw the doll-form of the dead man against a far wall. Several Imperial troops ducked out of the way just in time to avoid the grisly missile.

The massive form whirled unexpectedly, and Imperial officers shrank under that baleful sculptured stare. “Start tearing this ship apart piece by piece, component by component, until you find those tapes. As for the passengers, if any, I want them alive.” He paused a moment, then added, “Quickly!”

Officers and men nearly fell over themselves in their haste to leave—not necessarily to carry out Vader’s orders, but simply to retreat from that malevolent presence.

Artoo Detoo finally came to a halt in an empty corridor devoid of smoke and the signs of battle. A worried, confused Threepio pulled up behind him.

“You’ve led us through half the ship, and to what ...?” He broke off, staring in disbelief as the squat robot reached up with one clawed limb and snapped the seal on a lifeboat hatch. Immediately a red warning light came on and a low hooting sounded in the corridor.
Threepio looked wildly in all directions, but the passageway remained empty. When he looked back, Artoo was already working his way into the cramped boat pod. It was just large enough to hold several humans, and its design was not laid out to accommodate mechanicals. Artoo had some trouble negotiating the awkward little compartment.

“Hey,” a startled Threepio called, admonishing, “you’re not permitted in there! It’s restricted to humans only. We just might be able to convince the Imperials that we’re not rebel programmed and are too valuable to break up, but if someone sees you in there we haven’t got a chance. Come on out.”

Somehow Artoo had succeeded in wedging his body into position in front of the miniature control board. He cocked his body slightly and threw a stream of loud beeps and whistles at his reluctant companion.

Threepio listened. He couldn’t frown, but he managed to give a good impression of doing so. “Mission … what mission? What are you talking about? You sound like you haven’t got an integrated logic terminal left in your brain. No … no more adventures. I’ll take my chances with the Imperials—and I’m not getting in there.”

An angry electronic twang came from the Artoo unit.

“Don’t call me a mindless philosopher,” Threepio snapped back, “you overweight, unstreamlined glob of grease!”

Threepio was concocting an additional rejoinder when an explosion blew out the back wall of the corridor. Dust and metal debris whooshed through the narrow subpassageway, followed instantly by a series of secondary explosions. Flames began jumping hungrily from the exposed interior wall, reflecting off Threepio’s isolated patches of polished skin.

Muttering the electronic equivalent of consigning his soul to the unknown, the lanky robot jumped into the life pod. “I’m going to regret this,” he muttered more audibly as Artoo activated the safety door behind him. The smaller robot flipped a series of switches, snapped back a cover, and pressed three buttons in a certain sequence. With the thunder of explosive latches the life pod ejected from the crippled fighter.
When word came over the communicators that the last pocket of resistance on the rebel ship had been cleaned out, the Captain of the Imperial cruiser relaxed considerably. He was listening with pleasure to the proceedings on the captured vessel when one of his chief gunnery officers called to him. Moving to the man’s position, the Captain stared into the circular viewscreen and saw a tiny dot dropping away toward the fiery world below.

“There goes another pod, sir. Instructions?” The officer’s hand hovered over a computerized energy battery.

Casually, confident in the firepower and total control under his command, the Captain studied the nearby readouts monitoring the pod. All of them read blank.

“Hold your fire, Lieutenant Hija. Instruments show no life forms aboard. The pod’s release mechanism must have short-circuited or received a false instruction. Don’t waste your power.” He turned away, to listen with satisfaction to the reports of captured men and material coming from the rebel ship.

* * *

Glare from exploding panels and erupting circuitry reflected crazily off the armor of the lead storm trooper as he surveyed the passageway ahead. He was about to turn and call for those behind to follow him forward when he noticed something moving off to one side. It appeared to be crouching back in a small, dark alcove. Holding his pistol ready, he moved cautiously forward and peered into the recess.

A small, shivering figure clad in flowing white hugged the back of the recess and stared up at the man. Now he could see that he faced a young woman, and her physical description fit that of the one individual the Dark Lord was most interested in. The trooper grinned behind his helmet. A lucky encounter for him. He would be commended.

Within the armor his head turned slightly, directing his voice to the tiny condenser microphone. “Here she is,” he called to those behind him. “Set for stun forc—”

He never finished the sentence, just as he would never receive the hoped-for commendation. Once his attention turned from the girl to his communicator her
shivering vanished with startling speed. The energy pistol she had held out of sight behind her came up and around as she burst from her hiding place.

The trooper who had been unlucky enough to find her fell first, his head a mass of melted bone and metal. The same fate met the second armored form coming up fast behind him. Then a bright green energy pole touched the woman’s side and she slumped instantly to the deck, the pistol still locked in her small palm.

Metal-encased shapes clustered around her. One whose arm bore the insignia of a lower officer knelt and turned her over. He studied the paralyzed form with a practiced eye.

“She’ll be all right,” he finally declared, looking up at his subordinates. “Report to Lord Vader.”

Threepio stared, mesmerized, out the small viewport set in the front of the tiny escape pod as the hot yellow eye of Tatooine began to swallow them up. Somewhere behind them, he knew, the crippled fighter and the Imperial cruiser were receding to imperceptibility.

That was fine with him. If they landed near a civilized city, he would seek elegant employment in a halcyon atmosphere, something more befitting his status and training. These past months had gifted him with entirely too much excitement and unpredictability for a mere machine.

Artoo’s seemingly random manipulation of the pod controls promised anything but a smooth landing, however. Threepio regarded his squat companion with concern.

“Are you sure you know how to pilot this thing?”

Artoo replied with a noncommittal whistle that did nothing to alter the taller robot’s jangled state of mind.

IT was an old settlers’ saying that you could burn your eyes out faster by staring straight and hard at the sun-scorched flatlands of Tatooine than by looking directly at
its two huge suns themselves, so powerful was the penetrating glare reflected from those endless wastes. Despite the glare, life could and did exist in the flatlands formed by long-evaporated seabeds. One thing made it possible: the reintroduction of water.

For human purposes, however, the water of Tatooine was only marginally accessible. The atmosphere yielded its moisture with reluctance. It had to be coaxed down out of the hard blue sky—coaxed, forced, yanked down to the parched surface.

Two figures whose concern was obtaining that moisture were standing on a slight rise of one of those inhospitable flats. One of the pair was stiff and metallic—a sand-pitted vaporator sunk securely through sand and into deeper rock. The figure next to it was a good deal more animated, though no less sunweathered.

Luke Skywalker was twice the age of the ten-year-old vaporator, but much less secure. At the moment he was swearing softly at a recalcitrant valve adjuster on the temperamental device. From time to time he resorted to some unsubtle pounding in place of using the appropriate tool. Neither method worked very well. Luke was sure that the lubricants used on the vaporators went out of their way to attract sand, beckoning seductively to small abrasive particles with an oily gleam. He wiped sweat from his forehead and leaned back for a moment. The most prepossessing thing about the young man was his name. A light breeze tugged at his shaggy hair and baggy work tunic as he regarded the device. No point in staying angry at it, he counseled himself. It’s only an unintelligent machine.

As Luke considered his predicament, a third figure appeared, scooting out from behind the vaporator to fumble awkwardly at the damaged section. Only three of the Treadwell model robot’s six arms were functioning, and these had seen more wear than the boots on Luke’s feet. The machine moved with unsteady, stop-and-start motions.

Luke gazed at it sadly, then inclined his head to study the sky. Still no sign of a cloud, and he knew there never would be unless he got that vaporator working. He was about to try once again when a small, intense gleam of light caught his eye.
Quickly he slipped the carefully cleaned set of macrobinoculars from his utility belt and focused the lenses skyward.

For long moments he stared, wishing all the while that he had a real telescope instead of the binocs. As he stared, vaporators, the heat, and the day’s remaining chores were forgotten. Clipping the binoculars back onto his belt, Luke turned and dashed for the landspeeder. Halfway to the vehicle he thought to call behind him.

“Hurry up,” he shouted impatiently. “What are you waiting for? Get it in gear.”

The Treadwell started toward him, hesitated, and then commenced spinning in a tight circle, smoke belching from every joint. Luke shouted further instructions, then finally gave up in disgust when he realized that it would take more than words to motivate the Treadwell again.

For a moment Luke hesitated at leaving the machine behind—but, he argued to himself, its vital components were obviously shot. So he jumped into the landspeeder, causing the recently repaired repulsion floater to list alarmingly to one side until he was able to equalize weight distribution by sliding behind the controls. Maintaining its altitude slightly above the sandy ground, the light-duty transport vehicle steadied itself like a boat in a heavy sea. Luke gunned the engine, which whined in protest, and sand erupted behind the floater as he aimed the craft toward the distant town of Anchorhead.

Behind him, a pitiful beacon of black smoke from the burning robot continued to rise into the clear desert air. It wouldn’t be there when Luke returned. There were scavengers of metal as well as flesh in the wide wastes of Tatooine.

Metal and stone structures bleached white by the glaze of twin Tatoo I and II huddled together tightly, for company as much as for protection. They formed the nexus of the widespread farming community of Anchorhead.

Presently the dusty, unpaved streets were quiet, deserted. Sandflies buzzed lazily in the cracked eaves of pourstone buildings. A dog barked in the distance, the sole sign of habitation until a lone old woman appeared and started across the street. Her metallic sun shawl was pulled tight around her.
Something made her look up, tired eyes squinting into the distance. The sound suddenly leaped in volume as a shining rectangular shape came roaring around a far corner. Her eyes popped as the vehicle bore down on her, showing no sign of altering its path. She had to scramble to get out of its way.

Panting and waving an angry fist after the landspeeder, she raised her voice over the sound of its passage. “Won’t you kids ever learn to slow down!”

Luke might have seen her, but he certainly didn’t hear her. In both cases his attention was focused elsewhere as he pulled up behind a low, long concrete station. Various coils and rods jutted from its top and sides. Tatooine’s relentless sand waves broke in frozen yellow spume against the station’s walls. No one had bothered to clear them away. There was no point. They would only return again the following day.

Luke slammed the front door aside and shouted, “Hey!”

A rugged young man in mechanic’s dress sat sprawled in a chair behind the station’s unkempt control desk. Sunscreen oil had kept his skin from burning. The skin of the girl on his lap had been equally protected, and there was a great deal more of the protected area in view. Somehow even dried sweat looked good on her.

“Hey, everybody!” Luke yelled again, having elicited something less than an overwhelming response with his first cry. He ran toward the instrument room at the rear of the station while the mechanic, half asleep, ran a hand across his face and mumbled, “Did I hear a young noise blast through here?”

The girl on his lap stretched sensuously, her well-worn clothing tugging in various intriguing directions. Her voice was casually throaty. “Oh,” she yawned, “that was just Wormie on one of his rampages.”

Deak and Windy looked up from the computer-assisted pool game as Luke burst into the room. They were dressed much like Luke, although their clothing was of better fit and somewhat less exercised.

All three youths contrasted strikingly with the burly, handsome player at the far side of the table. From neatly clipped hair to his precision-cut uniform he stood out in the room like an Oriental poppy in a sea of oats. Behind the three humans a soft
hum came from where a repair robot was working patiently on a broken piece of station equipment.

“Shape it up, you guys,” Luke yelled excitedly. Then he noticed the older man in the uniform. The subject of his suddenly startled gaze recognized him simultaneously.

“Biggs!”

The man’s face twisted in a half grin. “Hello, Luke.” Then they were embracing each other warmly.

Luke finally stood away, openly admiring the other’s uniform. “I didn’t know you were back. When did you get in?”

The confidence in the other’s voice bordered the realm of smugness without quite entering it. “Just a little while ago. I wanted to surprise you, hotshot.” He indicated the room. “I thought you’d be here with these other two nightcrawlers.” Deak and Windy both smiled. “I certainly didn’t expect you to be out working.” He laughed easily, a laugh few people found resistible.


There was something evasive about Biggs as he replied, looking slightly away, “Of course I got it. Signed to serve aboard the freighter Rand Ecliptic just last week. First Mate Biggs Darklighter, at your service.” He performed a twisting salute, half serious and half humorous, then grinned that overbearing yet ingratiating grin again.

“I just came back to say good-bye to all you unfortunate landlocked simpletons.” They all laughed, until Luke suddenly remembered what had brought him here in such a hurry.

“I almost forgot,” he told them, his initial excitement returning, “there’s a battle going on right here in our system. Come and look.”

Deak looked disappointed. “Not another one of your epic battles, Luke. Haven’t you dreamed up enough of them? Forget it.”
“Forget it, hell—I’m serious. It’s a battle, all right.”

With words and shoves he managed to cajole the occupants of the station out into the strong sunlight. Camie in particular looked disgusted.

“This had better be worth it, Luke,” she warned him, shading her eyes against the glare.

Luke already had his macrobinoculars out and was searching the heavens. It took only a moment for him to fix on a particular spot. “I told you,” he insisted. “There they are.”