The Princess

And The Stellar Warrior

**By**

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Is There Anyone Out There?

The Universe is a vast empty space   
and we are the only living things -  
Do you feel lonely too?

The army of alien robots streamed through the city, crushing cars and blowing buildings to smithereens.

Army Major Eric Hanks quietly hid behind a burned-out truck, waiting for his chance. As a robot passed by, he jumped onto a leg and scrambled to the top. At the top he placed a control device on the robot and parachuted off. He had control.

Speaking into a walkie-talkie, the major reported, “Operation ‘Take Control’ begins now.”

“Roger that Major Hanks,” the subordinate acknowledged. “The control devices are ready for pickup.”

Eric gave his new robot commands. Hours pass and one by one the alien machines came under human control.

One day passed and Eric was ready to storm the alien mother ship.

Eric screamed into his walkie-talkie, “All units…are stepping onto the runway now. Aren’t they gorgeous in their summer dresses?”

“Sis, it was getting to the good part,” Luke shouted at his stupid sister.

“Like you haven’t seen that stupid movie a dozen times before,” Brenda scolded.

“Why are you women so obsessed with beauty pageants and the physical attractiveness of other women? You wouldn’t catch me watching other men,” Luke grumbled.

“You watch football, don’t you?” Brenda countered.

“That’s not the same. I have no interest in how handsome the players are, only how well they play,” Luke argued. “Football is a battle where speed, strength, endurance, and flexibility are married to strategic thinking that tries to outwit the opponent and obtain the victory. The win is never certain, even when the time runs out.”

“Whatever,” Brenda sighed, rolling her eyes. “Here’s a package for you.” She tossed the box to Luke, but it fell to the floor.

“Damn it Sis,” Luke grumbled. “Do you have any idea how expensive room-temperature superconducting wire is? It costs twenty dollars a meter. I paid almost two hundred dollars for it.”

“Aren’t you tired of playing with your stupid robots and spaceships?” Brenda asked.

“Just you wait Sis,” Luke said knowingly and picked up his treasure. “One day we shall find aliens, and then it shall be too late, because by then our race will be dead. Dead, I tell you.”

Luke entered his room and opened the package. He stared at the plastic-covered wire in fascination. He could now create a scale model of a vortex generator.

What is a vortex generator, you ask? It’s something that doesn’t exist. Not yet anyway. Once built, it would no longer be a crazy dream but a reality.

The idea was simple. You have three iron rings, spinning within each other. Three separate motors controlled the speed of each ring, and the whole thing was computer controlled. You sometimes see it in sci-fi movies, like the 1997 movie *Contact*.

In (science fiction) theory, when spun, the device would create a warp field, distorting the time and space within and around the device. Within it something amazing would happen.

No one had ever documented creating a vortex generator for four very good reasons. First, cooling independently spinning superconductor rings with liquid nitrogen was a daunting challenge. Second, there was no conceivable way it could be used as a star drive. Third, other more promising technologies such as the EM Drive and lifters existed.

Luke grabbed the first iron ring and wound it. Once wiring was complete, he wrapped the ring in carbon fiber tape. Then he worked on the second and then the third ring. Finally he hooked all the pieces together with the stand and connected the 9-volt battery and plugged in the computer.

The moment of truth was at hand. Luke entered the start command on his laptop and watched the device spin.

The device rattled and groaned as centripetal forces tried to rip it to shreds. Other than that, the device did – nothing.

The results weren’t surprising. The fourth reason no one did it was because of pesky physics. According to all known laws of physics, it was impossible for such a device to do anything other than look cool.

However, it was a fun project, and in two months he would be going to college to study for his degree in robotics.

Luke turned off the device and went into the backyard. He stared at the stars and wondered if there was life out there.

Space was so vast and empty. Luke felt lonely.

It’s a Conspiracy, Man

Do you believe what your eyes tell you,   
or do you believe what you common sense tells you?

*“Luke, I am your father,” a deep scary voice intoned.*

*“No you’re not,” Luke screamed. “You can’t be.”*

Luke opened his eyes and found his sister looking down on him. She was laughing her head off. It was her that did the Darth Vader voice using her phone as a voice changer.

“I can’t believe you dream of Star Wars,” Brenda laughed. “You’re such a nerd.”

“One day aliens will come down to dissect your brain, only to discover you have none,” Luke retorted angrily.

Luke turned his head and discovered in horror that his laptop was missing. His vortex generator was missing as well.

“No!” Luke screamed as he jumped out of bed. “My laptop and vortex generator are gone.”

Brenda frowned and asked, “Are you sure you didn’t misplace it?”

“Of course not,” Luke assured. “I had the generator running before I went to bed. I then turned it off because it was making such a racket, and then went to sleep.”

“That’s horrible,” Brenda said in mock horror. “Now all your porn is gone.”

“That’s not funny Sis,” Luke said, feeling disheartened. All the data for his projects was gone, as well as the articles he had yet to post on his blog.

“Luke, Brenda, we’re leaving,” Luke’s mother Lisa called. “Try not to fight too much.”

Luke sulked a few more minutes and then got ready for his summer job. Without that source of income, he couldn’t work on his robotics and science (or as Brenda put it, science fiction) projects.

Upon returning home, Luke discovered his laptop was back where it belonged. However, all his data was gone. Even his backup data was gone.

Luke entered his favorite chat room.

“Last night I finally got the wire and completed the vortex generator,” Luke said.

“So did you see any spatial distortions?” Lex Luthor asked.

“Unfortunately, no,” Luke replied.

“What do you expect?” Scotty added with a cheesy Scottish accent. “To generate a warp field, you need dilithium crystals.”

“Unfortunately, this morning I discovered that both my laptop and vortex generator were gone,” Luke said sadly.

“It’s a conspiracy man,” the Mad Anarchist said, sounding like a hippy. “The dudes in the suites came and took your stuff, because you were getting too close to the truth.”

Luke loved listening to the Mad Anarchist since he was so funny.

“Did you hear?” Cloud Strife asked. “Adipose Gaming is hosting a contest. The regional champion winner gets 5,000$.”

“And a job offer at their company,” Lex Luthor added. “With my evil genius, I can’t lose.”

“In your dreams, Lex,” Luke taunted. “I too can’t lose, since I have the Force with me.”

“Luke, Lex, you don’t need to fight. There are 1024 world regions to choose from. It’s very logical. We can all get rich,” Mr. Spock said with his usual deadpan-serious voice.

“With millions at stake and six months to prepare, I expect the competition is going to be fierce,” Marcus Fenix said.

The winner got 1,000,000$ US. The finalist got 600,000$. The two semi-finalists got 200,000$. The four quarter-finalists got 100,000$. Finally, the eight eighth-finalist got 50,000$

The competition entrance fee was just 10$. With an expected four million plus entries, the cost of the competition prize money was covered. Of course Adipose spent a fortune on marketing.

“That’s fine with me,” Dark Reaver whispered with a rasping voice. “The more players there are the more screams I can collect.” Dark Reaver tended to get carried away with his role playing.

The popup for Stellar Warrior 3 appeared on the screen, informing Luke that the update to the online game had been successfully installed. It was time to defend the planets of the Galactic Empire from the evil invaders spawned in a neighboring galaxy.

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It was Saturday December 12, 2036. The school semester was coming to a close and Luke felt as if his brain was going to explode from an overdose of mathematics. One of his teachers would fill the blackboard with equations and then say, “Class, this isn’t rocket science.” Technically that was true, since there were no rockets involved.

On the plus side, he was able to fully calculate the centripetal forces exerted on his vortex generator. He was now confident enough to sit in the middle of a full-sized one, without fear that it would slice his head off should it beak.

Luke pushed aside exam worries and focused on the console in front of him. It was the preliminaries for the Stellar Warrior competition. The challenge was to break through enemy lines with a nimble fighter (the Fangs of the Galactic Empire) and then destroy the enemy mother ship. There was only one problem. He had finite ammo and tracking enemy ships in 3D space was tricky.

All around Luke, people sat in front of their consoles, waiting for the go ahead to begin.

Over 46 million people worldwide had signed up for the competition. That wasn’t surprising since even the winners of the preliminaries got 100$ each. Also, it helped that the game was a free MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role-playing game).

Since this was PVE (Player Verses Environment), everyone could potentially win.

“Begin,” the announcer commanded.

Luke focused his attention on the screen and grasped the joystick. Gradually the room faded away, leaving Luke with just himself and his fighter. In his mind’s eye, the screen expanded around him and he found himself on the runway of the mother ship of the Galactic Empire.

Heart rate slow and steady, Luke pressed the throttle button of the Fang. Luke felt imaginary G-forces ram him back into his pilot seat as the mother ship receded into the distance.

There in front of him was the enemy. “Okay Luke, call on the Force. Let it guide you,” Luke intoned.

Luke pressed the firing button and his Fang spat out a single photon blast. It hit an enemy ship and destroyed it. Without waiting to see the effect, Luke fired again and then again. One by one enemy ships exploded.

By now Luke was completely surrounded. It was now time for his second maneuver. Luke flew as close to the enemy as possible, while keeping his moves erratic.

Fellow NPC (Non Player Character) pilots took out enemy NPC pilots. All contestants had the same help.

*Calm yourself Luke. Feel the Force. Let it guide you.*

Through his headphones, Luke could hear the enemy ships screaming past him. Composed and collected, Luke pressed the button and bolts of energy blasted from his cannons.

The enemy thinned and he saw the mother ship. Luke relaxed his concentration for a second.

Bang!

There was an explosion as an enemy bolt hit the tip of a wing. Power dropped to 90% as circuits fried. Heart pounding a mile a minute, Luke executed an evasive maneuver.

“Damn!” Luke cursed. This was not the time to get cocky. The most dangerous part of a battle is sometimes at the very end, when people get tired and lose focus.

Trying to calm himself, Luke resumed the attack on the remaining enemy ships.

Unfortunately the enemy mother ship chose that time to start shooting. The zing of near misses rattled Luke’s nerves.

A bead of sweat fell into Luke’s eye, blurring his vision, forcing him to use his ears to detect the enemy.

With only five energy bolts left, the last fighter was shot down. Now was time for the hard part. He had to outmaneuver the ship cannons and then blast the exact center of the ship’s engine.

Waving erratically, Luke approached his destination.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Multiple hits reduced his defense to 60%. Also, his maneuverability was down to 80%. Luke fired and missed. The good news was that it knocked out two cannons.

Again Luke fired. Again he missed. Finally at half a mile distance, Luke fired the third photon blast. This shot went through and hit the target dead on. The mother ship exploded. With two shots remaining he had won the game. The Fang switched to autopilot and returned home, where Luke’s avatar got a medal.

Luke became aware of his surroundings as he removed his headphones. Looking around, he discovered he was the center of attention of a small crowd. Contestants who had lost had decided to see how he fared.

One teenager asked, “How were you able to avoid all those enemy craft? I got shot down almost at the beginning.”

“That’s simple,” Luke replied. “I listened to the enemy.”

“That’s so lame,” another player complained. “Sound doesn’t carry in space.”

“If you had read the technical specs, then you would know, the Fangs are equipped with an auditory feedback system,” Luke explained. “Using 3D sound, the Fangs show us where the enemy fighters are. Listening to location, volume and pitch allowed me to hear how they move. In the beginning I adjusted the sounds so that I could only hear enemies coming from behind. That prevented me from getting overloaded with data.”

“Oh man,” a twelve-year-old kid grumbled. “If I had known that, I could have won.”

“No you couldn’t have kid,” a man in his early twenties said. “It takes hundreds of hours of flight simulation training to get as good as we are. Although I admit this game was harder than I expected. I guess you can try again for the next tournament in six months.”

The man turned to Luke and extended a hand. “Hi, I’m Hans Klein. What’s your name kid?”

“Kid?” Luke asked and shook Hans’ hand. “You’re not that much older than me.”

“I’m twenty six,” Hans replied.

“My name is Luke Templeton and I’m nineteen.”

The speaker announced, “Attention everyone. The last candidate for your session has completed their mission. Please exit in an orderly manner so we can prepare for our next group of candidates. Have a nice day.”

“Come let’s go eat,” Hans said. “I’m buying.”

“If you’re buying, then I’m eating,” Luke replied.

They entered a burger joint, ordered food, and sat down to eat.

“So kid, are you a member of the Illuminati?” Hans asked, referring to Luke’s last name.

“I’m not a kid, and I wish,” Luke replied. “Then I could have more money to work on my science projects.”

“What sort of science projects?” Hans asked.

“Like the vortex generator in the movie Contact,” Luke said. “I created a working prototype, which then mysteriously disappeared, in addition to all my data. My chat-room buddy the Mad Anarchist claimed it was a conspiracy.”

“I wonder why Adipose Gaming is spending so much money on this competition,” Hans mused. “They spent a fortune on marketing.”

“In the words of the Mad Anarchist, ‘It’s a conspiracy man. They’re training stellar warriors for when the aliens invade.’” Luke replied, using his best hippie voice.

Hans laughed. “That Mad Anarchist is funny. What do you think is the real reason?”

“It’s a marketing ploy,” Luke replied. “Actually I’m not sure.

“I do know they just posted record profits. According to analysts, next year’s profits will be even higher. More importantly, they have their finger in the military pie of multiple nations. Have you joined a team?”

“No, I’m solo,” Hans replied.

Luke laughed. “So you’re Han Solo,” Luke said and laughed even harder until tears flowed. “I’m Luke Skywalker. Pleased to meet you,” he greeted. “Why don’t you join our group?”

“That’s funny kid, and I’ll think about joining,” Hans smiled.

They exchanged contact information.

“So what do you do to pass the time?” Hans asked.

“I’m studying mechanical engineering at college, with a major in robotics,” Luke replied.

“I’m a fighter pilot for the air force,” Hans said.

“No fair,” Luke grumbled. “You have real world experience.”

Hans laughed. “I guess that’s why I won with almost half my ammo remaining.”

“I hope you join our group,” Luke said. “I don’t want to fight you in the regionals. I need the prize money.”

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Luke got up bright and early. He borrowed his mother’s minivan and loaded it with equipment. He then drove to a nearby city park area where he knew he wouldn’t be disturbed. There he set up his full-sized vortex generator and connected it to the electric vehicle’s main battery.

The vortex generator had an acrylic sphere in the center. He opened the hatch and placed a rolling chair inside. He stepped in and latched the hatch. Luke made himself comfortable in the chair and pressed the start button.

The outermost ring began rotating. The chair rolled over the tiny air-holes as the acrylic sphere turned. The second ring began spinning, and finally the third. The chair moved erratically as the sphere spun every which way. Electricity flowed in the superconducting wires, generating Cooper-pair radiation. The device shook and rattled as mechanical forces stressed the device.

Suddenly Luke realized he made a mistake. He forgot to set up a camera to take video of the momentous occasion, so he could post it on YouTube. Luke decided to take pictures from the inside using his phone and got an unpleasant surprise. He was paralyzed.

Fear gripped Luke as he realized what he was doing could be dangerous. This fear was justified when he felt an electric tingling throughout his body. The tingling increased into pain. He was getting electrocuted.

Luke wished desperately that he had told his parents, or at least his friends, what he was doing. They could have stopped the experiment if something went wrong. It was too late now. He was going to die.

An explosion of pain rocked Luke’s brain as his vision blurred. He began hallucinating.

Luke found himself standing on a floating island in a world filled with multicolored clouds. In front of him was a snow-white creature.

She had large, expressive, child-like eyes that sparkled like emeralds and star-shaped pupils. Her mouth was large and generous, but had no nose. Instead, she seemed to have what appeared to be gills. Except her gills weren’t ugly like fish and shark gills. Her peanut-shaped face had no resemblance to being human, but it was the prettiest face Luke had ever seen.

Her body was elongated with two sets of legs and one set of arms. The tail tapered into what looked like an electric cable over 100 meters in length. Each hand had three fingers and two thumbs. Upon her back were wings. She was a dragon.

The dragon placed her gentle gaze on Luke and the sound of a wind instrument he never heard before emanated from the feathery plumage that was her gills. The song she sang was filled with worry and a warning. As she sang her song, her large catlike ears on the top of her head wiggled.

The dragon stopped singing and the scene faded. The next thing Luke knew it was dark. He was again sitting in the vortex generator, but it was no longer spinning. Surrounding him were threatening-looking people in black suites.

As consciousness faded, one thought popped into Luke’s head. Why were they all wearing dark glasses in the middle of the night?

The Best of the Best

It’s not the fighter that shoots first who wins,   
but the fighter that hits the bulls-eye first.

Luke woke up in a hospital bed. His parents and sister were there.

“Are you okay dear?” Lisa asked worriedly. “People found you sprawled next to the minivan in the park. What happened?”

*That’s odd,* Luke mused. *Shouldn’t I have been found inside my vortex generator?* He had a sinking feeling he lost his new toy, just like the first one. Unfortunately his computer was attached to the device, which meant it was lost as well.

“I’m okay mum,” Luke replied. He sat up and got dizzy. He lay back down and asked, “How long have I been out?”

“You were unconscious for three days,” the doctor said.

“Holy crap,” Luke exclaimed and tried to get up again. “I have exams.”

“Don’t worry Luke,” Father assured. “The school said you could take makeup tests.”

Luke nodded, feeling better. “When can I leave the hospital?”

“Well Luke,” the doctor began. “You seem to have gotten some sort of unknown infection. We isolated you for two days, but determined that it’s not infectious. However we still need to monitor your health.”

“If it’s unknown, can I name it?” Luke asked.

“I suppose there’s nothing wrong with that,” the doctor considered.

“How about the dork syndrome? You only get it if you conduct dorkish experiments,” Brenda suggested.

“Brenda, this is serious,” Lisa scolded.

“For the time being we are calling it the Templeton virus,” the doctor said.

Luke nodded and then said, “I don’t want to miss my exams.”

“I suppose you can go to school for your exams, but you need to return for monitoring,” the doctor offered.

“Okay doctor,” Luke agreed. “Mum, can you please get me my laptop? I need to do some studying.” *And play some video games.*

“Here it is Luke,” Father said. He picked up the laptop bag from a table and handed it to Luke.

“I have to be going,” the doctor said and left.

“Mum, do you know the results of the premieres?” Luke asked.

“46 million people competed. 98% of the applicants failed, leaving around 920 thousand people,” Lisa replied.

Luke nodded. “I can’t believe so many people were able to complete that mission. I’m going to have some stiff competition this Saturday and Sunday.”

Luke opened his laptop. Just as expected, the data was gone.

“I know you can do it dear,” Lisa said. “We have faith in you.”

“We need to go back to work son,” Luke’s father Ralph said. “If there’s anything you need, just call.”

Lisa, Ralph, and Brenda left. For the next few hours he studied for his exams, with more than a few breaks for Stellar Warrior 3.

That evening he entered his favorite chat room and greeted everyone.

“What happened to you Luke? We thought you died or something,” Lex asked.

“I almost did,” Luke replied. “I finally set up my full scale vortex generator and entered it. I then got electrocuted and then got this strange vision of a beautiful dragon. When I woke up it was night and I was surrounded by people in black suits and dark glasses. I blacked out again and then found myself in the hospital.”

“Freaky man,” the Mad Anarchist said. “The the dudes in the suites got you. I mean it’s a conspiracy man.”

“I’m glad you’re okay kid. Now let’s kick some alien butt.”

“Hans,” Luke said happily. “I’m glad you joined and I’m not a kid.”

“You’re the youngest,” Mr. Spark pointed out. “Logically speaking, that makes you the kid.”

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It was Saturday Morning, December 19, and time for battle. He was competing with 842 people in his region.

This time there was no joystick, but just a keyboard. Not being allowed to use VR goggles was a drag, but being forced to use a keyboard was just plain annoying.

“Attention everyone,” the announcer called. “This challenge will be a reconnaissance mission. You will infiltrate an enemy base and collect the plans for a new warship the enemy is building. Good luck warriors.”

Luke focused his attention on the screen and placed his hands on the keyboard. As always, the room gradually faded away, leaving Luke with just himself and his fighter. In his mind’s eye, the screen expanded around him and he found himself on the runway of the mother ship of the Galactic Empire.

Heart rate slow and steady, Luke pressed the throttle button of the Fang. Luke felt imaginary G-forces ram him back into his pilot seat as the mother ship receded into the distance.

Luke headed planet-side and landed in a rocky area near the enemy mountain research center. Luke exited the Fang and stealthily approached.

Guarding the entrance was a group of enemy soldiers. The invading Andromeda Empire never used its elite troops for menial tasks such as guard duty. Instead they employed slave races such as the Rants.

The Rants were a vicious rat-like species that had excellent aim. If they catch you, they’ll eat you.

Luke peeked around a rock and launched a grenade. It exploded near the entrance and destroyed the door. It also killed several Rants.

The Rants charged Luke’s position and fired. Luke fired at an overhanging rock. The rock fell, taking out several enemy units.

Luke ran and jumped from boulder to boulder. The Rants were weak against attacks from above. Within minutes the battalion was wiped out.

“As easy as shooting fish in a barrel,” Luke said aloud. He paused a moment to consider how strange that expression was. Shooting fish in a barrel wasn’t easy, or at least Luke didn’t think it would be.

Automated weapons fired from above. Luke launched grenades. One by one the cannons went out of commission. Task complete, Luke returned to his Fang and resupplied with grenades.

Luke approached a Rant soldier and pressed a button on the keyboard. His avatar knocked the Rant out. Another button caused Luke’s avatar to remove the enemy soldier’s uniform and put it on itself. Luke entered the fortress.

The disguise was lousy and it caused a 20% reduction in maneuverability. However, having so many slave races, it was nearly impossible for the enemy to track who was who. Luke walked down the corridor while enemy troops ignored him.

Luke stepped up to a console and pressed keys. A map appeared showing the layout of the base. There was the main reactor and there was the lab. Luke headed for the reactor room.

The door was guarded by stroncers. They were discussing what they would do after their shift ended. Stroncers had the body shape of gorillas with alligator skin. They preferred close combat fighting, since they were near sighted as a species.

The standard way of getting past them was to make a diversion and then walk past them. Luke pressed a button and a grenade exploded.

As expected, all the stroncers went to investigate. That was expected since they had a strong herd mentality.

Luke passed the blockade and into the reactor room. There he placed bombs in several strategic locations and set the time to 30 minutes. He left and headed for the research lab.

The Guardian overlords of the Andromeda Empire almost always employed braggins for the research labs. Braggins were a Vulcan-like race that tended to be rigid in their thinking. Fortunately Luke had forged papers.

Luke handed the documentation to the first braggin that approached. He verified the document with the others and then gave permission to Luke to access the computers. In less than a minute Luke had downloaded the data.

Luke then walked out of the base and stepped into his Fang. Just as he took off, the fortress exploded. The Fang switched to autopilot and returned to the mother ship, where Luke got a medal.

Luke removed his headphones and looked around. Some of the contestants were still playing. One eighteen-year-old-girl complained, “Those stupid gorilla-alligator things got me.”

“That’s because they have a strong herd mentality. Every single one of them will fight you to the death if you kill or injure one, and they are crazy strong and fast. The trick is to avoid fighting them, if possible,” Luke explained.

He headed back to the hospital for an examination and to prepare for his next exam.

The next day, Luke discovered that only 56 people passed the Saturday elimination round. That went to show that advanced knowledge of the enemy went a long way in a battle.

The final regional round was a PVP (Player Verses Player) challenge, where contestants would fight each other. The field was an abandoned space station filled with traps. Using traps, stealth and luck Luke won after an hour battle.

-- Saturday, January 16, 2037 --

The regional champions throughout the world were invited to Tokyo to celebrate the fact that they won. Luke’s parents and sister came along as well.

The convention hall was packed with the 1024 winners and their guests.

“This seems quite extravagant for a private company, don’t you think?” Father asked.

“I suppose,” Luke agreed and looked around for his friends. “However the parent company’s holdings are greater than Apple.”

“Welcome everyone,” the announcer greeted in international English. “Please mingle and get to know your fellow regional winners. As mentioned in the beginning, we offer employment at Adipose Gaming for those who wish. Our salaries are competitive. Next month we will begin the competition for the Best of the Best.

“Remember fellow warriors, we are fighting to protect the Galactic Empire from the evil Andromeda Empire, who wants to enslave the universe and extinguish all free will. Even now the battle between good and evil rages among the stars, as galaxy after galaxy burns in the flames of war.”

“Damn, you guys take gaming seriously,” Father commented.

Luke shrugged. “We got a vacation out of it and if I win the grand prize, we shall be rich.”

“You’ll have to settle for second prize kid, because I’m going to take the grand prize.”

“Hans, these are my parents, Lisa and Ralph, and that is my big sister, Brenda,” Luke introduced. “Mum, dad, Sis, this is my gaming buddy Hans Klein.”

“Seriously?” Brenda asked in surprise. “I can’t believe you are friends with such a hottie. Why didn’t you tell me one of your friends was so hot?”

“How the hell would I know if a guy is hot?” Luke grumbled. “He looks like any other guy I have ever seen in my life.”

“Luke, how old is she?” Hans whispered.

“Twenty-three,” Luke replied.

Hans leaned against a wall and smiled at Brenda. “Hi there cutie. Did you know I’m a pilot? I’m Major Hans Klein of the US Air Force and you could have the honor of dating me.”

Brenda raised an eyebrow and said, “You’re one cocky little bastard, aren’t you. I like that.”

“And you’re one hot tamale, my beautiful princess,” Hans smiled.

Brenda blushed and said, “I’m no princess.”

“You got that right,” Luke agreed.

Kick!

“Ouch,” Luke screamed and hopped on one foot. He held his other foot and rubbed his ankle.

“Brenda, be considerate with your brother. He is sick after all,” Mother scolded.

“Yes mother,” Brenda apologized.

Just then Luke heard a familiar voice mixed with the din of the crowd. “It’s a conspiracy man,” it said. “They are fattening us up before they send us out to battle and die.”

“Excuse me everyone,” Luke said. “I hear a familiar voice.”

“How can you hear anything over this racket?” Brenda asked as Luke left.

“That’s because he’s still just a kid,” Hans replied. “They have better hearing than us grownups, which is an advantage in games like Stellar Warrior.”

Luke ignored Hans and headed to his friend. The Mad Anarchist was there, along with his other friends and their supporters. That wasn’t surprising since groups and their supporters were seated together.

“I wonder why they made sure groups didn’t compete in the regionals. What’s the point in that?” Mr. Spock wondered.

“It’s a conspiracy man,” the Mad Anarchist said. “They want us to be together when we form squadrons for the upcoming war.”

Hans and Luke’s family arrived.

“That’s perfect, because then we can wreck the greatest mayhem,” Dark Reaver cackled.

“How big is a squadron?” Father asked.

“In Stellar Warrior, it’s twelve units,” Mr. Spock replied his deadpan-serious voice. “It’s very logical.”

Everyone took their seats at the tables and salad was served.

“Greetings fellow warriors and guests,” the announcer spoke. “Today we have a very special guest. For the first time ever, the Galactic Emperor has decided to grace our world with his presence. Please stand to pledge allegiance to the empress.”

A classic red dragon out of a fantasy novel appeared on the screen. Everyone stood up and the gamers saluted by placing their right fist against their heart.

Words of the pledge appeared on a side screen and all gamers spoke the pledge.

“Warriors of the galactic empire, the fight for our freedom is intensifying. Planet after planet is falling. It is up to you to help save our galaxy from the evil Andromeda Empire,” the dragon spoke, using a very human voice.

“I ask that you join Adipose and train hard so that you can become the heroes that protect the precious freedom of our galaxy. As you know, we allow each race to develop as they see fit, until they are ready to formally join our empire.

“Unfortunately, that is no longer an option for your race. The Evil Empire has discovered your race by the radio and television signals you have been broadcasting. It is now time to fight for your world and your freedom.”

The screen went blank and the announcer continued. “Thank you, Emperor, for your words of concern,” the announcer said.

“Please be seated everyone.

“There you have it. We need you to help us protect our planet, as well as to create superior games. We are the top gaming company in the world for one reason only. We employ superior individuals such as you to develop superior technology that brings happiness to everyone. Will you join us in creating a glorious future?”

The sales pitch continued for ten minutes, and then the announcer asked for questions.

“When will we see the Galactic Princess?” someone asked.

“The current emperor and empress have two sons and a daughter and is only 850 years old,” Mr. Spock explained to his parents. His real name was Gary Ford, but no one ever called him that.

“The previous emperor was killed less than five years ago when his ship was destroyed while on a diplomatic mission.

“The Galactic Princess is only 82 years old and is supposed to be the most beautiful creature in the universe. That is illogical, since every race has their own idea of beauty.”

“We can’t reveal her identity, since the princess is in constant danger of being kidnapped,” the announcer explained.

“Of course not,” Cloud Strife said. “Where’s the fun in that?”

“82 years old,” Brenda exclaimed. “Wouldn’t that make her all wrinkly?”

“The draconic race is functionally immortal and reproduces very slowly,” Mr. Spock said. “From their point of view, the princess is just a teenager.”

“That’s perfect for Luke, since he too is just a kid,” Hans added.

Following the announcements came entertainment, interspersed with announcements for new games, including Stellar Warrior 4.

“I told you I’m not a kid,” Luke said angrily and popped a pill.

“What’s that for?” Hans asked.

“This is menaphine,” Luke replied and showed the bottle to Hans. “It’s a pain killer that’s as strong as morphine, but much safer. I need to take it once a day with meals. Unfortunately, it’s not strong enough to block really big pains, such as Sis.”

Luke was too far away for Brenda to reach, so she hit Luke on the head with a piece of bread.

“It’s a conspiracy man,” the Mad Anarchist said. “The dudes in the suites did a number on you, didn’t they?”

“Are you planning on building another vortex generator?” Lex Luthor asked.

“No,” Luke replied. “I’ve learnt my lesson. I’m going to use my prize money to build a prototype R2D2 unit.”

“How about a C-3PO unit?” Scotty asked.

“No way,” Luke replied. “C-3PO was an annoying droid who was always getting into trouble. I don’t need a useless protocol droid.” He then added.

“Why do you need such powerful pain killers?” Mr. Spock’s mother, Sera asked.

“He was foolish enough to enter a vortex generator and got zapped,” Mr. Spock explained.

“Luke, why did you do something so stupid?” Lisa asked angrily. “You could have died.”

“What is a vortex generator?” Ralph asked.

“It’s just a spinning electromagnet,” Luke replied. “It’s been used in motors and generators for centuries. In theory nothing should have happened. It doesn’t matter since I lost it and I don’t intend to build another one.”

A thought entered Luke’s head. What would have happened if he had used AC current instead of DC current? He pushed that thought aside and focused on desert.

“What kind of stupid name is Adipose anyway?” Dark Reaver’s father, Bernard asked, trying to change the subject. “Why not call it belly fat?”

“It’s sounds like a name a person who doesn’t fully understand English would choose,” Mr. Spock’s father, Hector guessed.

“It’s a conspiracy man,” the Mad Anarchist said. “It’s the aliens who established the company and are using humans as front men.”

“For you, everything is a conspiracy dear,” the Mad Anarchist’s mother, Myrtle said. Everyone who knew Mad Anarchist laughed. No one could figure if he truly believed or if he just enjoyed acting.

Adipose

Fat represents prosperity,   
but too much fat can kill

Luke sat in the lobby of the Adipose office, nervously waiting for his appointment. Outside was a typical drizzly Monday evening in Redmond, Washington.

“Hi Luke, my name is Edward Jones,” Edward said. He unlocked the lobby door with his ID card and they entered. “So how long have you lived in Seattle?” Edward asked, making small talk.

“All my life,” Luke replied. “I love the city and the mountains and the sound.”

“What do you think of the Seahawks?” Edward asked.

“They were so close,” Luke replied. “Perhaps next year they’ll play in the Super Bowl.”

“Here is my office, and you don’t need to be nervous. Do you want something to drink?”

“No thanks,” Luke replied.

The office was a typical office with a desk, lamp, chairs and black board. On the desk was a strange musical instrument. In appearance, it looked like two trumpets stuck together, with the complex controls of a flute, and there was no slider. It was around 7 inches long and pocket sized.

Without thinking, Luke picked up the instrument.

“Do you play?” Edward asked. “Please have a seat.”

“No,” Luke replied and sat down.

“This bi-flute is controlled using both hands and two reeds. Pull the pieces apart.” The front separated, but was still connected with sliding pipes. “Just like an accordion, you can modulate the sound by moving the two pieces together or outward. I have a recording of it.”

The music was eerie, lonely, and nostalgic.

“That’s it,” Luke exclaimer and got up. “Last month I was electrocuted. After getting knocked out, I dreamt of visiting a gas giant filled with hovering islands. In my dream I met a beautiful dragon who sang to me. Her voice sounded similar that.”

“Well young man, how would you like that instrument?” Edward asked.

“But it probably costs thousands,” Luke argued.

Edward smiled and pushed a document towards Luke. Luke hesitated and then said, “But I can’t work here full time. I haven’t finished schooling.”

“We’re quite aware of your student status,” Edward assured. “That works to your advantage, since mechanical engineering is important to us.

“Now then, there’s nothing wrong with working 2-3 hours a night here, is there? Also, we expect you to be able to work during the weekends, from 6:00PM Friday to 6:00PM Sunday.”

“But what am I supposed to do? I only have high school level programming experience,” Luke asked.

“I assure you your experience level is sufficient for us,” Edward replied and pushed the paper again to Luke. “Here at Adipose, we like people who think and work outside the box.”

“If you say so,” Luke said uncertainly and signed multiple documents. As he signed he felt as if he was signing his soul away to the Devil.

“Sign this too. It’s for the bi-flute,” Edward added and brought out a bi-flute case. Luke signed and returned the bi-flute to its case, and then clipped it to his belt.

“Please follow me. We at Adipose are working on an adventure theme park where people will have the real Stellar Warrior experience. We have simulated environments of various worlds where our patrons will battle as if they were in the real game. You will help test these games.

“In addition, we are working on a training regiment for the US military. You will go through the military training to make sure our product is satisfactory for the military.”

“But I’m not physically fit,” Luke complained. “For me, exercise is watching football.”

“No problem,” Edward replied. “You will be fit by the time we’re through with you. As a matter of fact, the fact that your fitness level is less than perfect works in our favor.

“The military has been developing body building drugs for decades. The latest drugs have no known side effects.”

*Did you say drugs? I didn’t agree to that. Damn! I should have read the contract before signing,* Luke thought apprehensively.

“Don’t be alarmed Luke,” Edward reassured. “Top doctors will monitor both you and your friends to ensure your safety. We also know about your medical history and will take that into consideration.

“Please keep in mind that this is all top secret, especially the military training…”

“And the gene therapy,” Luke added.

“I assure you gene therapy it is safe. Multiple therapies are already on the market,” Edward reassured. “Now it’s time to get you your ID card. It will get you into all the areas you need to work in.”

“Just as long as I don’t turn into Frankenstein’s monster or his dog,” Luke commented as they entered the security office.

The office had a short line. They waited ten minutes and then the guard took a picture of Luke for his smart card.

Luke frowned at the ID. His hair was messy and he looked like a space cadet. He put it in his wallet.

“Okay Luke, I’ll show you your desk,” Edward said.

The office was filled with about a dozen desks. “This is your desk and computer. Our IT department has installed the necessary software.

“Stellar Warrior 4 represents a quantum leap in complexity. We have added 143 slave races and 187 friendly races. In addition, the amount of alien technology you can use has also been greatly increased. You can also custom build machines in-game and adapt alien technologies to your needs. Your knowledge of engineering and robotics will come in handy here. The physics engine is amazing.

“But first you need to gain a full understand of the alien technologies and races as soon as possible, so that testing can begin.”

“I can’t believe I’m being paid to play video games,” Luke marveled.

“It’s more than a game,” Edward intoned. “It’s a way of life. I’ll show you how to log on and access the network from your home.”

Half an hour later, Edward took him to the gym. “Luke, this is Arnold Smith. Starting tomorrow, he will be your trainer.”

Arnold looked like a walking slab of beef.

“Hello scrawny little boy,” Arnold said with a sweetish accent. “Tomorrow at 7:00AM, I’m going to pump you up. You will no longer be a wimpy little boy but a manly man.”

“Hold it,” Luke said worriedly. “I’m not a morning person.”

“That’s because you’re a wimpy little boy,” Arnold said as he flexed his muscles. “Real men wake up at the crack of dawn to train.”

*Why are they giving me a personal trainer? Something’s not right with this picture. I don’t want a trainer. That’s too much hard work.* He didn’t say that out loud.

“Don’t worry Luke,” Edward assured. “We have an apartment for you on campus. Here’s the address. It’s fully furnished so you can sleep there tonight. Then you can work out and then go to school.

“It’s almost 7:00PM. There’s one more thing you need to do today and then you’ll be free until 7:00AM tomorrow.”

They headed to a music room and entered. Students of various ages filled the room. Edward said goodbye and left.

“Hello students,” the teacher said. “My name is Melodine Philips. Starting today I will teach you to play the by-flute. It is a complicated instrument that I know every one of you can master.

“How many people have played a musical instrument before? That’s fine since we will begin with the basics of music theory.”

The words, ‘*It’s a conspiracy man’,* echoed in Luke’s brain. *I’m getting a free apartment, personal trainer, music lesions, and money just for playing games. This was too good to be true. Perhaps I really did sign my soul away to the Devil, but when will they collect?*

A sinister laugh echoed through the room. *Wha-ha-ha ha-ha…*

“Sorry about that,” Luke apologized and silenced his phone.

Basic Training

A sound body is the basis  
for a sound mind  
and a sound heart

“Hello little boy,” Arnold greeted and flexed his muscles. “Are you ready for me to pump you up?”

For the next hour Arnold gave Luke a grueling workout that made Luke’s legs and arms feel like noodles. He took a shower in his new apartment and went to school.

The school day passed like normal and Luke arrived at Adipose. In the office Luke found his friends, as well as three new people. He greeted his friends and introduced himself to the new people. The game names of the three new members were Jack Sparrows, Brucie, and the Mad Peon.

Luke sat at his desk and studied the new races and their technologies with an eye to finding mistakes.

After that came music lessons while the others continued working on their computers. Luke then returned to the office for more studying. The remainder of the week was the same.

-- Saturday, January 23, 2037, 7:00AM --

Luke arrived at the office as per instructions. The others were there. It was time to take the training Adipose was developing for the US armed forces.

“Good morning gentlemen, I am General Jones, head of regiment 23 of the Earth Forces,” Edward said. “The first thing we need to do is get equipment for you. Then you start the training for which you were hired. Please follow me.”

The twelve members of the squadron boarded the military truck and headed out.

“Well men, do you think you are ready for the most intense game of your life? Keep in mind that this is for the military, so the drill sergeant will be, shall we say, a little on the annoying side,” Edward explained. “For the first part of the training you will be treated like enlisted men. After you finish that training you will go through officer training.”

They arrived at a military facility and entered a building. Luke approached the clerk and handed her his ID. Within minutes he got a combat uniform, dress uniform, equipment and a blaster that looked like the real thing from the game.

“The blaster is a regular gun you will use for training,” Edward explained. “Sorry we can’t give you the real thing at this time,” he added with a smile.

The Mad Anarchist looked as if he wanted to say something.

“Say it,” Luke said with a smile. “I know you want to.”

“It’s a conspiracy man,” the Mad Anarchist said. “They don’t want us to know they have the real thing until after the war formally starts.”

Edward glanced at the Mad Anarchist but didn’t comment. Instead he said, “It’s time for you to change and get ready for basic training.”

At the base they were greeted by a large man in combat uniform. “Listen up maggots, my name is Sergeant Slaughter, and it will be my job to turn you soft civilians into fighting machines,” Sergeant Slaughter screamed at the top of his voice. The sound rattled Luke’s brain.

Most people have voices with a little bit of shrillness that hurt Luke’s ears, but this sergeant had none. However it was way too loud.

After ten minutes of shouting, the sergeant took them on a run and then through an obstacle course.

Following that was basic military training that all soldiers need to know.

That evening everyone sat together and complained.

“I don’t know who will kill me first, the drill sergeant or the aliens,” Luke grumbled as he rubbed his sore muscles.

“Quit your complaining,” Scotty complained. “At least you’re taking pain killers. We don’t have that option.”

“You’ll get through this,” Hans assured. “Although I remember it almost killed me.” He wasn’t taking the training since he did it before. Instead he was taking more advanced training with another group.

- Saturday, February 20, 2027, 1:00PM -

Day after day training continued. Finally it was time for the final rounds of the competition.

To win Luke had to defeat ten people in one-on-one competition. This would be broadcast for the world to see.

The first challenge was a dogfight. His opponent was an unknown from Sweden.

Luke took off and headed into space. Within moments his opponent appeared on radar. This time VR goggles were supplied. That made it much easier to play, since that gave a more immersive experience. Unfortunately the opponent had the same advantage.

Within moments they were in firing range. Luke took evasive action as photon blasts zipped past.

Luke made a detour to a nearby asteroid field and the opponent followed. Asteroid courses were fun for Luke and he relaxed to the experience. Just then there was an explosion behind Luke. The opponent took himself out by hitting an asteroid. That was lame.

Luke navigated himself out of the asteroid field. A moment later the Fang switched to autopilot and returned to the mother ship.

The second match was an aerial race through a jungle. A standard game controller controlled the flying racer. The left joystick controlled the laser cannon and the right controlled flight.

The green light flashed and Luke hit the accelerator. Both racers zoomed through the forests, each narrowly missing ten-foot-wide trees.

Luke tried to get a bead on the opponent, but it was difficult to do while flying at what seemed like a hundred miles an hour through the jungle.

In and out Luke weaved as he went under logs and over boulders.

Trees exploded as the enemy shot at Luke. He returned fire and almost hit a tree. Heart pounding, he focused on flying.

Luke tried to slow down and get behind his enemy, but the enemy slowed down as well. They both exchanged shots, devastating the forest in the process.

This was getting frustrating. Luke considered himself an expert in this type of course, but the woman seemed better.

Just then Luke almost hit an eighty-foot-wide spider web. Keeping a bead on the opponent, Luke discovered his opponent wasn’t so lucky. She ran right into the web.

Luke slowed his machine and fired. It was a direct hit. Luke won the battle. Feeling exhausted, Luke removed his goggles.

“That was incredible Luke,” Lisa said and hugged him.

“Thanks mum,” Luke replied. “We now have 256 contestants. I need to make it to at least the top sixteen. I still have to face my buddies.”

“I know you can do it dear,” Lisa said.

Luke glanced around the room. His friends were battling people from around the world. One by one their sessions ended. He wondered how many would last to the end.

“Contestants, prepare for your next session,” the proctor instructed.

Luke got back to the console and put his goggles and headphones on. This time he was in an alien garbage dump with no equipment. The field was fifty miles in length, and they were at opposite ends. The objective was to take the enemy’s flag and bring it back.

Luke rummaged through the junk and collected parts. It took him almost ten minutes of searching, but he finished. He then assembled the parts with tools he found and assembled a vehicle. He also had projectile weapons just in case he had to fight.

For precaution Luke set up a bunch of boogie traps.

In real life, the process was as simple as clicking on items to collect and move them. He then tested and assembled the parts.

Luke added tools and spare parts to his makeshift vehicle and headed out.

Halfway there Luke’s vehicle conked out. Examining the vehicle, Luke found the problem and fixed it.

Five minutes later Luke arrived at the enemy base. Luke then spent ten minutes navigating non-existent traps.

Luke grabbed the enemy flag and headed back. As he was returning, he spotted the enemy running to his base. He took the enemy out and returned to base. The winner poster showed.

Luke removed his goggles and said, “That was too easy.”

“Why didn’t he make a car thing like you did?” Ralph asked.

“Maybe he did, and it died. The Stellar Warrior game is very realistic,” Luke explained. “It obeys all the laws of nature. I only won because of my knowledge of mechanical engineering and knowledge of cars. My mechanical knowledge was greater, and so I won. Now there are 128 people left.”

“Are you saying you need to know mechanical engineering to play the game? Isn’t that a little extreme for a video game?” Ralph asked in surprise.

“Not just mechanical engineering,” Luke replied. “Knowledge of physics, chemistry and programming come in handy as well. It’s a crazy game and I have yet to find a bug in it.”

“It’s a conspiracy man,” the Mad Anarchist said as he approached. “This game was created by aliens as a training tool. We are being trained to fight. Those who can’t fight in all fields aren’t fit to protect our world when the Guardians come to take our freedom away.”

The others came as well. “Fortunately the amount of engineering we need isn’t as great as what Luke has, or I would have lost on that one,” Dark Reaver said. “Why does a psychopathic killer need so much knowledge to be evil? It’s so sad.” He shook his head in sorrow.

They Came – We Lost

Wars are sometimes determines   
before the first bullet is ever fired.

Sunday Evening, September 9th, 2039.

Luke was spending the evening with his family. Hans sat with Brenda while they watched a remake of *the Fifth Wave*.

“The premise of the movie is silly,” Luke commented. “Why would aliens take so much trouble to exterminate the human race? They could have easily done it within a day or two with their advanced technology. They come. We scream in pain for a few seconds and then it’s all over.”

“Cone on son,” Ralph said. “That wouldn’t make for a very interesting movie.”

They watched as swarms of zombies overran cities.

The movie was interrupted a few seconds later when a creature that resembled a cross between an ant and a fly appeared on screen.

“Greetings people of Earth. We are the Guardians, the ones who impose order upon this chaotic universe.

“Seven years ago, your people broke the light barrier, thereby alerting us to your presence. We have spent this time studying you in order for us to decide how best to free your people from Chaos.

“We have freed hundreds of races from Chaos and now they live in perfect happiness. Happiness comes about by knowing your place in the hierarchy of society and striving to fulfill your duties to the best of your capabilities. Only then can perfection reign.

“As we speak, members of our child races are descending upon your planet to help you transition into a perfect society. Please greet them with open arms and be happy.”

“Is this part of the movie?” Lisa asked.

C:\Users\Burgess\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary Internet Files\Content.IE5\0LM9LILP\MC900065312[1].wmf

“No Mrs. Templeton. That’s an Envoy from Stellar Warrior. They are used as front men for the Guardian race in Stellar Warrior. No one knows what the Guardians really look like,” Hans replied.

The transmission ended and the movie resumed.

Luke looked out of the window and spotted tiny dots in the sky. They resolved themselves into spacecraft.

“Holy crap,” Luke exclaimed. “Those are Rant transport ships. We are being invaded.”

Lisa looked terrified.

“Who are the Rants?” Ralph asked as he held his wife.

“They are just a slave race,” Hans said. “The Guardians are a dictatorial race who can’t tolerate ways of living other than their own. If they can’t incorporate us into their ridged hieratical society, then they will exterminate us.”

Luke’s phone rang. He listened and then said, “I’m with Hans. We’re on our way. What about our families?”

White faced, Luke said, “Mum, Dad, Stellar Warrior isn’t a game. I have to go to my apartment. Be back in ten minutes.

“Pack your suitcase everyone. We are heading to SeaTac. It is time for us to leave this planet and fight a war.”

Luke headed for his apartment. On arrival, he went to a mysterious locked trunk Adipose insisted he keep in his room. He entered a code someone from Adipose gave him over the phone.

He entered the code ‘1234’ and it opened. Inside the trunk was military equipment from the game. Staring at the contents, Luke knew with every fiber of his being that those things and that blaster was real.

Luke went to his closet and put on his combat uniform and then loaded himself up with equipment. He clipped his bi-flute case onto his belt. The dress uniform went into the trunk, along with clothes and stuff he didn’t want to leave behind.

“R2, follow me,” Luke called and headed for the door with military trunk in hand. The R2 unit followed and they went back to the minivan. Luke put his luggage and his R2 unit into the trunk and drove back to his house.

*I wonder if I’ll be able to kill a sentient being,* Luke wondered as he entered his home. Already some of the space craft had landed. Off in the distance he heard gunfire as residence tried to protect their homes.

Luke ran into his parent’s room and asked, “Do you have any suitcases packed yet? I need to load the car as soon as possible.”

In the background, the television blared instructions for the residence, telling them to stay calm and that the military would deal with the situation.

Lisa looked at Luke with big eyes and then pointed at a suitcase. Luke placed it in the minivan and then went to Brenda’s room.

Brenda looked at him with a face tinged with fear and said, “You really are a Stellar Warrior, aren’t you?”

Just then there was a loud explosion followed by screams. “Unfortunately,” Luke said and grabbed Brenda’s suitcase.

Ten minutes later they were in the car and headed for the airport. “I always found it strange how incredibly detailed the game was and why they were giving me crazy amounts of military training,” Luke commented.

At the airport Luke showed his Adipose ID card to a guard. She saluted him and told him where to go. They arrived on the tarmac filled with other cars. A soldier approached and saluted. “Lieutenant Skywalker, allow me to take your luggage.”

Luke handed the soldier the keys and said, “Thanks.”

Everyone got out and headed to a large group of people.

The group was composed of government officials, military brass, and various VIPs, along with their families. People in fancy cars trickled into the restricted area.

Nearby, filled luggage racks sat, ready to be loaded onto the plane once it arrived.

“Won’t they shoot us down or something?” Brenda asked worriedly. Nearby people nodded, thinking the same thing.

“No they won’t,” Luke replied in a commanding voice loud enough for everyone to hear. “The Andromeda Empire is built on a caste system. They believe everyone was born to fulfill a certain function in society. There are soldier races, worker races, intellectual races, and so on. In the next few days they will shoebox our race and then force us to conform to those expectations.

“Right now they will not interfere with us unless we attack them first. Rest assured that the world governments have been preparing for this for years.”

“Isn’t Stellar Warrior just a stupid game?” a senator asked.

“I thought so too, just an hour ago,” Luke replied. “Unfortunately this blaster and those spaceships look real.”

A cute twelve-year-old boy saw Luke’s name tag and came up to him. “You’re Luke Skywalker. Do you have a light saber?” he asked.

*The kid looked familiar. Who was he?* Luke remembered. It was Sam, the president’s son. He was on TV, when the president got sworn in two weeks previously. John, the father stood nearby.

“Yes Sam,” Luke said and rubbed the boy’s head. “It’s in my R2 unit.”

Sam opened his eyes wide and said, “You have an R2 unit. That’s so cool.”

“Do you?” John asked.

Just then a whistling sound came from a nearby luggage rack. “Look dad. It’s R2D2.”

The child ran to the machine and stuck his hand out. “Hi R2, I’m Sam,” Sam said.

A tiny door opened and a metal hand came out and shook Sam’s hand. It then withdrew the hand and continued making beeping and whistling sounds.

The sight of Sam and R2 greatly improved the morale of the passengers. Even nearby workers seemed optimistic.

“Do those sounds mean anything?” John asked.

“Yes,” Luke replied. “It’s based on a musical language my instructors have been teaching me.”

“I’m sorry folks but the planes have been delayed for at least an hour,” a pilot announced.

Just then a large swarm of bee-like insects descended and attacked the people. Within seconds every person was stung. The creatures fell to the ground when their job was complete. The rest of the bees flew away.

“What the hell was that?” someone asked.

“According to the Stellar Warrior handbook, those things are called judges. They inject nano-probes into the victim. The nano-probes examine the DNA and biology of the victim and judge whether the person is fit to be part of the Andromeda Collective.”

“What’s going to happen to us,” a woman screamed.

“I don’t know ma’am,” Luke said. “I just know the names of all species and the roles they play in the game.”

Luke paused a moment, not knowing what to do. He removed his bi-flute from its belt pouch and played. The stressed-out people stood quietly and waited.

About ten minutes later an elderly gentleman fell over. This was followed by a frail woman in a wheelchair.

“Someone, call 911,” a man shouted.

“I’m sorry but it’s too late for them,” Luke replied. “According to the handbook, the job of judges is to prune races.”

“How do you know so much?” a woman asked angrily.

Luke paused a moment in thought and then replied with the story of how he joined Adipose Gaming.

“I now realize that they were training soldiers in preparation for war for years.”

“How many people will die?” a woman cried hysterically. “I don’t want to die.” Just then a twenty-year-old man in perfect-seeming health fell to the ground. Off in the distance a truck crashed into a waiting plane. The death toll rose.

“The handbook says judgement will last ten to twenty minutes. Then the immediate danger will have passed,” Luke explained.

“What is an otaku?” someone asked.

“Someone who is obsessed with playing video games and watching cartoons,” Luke replied. He paused and then said with a smile, “I never thought my obsession with video games would come in handy. Don’t worry. All games can be won.

“After all, we are human and they are just stupid aliens. Am I right or am I right?” He added with as much enthusiasm as he could muster. That was false bravado, since no one has ever come close to defeating a system boss, much less winning the game.

“That’s right,” Sam declared with a smile and gave Luke a hug. “You’re Luke Skywalker, Jedi Knight.”

“That’s right I am,” Luke declared with as much enthusiasm as he could muster. “And I’m going to kick some alien butt.

“For those who are interested, the universal language of the Galactic Empire is a musical language. This is called a bi-flute. It can produce the vowels and consonants of the language. We can speak it as well, or use sign language, but this sounds nicer.” Luke played again as they waited.

The planes finally arrived and Luke’s audience expressed disappointment when the performance ended.

Sam grabbed Luke and made him sit with him. Brenda took the aisle seat on the other side of Luke.

“I had no idea you were so cool, baby brother,” Brenda said.

Luke laughed. “So it took an alien invasion to help you figure that out?”

“Thank you for your patience ladies and gentlemen,” the pilot said. “We will now head for the Nevada Test and Training Range, also known as Area 51.”

“Despite your big ears,” Brenda added.

“My ears aren’t big, are they?” Luke asked worriedly and covered his ears. He had to admit they were bigger than normal ears. What was worse, they were making him look like a dorky little kid. His extra large head didn’t help. Impossibly, he had grown three inches since completing high school.

Luke stared out of the window and saw alien spacecraft flying through the sky. “I feel I’m in a dream. Yesterday Stellar Warrior was just a stupid game I was being paid to play. Today aliens are conquering the world.”

“Why are they killing people?” Brenda asked.

“They call it pruning and cultivating,” Luke replied. “According to the back story, they do it to all newly enslaved races. They will eliminate the weak and keep what best fits the role they will assign to us.”

“That’s horrible,” Brenda said, shocked.

“That’s why we have to fight. According to the back story, the Galactic Empire is horribly stretched in this battle. The amount of help they can give is limited to technology and a few advisors,” Luke replied.

“So it’s hopeless,” Brenda said sadly.

“No it’s not useless,” Sam said adamantly. “We have Luke Skywalker.”

“Sam is right. There is hope,” Luke replied. “The Guardians will dedicate a certain amount of resources to this world and then ignore it, assuming it will function as intended. All we have to do is cut off the link to the main forces and then deal with the current invaders.”

That was easier said than done. The Guardians had been conquering worlds for thousands of years, so they knew what they were doing.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we will be landing shortly. Please put your seats in their upright positions and secure your belongings,” the flight attendant called.

Luke stared out the window as they landed. Other planes were landing and taking off.

“Attention passengers, all civilians please go to the officer with the blue flag. Military personal and Stellar Warriors, go to the officer with the green flag,” the flight attendant announced.

“But I want to stay with you,” Sam complained.

“What’s wrong with staying with your father?” John asked.

“Because you’re not a Jedi Knight,” Sam replied worriedly. Sam’s father flinched at the reply.

“Sorry Sam, duty calls. See you later mum, dad, Sis,” Luke said and headed for his destination. Luke’s group headed to the nearest building and entered.

At the far end of hall was a conference hall. The conference room was packed with people in Stellar Warrior uniforms and military personal. Edward was there, wearing a US army uniform.

Luke ran up to him and asked in surprise, “You’re an army guy?”

He smiled and said, “Sorry for keeping secrets from you, kid. I’ll explain everything in a few minutes.”

A soldier announced, “General, the last officer has arrived.”

“Thank you Sergeant Jones,” Edward said. He faced the audience and continued. “Everyone please take your seats.

“As you can guess, Stellar Warrior is not a game. It is a training tool for finding and training Special Forces to defend our world from aliens. Everything you know about the game applies, since the game was based on reality.

“Was that dragon the real Emperor?” someone asked.

“No,” Edward replied. “The Emperor’s appearance is classified at this time. That’s not important.

“On June 17h, 2015, we test fired a prototype of a faster than light drive. It was launched into space on a Russian rocket, and the test lasted a full 8 seconds.

“Unknown to us, this alerted both the Andromeda and Galactic empires of our existence.

Unfortunately, Andromeda got here first. For the record, they sacrificed 4 of its 5 ships for the speed advantage. The fifth arrived, but it was badly damaged. The only thing it could do was launch its entire payload and limp back into outer space.

“How come no one spotted it?” a general asked.

“Because no government was worried about asteroids at the time,” Edward replied.

“In October 2017, the ship was discovered and mistaken for an asteroid, and named Oumuamua.”

“Eventually members of the Galactic Empire arrived, but it was too late. We were already being held hostage.”

“In their haste, they almost lost their mission. That doesn’t make sense,” a captain exclaimed.

“The guardians view all sentient races as just cogs in a wheel. Therefore an 80% loss is acceptable.”

“General Jones, can you tell us about the X Warrior project?” a major general asked.

“I’m sorry but that’s classified,” Edward said and checked his notes. “All I can say is that we have twelve people in training for that super-elite force. The US has one, China has five, Germany has one, Russia has two, India has one, Iran has one, and finally Saudi Arabia has the last one. The identities of these people are classified.”

“It must be me since I’m an evil genius,” Lex said.

“That is illogical,” Mr. Spock said. “You would know if you were a member of this super-elite force.”

“We didn’t know we were part of the military until now,” Scotty commented.

“Point taken,” Mr. Spock replied.

“Is it true that the process of creating an X Warrior is almost 100% fatal?” a colonel asked.

“That too is classified,” Edward replied.

“Meaning ‘Yes’,” Mad Anarchist commented aloud.

“Were those wasp things killing at random?” a general asked.

“No,” Edwards replied. “They were targeting all the sociopaths and psychopaths of the world.

“From their point of views, these people have two fatal flaws. One is they always question authority. They always ask, ‘What’s in it for me?’

“And two, they are never willing to sacrifice themselves for the so-called grater good.

“As a result, they can never be truly subjugated, and so are useless to the Guardians.

“The side effect of the culling is that it scared the snot out of everyone.”

“So how many thousands of people were sacrificed for the Warrior X project?” a brigadier general asked.

“General Edward, you are needed,” an aid said.

“Lieutenant Skywalker, can you please cover for me?” Edward said.

“But I don’t know what’s going on,” Luke complained.

“Just do your best Luke,” Edward said and exited.

Luke stepped to the front.

“So how many thousands of people were sacrificed for the X Warrior project?” a Brigadier General asked.

“I don’t know,” Luke said. “This is the first time I heard of the X Warrior project.”

“What do you know about this pruning thing?” a Colonel said. “Do you know who they will attack next?”

“The general mentioned we are hostages,” someone asked.

“According to the back story, when Andromeda discovers a space-faring race, the first thing it does is plant doomsday devices within the crust of the home world as the first step in conquering the species,” Luke replied.

For the next hour the brass bombarded Luke with question after question. Finally Edward came back to relieve him. “Good job Luke. Were there any questions you couldn’t answer?”

“Plenty,” Luke replied. “For instance, what is our current tactical strength?” Luke asked and returned to his seat.

“The Arian race gave us a factory ship and advisors. We have been able to build over 60,000 Fangs, as well as over half a million blasters. This is in addition to various necessary items such as space suits and tools. We also have around 200 transport ships, now in the hands of the various governments of the world. That is nothing compared to the power the Guardians have at their disposal.”

More questioning followed. By the time it was over, the time was almost 1:00AM.

“Sorry for forcing you to answer questions on such short notice,” Edward said after the brass was dismissed.

Luke nodded and yawned. “None of this seems real. I feel like I’m playing the game right now.”

Edward nodded. “It’s a lot to take in. Go to room 2376B and they will assign you your room, then go to sleep. All of you will need the rest. Starting tomorrow, 1000 hrs, the fun begins. I’ll text you the details later.”

Luke entered his room and found his stuff there. He changed and went to bed. The next thing he knew it was 8:27AM. Luke yawned and got out of bed. It was time for breakfast. He put on his dress uniform as per instructions and headed for the cafeteria.

In the cafeteria kids ran amuck while their parents chased their little ones.

“Hey everyone, it’s Luke Skywalker,” Sam yelled.

“Hi Sam,” Luke greeted. He looked around but his friends weren’t in sight. He briefly wondered where they went.

A large group of children followed Luke to the cafeteria line where he ordered food.

“Can we play with your R2 unit?” a kid asked.

“It’s in my room,” Luke replied.

“I can get it for you sir,” a soldier offered. Luke gave him the room key and the soldier ran off.

Luke swallowed his food as the kids badgered him with questions. Finally the soldier brought back R2D2 and the kids played with it.

“Hey kid, having fun playing with your friends?” Hans asked.

“I’m not a kid,” Luke said angrily. “Everyone meet Han Solo, and yes, he’s dating my sister.”

“I want to meet Princess Leia,” a twelve-year-old girl begged.

“Yo Sis,” Luke yelled. “Can you come here please? These kids want to say hi.”

Brenda came and the children congregate around her. She looked curiously at Luke.

“You’re Princess Leia,” Luke said. “Just play along.”

Brenda nodded and got into character.

Edward entered and said, “I’m glad you’re entertaining the kids Luke. All this is very stressful for the kids. We haven’t decided when your first mission will be. In the meantime we need you to make some television appearances, to calm the people down.”

“Luke doesn’t look quite the same as on the TV series. Why is that?” a boy asked.

“That’s because the one on TV is an actor. This is the real deal,” Edward explained.

They walked away and Luke asked, “Why me?”

“You have a certain something about you that I guess you haven’t noticed,” Edward replied. “The president was informed about how you dealt with the civilians at the airport, even though you didn’t know what was going on. She was impressed.”

“But I don’t know anything about acting,” Luke complained.

“That’s no problem. You will just talk about your training. We’ll do the rest. By the way, congratulations on your promotion,” Edward said and pinned silver bars on his dress uniform. “You are now a captain.”

They entered a studio and someone came up to Luke and handed Luke a belt with what looked like a light saber.

“Sorry Luke but that doesn’t work. We believe it’s possible to create a real one by adapting alien technology, but it will be a while before they can create a prototype,” Edward explained.

“Do you really think that’s necessary? Such a weapon would emit crazy amounts of radiation and I don’t see how practical that would be,” Luke commented.

“You know the boy Sam. Did you know he’s the president’s kid?”

Luke nodded. “I saw him when the president was sworn in a few weeks ago.”

“He has been living in Seattle with his father because of marital problems,” Edward explained. “Anyways, he discovered that there was no such thing as a light saber. He bugged his mother and there you have it. You’re his hero and he can’t bear to have you not have a light saber.”

Luke sighed. “But I’m no hero,” he complained. “If my eye sight gets worse…” He didn’t complete the sentence.

“I’m certain your eye sight and everything else will get back to normal soon,” Edward assured.

“If you say so,” Luke said uncertainly.

Edward patted him on the back and said, “Buck up son. You are a hero. Now it’s time to meet your fans.”

They entered a TV studio. Adults and children trickled in. The audience settled down and the announcer spoke.

“Good morning America. As you know we have been visited by people from outer space,” the announcer began. “We ask that you fulfill your duties to the best of your ability, because that is what makes people happy.

“Keep in mind that one of your duties is to play Stellar Warrior and improve your skills, so you can be of service.

“Today I have the privilege of speaking to an elite member of the Stellar Warrior corps, Captain Luke Skywalker. Why did you become a Stellar Warrior?”

Luke noted a teleprompter and read the script. “It’s because I found I can best serve society as a warrior. Happiness comes about by fulfilling our role in society to the best of our ability.” He then turned to Edward and raised an eyebrow. Edward just shrugged.

“What do you think of our visitors?”

“I welcome our Guardians with open arms. I suggest you do the same if you want true happiness. When the time comes your true heart’s desire will come about. When the time comes we will…” Luke trailed off and made a shooting motion with his finger as per instructions.

“I heard you learnt a new instrument. Can we hear it?”

“I’m no expert but here goes,” Luke said and took out his bi-flute from its pouch. He played the score that appeared on the teleprompter.

The bi-flute spoke about how marvelous it was to be a cog in the society of the Guardians and how he didn’t want to do anything other than obey. It also asked the people of the world not to resist their overlords.

The audience didn’t understand the musical language, and so it was just entertainment to them.

The audience clapped when Luke finished. “That was incredible,” the announcer declared. “I hope the Guardians understand our true feelings now.

“I have been informed that the Guardians have designated our race as a warrior race. That means that we will be called upon to serve in their army in a few years from now. To show that we are capable, Luke Skywalker shall give us a demonstration of his skills.”

They went outside and Luke was given a paintball gun. He was also blindfolded. Luke wasn’t worried. He had more confidence in his ears than in his eyes and his distorted vision.

“Ladies and gentlemen, Luke shall attempt to shoot twenty robots that are coming after him. If they touch him, he loses. If he hits all of them, he wins.”

In his mind’s eye Luke could see the machines. They were making enough noise to allow him to pinpoint their locations.

“Begin,” the announcer said.

Luke began shooting. One by one the robots stopped making noise. The last one was only three feet away when Luke got it. That was cutting it close.

The audience gave Luke a thunderous applause and Luke removed his blindfold.

Luke read from the teleprompter. “We are all grateful to the Guardians for what they are doing.” He winked and added, “I promise they will get what they deserve and everyone will be happy.”

The audience clapped again and the announcer said, “Back to you Jenny.”

The on-air light went off and Edward said, “That was excellent work. You conveyed to the enemy that we were obeying and to our people that we intend to defeat our enemies.”

The kids clamored around him. “That was incredible,” Sam said. “How did you do that?”

Luke smiled and said, “I called upon the Force and it guided me as to where to shoot. Don’t worry kids. We will get our planet back.”

“When are you going on your next mission?” the governor of Washington’s kid asked.

“I don’t know Billy,” Luke replied. “Boss, when can I train? I’m itching to try this blaster out.”

“All in good time,” Edward replied. “First you have a lunch appointment with the president and some others. Then you can change and train.”

“How come you aren’t using that X Warrior guy for all this, instead of me?” Luke asked.

“His identity has to be kept secret from the Guardians. Also, he’s currently on mission,” Edward replied. “Keep wearing the light saber. From now on that will be part of your uniform.”

“Yes sir,” Luke said uncertainly.

“Come on Luke, it’s time to see my mum,” Sam said and dragged him along. The other kids followed.

They entered an office and Sam said, “Mum, here’s the Jedi Warrior.”

“I’m busy dear,” President Hilary Jameson said. “Go play video games or something.”

The kids dragged Luke to another room. James, a son of some general, tossed Luke a controller. Luke sat down and asked, “Who wants to battle me?”

“I do,” everyone screamed, logged on, and put on goggles.

Luke selected the free-for-all battle style in Stellar Warrior. He put on his VR goggles and found himself in an asteroid field. Surrounding him were his enemies.

Luke swerved and dipped, making sure he wasn’t in the line of fire of his opponents. He however did not shoot.

“Listen up kids,” Luke said. “Can you hear the ships zipping past you? Focus on the sound. Sound is more important than sight. They will tell you where your enemy is. Be careful you don’t hit each other, and don’t get in the way of someone else. Friend ships sound different than enemy ships.”

Luke buzzed a few kids and gave advice as he flew.

“Damn it,” Jerry screamed. “Why can’t I hit you?”

“You need to relax Jerry,” Luke said softly. “Let the Force guide you. Don’t try to force it.”

For the next half-hour Luke dodged attack after attack from ten enemies, while teaching.

“Time for lunch everyone,” someone called.

“In a minute,” Philip called back.

“Let’s finish this,” Luke said and attacked. Twelve seconds later all his opponents were defeated.

“Oh man, you kicked our butts royally,” Sam complained.

Luke removed his goggles and said, “Don’t get discouraged. All you need is practice.”

They headed for a conference room. Within were the president, vice president, and a few big wigs. The rest were the children of the adults. The boys and girls were equally split.

“What’s going on?” Luke asked. “Why am I here?”

“This is just an informal meal,” Hilary said. “I just want to meet the young man who is my son’s hero.”

Luke sat down next to Sam and people served food.

“Luke, I was told that the game was a training tool designed to help us defeat the Guardians,” Hilary said. “Can you tell me about it? Also, why did you start playing?”

“Yes ma’am,” Luke said. “I’m one of those guys who are crazy about games. Then I found Stellar Warrior. It was different from other games, in the depth of the story. Anyone can play the first few levels. All you need is practice.

“The higher levels require problem-solving skills, knowledge of strategy, and tactics. Then later on you need knowledge of physics, chemistry, geology, and computers to advance. As well, you need to know the strengths and weakness of all alien species. I got hooked on the game the moment I began playing it. It is so incredible. You should get your children to play and aim for the higher levels. It’s an incredible teaching tool.”

“Do you need diplomacy as well?” Hilary asked.

“Of course,” Luke replied. “Knowing how to handle different types of people is essential to advance in the game. I’m only at level 56. The highest anyone has reached is 63.”

“Do you think you can win?” the vice president asked.

“Of course,” Luke replied. “However it might take years. I currently don’t have enough knowledge and experience to defeat the game.”

“I know you’ll win,” Sam said. His posse agreed.

“How come there are so few girls playing the game?” sixteen-year-old Susan asked.

“I don’t know,” Luke replied. “What level are you?”

“I’m level 35,” Susan said.

“That’s incredible Susan,” Luke said and clapped. “Very soon you’ll be kicking my ass.”

Susan beamed at the praise. Luke’s circle of fans increased.

“What do you think we should be our course of action?” Hilary asked.

“We need to know where the doomsday devices are so we can take them out,” Luke replied. “I’ve gone on spy missions countless times in the game and in training, but not in real life. However I wouldn’t be surprised that will be my first mission.

“My ranking is 87, so I guess the others will be doing similar missions.”

“How come you’re only 87?” Susan asked.

“Because I have vision problems,” Luke replied. “My vision gets distorted and sometimes I get double vision. It throws off my aim. I compensate with my excellent hearing. It helps that I have big ears,” Luke added and wiggled his ears.

“Do you know why?” Hilary asked.

“It’s because I did something really stupid a little over one year ago,” Luke replied. “It doesn’t matter. The doctor said my vision should get restored soon.”

“We’ve been asking you so many questions, you didn’t have time to eat,” Hilary said.

The others talked about other subjects as Luke ate in peace. But he wasn’t at peace. The alien occupation was nearing completion, and it seemed that it was going more smoothly than it should. How could the aliens have come without anyone knowing?

“Are you okay Luke?” Hilary asked. “You seem tense.”

Luke smiled and said, “I’m fine. I’m just a little eager to try out my blaster. I’ve always wanted to fire a real one.”

“A warrior may only draw their weapon in battle or during training,” Susan said.

“That’s correct,” Luke agreed. “That is part of a Stellar Warrior’s code. If you’ll excuse me, I need to text General Jones.”

Luke sent the message and within moments got the reply. He read aloud, “The training grounds won’t be ready for another two hours,” and then said, “What’s taking them so long? I just want to go to the firing range.”

“Can I battle you?” Susan asked.

“Of course,” Luke replied. “You other ladies can join. Real men love ladies who can fight.”

“But they don’t like it when we win,” Gail, a fifteen-year-old girl responded.

“That’s because they are weak,” Luke replied. “A real man would accept your strength, and then strive to become stronger – Right, boys?”

The boys looked at each other and nodded uncertainly.

“Are there any girls stronger than you?” Stephaney, 16, asked.

“Loads of them and I respect all of them,” Luke replied. “For instance Julian is number two. She really kicks alien butt. She rose very quickly and I wouldn’t be surprised if she takes first place in the rankings. In fact, if I were to choose who should sit in this chair, it would be her.”

“How old is she?” Hilary asked.

“Twenty years old,” Susan replied, sounding a little jealous.

“Don’t be jealous, Susan,” Luke said. “You will definitely improve your score. Remember to focus on the science basics, as well as psychology and human nature. The alien races can be understood when you know the forces driving them, such as mating strategy.”

“That’s not why she’s jealous,” Hilary said.

“Mother,” Susan screamed and her face turned red.

“Did I miss something?” Luke asked.

“Nothing dear,” Hilary said with a smirk.

“Okay,” Luke said uncertainly. “If you like we can play, but first I’d like to change. I want to be ready when the general gives me the call.”

“Can we watch while you train?” Sam asked. The others agreed.

Luke looked at Hilary and she nodded.

Luke ran to his room. Six minutes later he was back in his combat uniform. They played while Luke instructed.

It was fun teaching them, but Luke was getting impatient. What was taking them so long?

Finally the call came.

Luke made a pit-stop at the little boys’ room and then they headed for the destination.

Outside was a school bus. Alien craft flew overhead. The world was entirely too peaceful. Luke suspected the reason for but he didn’t vocalize it.

Luke and his posse got on and they headed for the range.

A Test of Skill – and Courage

Only one who has killed   
knows what it is like to kill.

“Sorry for taking so long,” Edward said. “Your job is to defeat your friends and capture the flag,” Edward said. “In addition you will face automated tanks, drones and artillery. You may blow them up with your blaster.”

Someone attached a wireless mike to his uniform.

“Damn it. I only wanted to test fire my blaster,” Luke said angrily. “Don’t you think this is dangerous?”

Edward looked Luke in the eye and said, “I know. However I assure you it is necessary.”

Luke sighed and then turned to the kids and said, “Listen up kids. I’m faced with people who have been training with me for almost a year. There are two keys to winning this contest. Can anyone tell me?”

Luke glanced around. He felt as if someone was watching him. There was a glint in the distance. It was the glint of a camera.

“Know your enemy,” Susan said.

“That’s right Susan. You need to know their habits and driving forces. That only comes through observation,” Luke replied. “What’s the second element?”

“Know yourself,” Gail said.

“Excellent Gail,” Luke replied. “Pay attention to your behavior to see how you react in different situations, and then modify your behavior to suit the situation. When faced with an opponent who knows you, change your actions to throw them off. Also don’t over-think this or it will paralyze you.”

“Yes Luke,” Gail said.

“Here, wear this,” Edward said and gave Luke a paintball gun in a chest holster.

“The revolver has 20 pellets, more than enough for your eleven opponents.”

Luke strapped on the paint gun and said, “I’m ready.”

Edward pointed to a building.

“Okay everyone, there are two things I need to do,” Luke began, lecturing on war tactics. “First, I need to test fire my blaster. That is essential, since a mistake can kill. Unfortunately I can’t do it here. Second, I need to get a map. I’ll assume my first opponent has it. He should be in the warehouse.”

Luke grabbed some stones from the ground and quietly advanced to the building. Should he go in through the front door? That seemed foolish.

Luke went to the side of the building and tossed a stone to the front. A moment later the door was shattered with bullets. *Yikes!*

“The enemy gave away his position,” Luke said. “That was no droid. That’s the Mad Anarchist.”

Luke shattered a side window and then ran as fast as he could to the front entrance. He heard gunfire from the other room.

He dove in and hit the ground with both hands. He did a flip and spun around. There was the Mad Anarchist, returning from the other room.

Luke shot the Mad Anarchist in the forehead with a paintball before he could react.

“Ow,” the Mad Anarchist said and fell to the ground. Green paintball dripped to the ground as he lay.

“That’s what you get,” Luke said angrily and examined a map taken from the Mad Anarchist’s pocket.

“When faced with an unknown challenge, always take the high ground,” Luke said out loud. “Also never take unnecessary chances. Going through this building doesn’t gain me anything, and so I’ll go around.”

Luke returned to the front where he knew the coast was clear. If someone knew he had entered, they would have ambushed him by now.

Outside, Luke ran up the wall and grabbed the top of the eves. He looked over the edge and found no one. Off to the side was a camera. It was badly camouflaged. Luke ignored it and ran across the roof, trying his best to look cool in the process.

Beyond were several buildings where snipers could hide. Unfortunately he couldn’t engage an enemy that was too far away. For best results, the enemy had to be less than 40 feet away.

Luke scurried to the edge of the building and scanned the area. There was no one. He did a double flip in the air before hitting the ground running. Keeping his ears peeled, he glanced around as he ran.

Luke dashed between buildings, paying attention to what was above. There was a sound of movement to the right and above. He dashed sideways and looked up. It was Cloud Strife. Thankfully he was in range. Luke shot and got him in the chest. Cloud screamed in pretend agony and slumped on the window.

“In situations like this, hearing can give you a decisive advantage,” Luke lectured to the hidden cameras.

Luke continued onward. Beyond that was a junkyard. There should be several people there. Carefully moving from cover to cover he reached the dump.

“I need to capture the junkyard,” Luke said. “I will be filled with resources. Also, I can test fire my blaster there.

“Please note the chain link fence. Also note the horizontal wires strung above the fence. That’s an electrical fence. I better not touch it.”

Luke threw a stone. It hit the fence. Moments later, paintballs hit his location. That was not good. The enemy had the range advantage.

Luke returned to the buildings, searching for tools. In one warehouse he found a wire cutter.

He also found a cart. Perfect. He created a double of himself using hay and sack cloth and placed it on the cart. He then returned to the fence.

He returned to the fence and walked the perimeter. He found a suitable location and probed it with thrown stones and sticks. Nothing happened, and so he used his double. The coast was clear.

“The fence here is safe because it directly touches the ground,” Luke said. “But just to be safe, I’ll use this grass stock. I touch the stock and move it closer. If I feel a tingle, it’s live. Okay it’s safe.”

Luke cut through the fence. He didn’t go through. “Let’s deal with the sniper. I now his approximate location.

Luke returned to the last known location of the sniper with the cart. He tossed a rock. The sniper was still there.

Inching forward, Luke positioned himself and pulled the cart.

Marcus Fenix showed himself as he showered the fake Luke with paint balls. Luke got him with one shot to the head.

Luke entered the junkyard. “Not to probe for the next sniper,” Luke said.

Luke moved away from Marcus Fenix’s position and started tossing garbage. Nothing happened. He advanced and tried again.

There was a movement to Luke’s right. Luke spun and saw Mr. Spark.

Luke took the shot and hit Mr. Spock in the head. “That’s not logical,” Mr. Spock said and fell.

As Luke scampered forward, he ran into Dark Reaver. Luke dived to the left, rolled, and hit Dark Reaver in the chest.

Dark Reaver clutched his chest and screamed, “All my evil is at an end. What a world. What a world.” He then lay down and pretended to be dead.

That was five down, six to go.

“Okay the dump is secure. Time to test the blaster,” Luke said. “1% power hits like a handgun. 10% is like an armor piercing bullet. 100% power punches through a two-inch steel plate, at least. Too bad it has a 30 second cooldown.

Beyond the dump was a firing range. It was littered with craters and destroyed vehicles and tanks.

Three tanks faced Luke. Each had names on them, representing his enemies he needed to defeat.

“I’ll assume my friends are in the tanks, since their names are written on them.”

Luke returned to the junkyard and found three blaster reflectors. He carefully positioned them and then went to a safe location.

“I’ll use the reflector to hit the bull’s eye on Scotty’s tank. 30% should be enough.”

The laser bounced off the reflector and hit the bull’s eye. The top flew off and it stopped moving. Scotty got out, did a stylistic death scene and fell down.

The other two tanks fired at the first location. The area exploded and Luke felt the breeze from the blast. *Damn it! Are they nuts?* Luke cursed.

Luke adjusted the second reflector using his phone. He fired again. Jack Sparrows’ tank blew up. Again the remaining tank hit the second reflector.

This time the remaining tank began shooting at random around the area. The next blast was too close. Where they trying to kill him? Impossible.

The last reflector was destroyed.

Ears ringing from the shelling, Luke charged and fired and hit the Mad Peon’s tank’s bulls eye.

Sweating more from the stress than from exertion, Luke contemplated his next move. Those idiots were firing live weapons. If he made a mistake, he could…

Luke pushed aside that thought and focused on his mission. “Okay everyone, I have two opponents left. Beyond is a forested area, where booby traps are expected. I wasn’t fired upon when the last tank was destroyed. Therefore the firing range is unguarded.

“However I don’t know that, so I’ll use the truck I passed on my way here. Isn’t that convenient? The key is in the ignition.”

Luke brought the truck to the front and jimmy-rigged the pedals to make the truck move slowly forward by itself. Luke followed behind.

At the end of the firing range, the truck crashed and Luke entered the woods. There was silence, and then a sneeze.

“Brucie has hay fever,” Luke signed to the nearest camera. “I spotted his location. Now I must get to him while using diversion. Fortunately I found a drone.”

Luke flew the drone off to the side and slowly advanced. Neither he nor the drone was spotted. He snuck up behind Brucie and took him out.

“Dude, didn’t you hear the drone at least?” Luke asked.

“Luke, you seriously underestimate your own hearing,” Marcus said. “Don’t talk to me. I’m supposed to be dead.”

Beyond the woods was a rocky area. Hans waited there, dressed as a Sith Lord.

Luke stepped out and pressed the button on his pretend light saber. The plastic blade extended.

“You may go no further Luke Skywalker,” Hans said.

“I will protect this world with all my power,” Luke said.

“Don’t you understand?” Hans asked. “The dark side of the force is stronger. You will lose,” he said and swung his staff.

Luke blocked it and swung at Hans. Hans blocked. Back and forth they fought. Hans swung his weapon around like a baton. Not to be outdone, Luke spun around and attacked from left and right.

Luke then charged Hans and did a flip in the air. While upside down, Luke stabbed his light saber at Hans’ chest.

Hans raised his light staff to block, but then dropped it a fraction of an inch. Luke’s light saber hit Hans in the chest. Hans screamed and threw himself backwards over the edge of the cliff.

*That was lame,* Luke thought to himself and resisted the urge to look over the edge. He grabbed his gear and headed forward.

Peering over the edge of the cliff, Luke saw the destination. It was a rundown building far in the distance. It was guarded by cannons. There was no way he could hit the cannons at that distance. His distorted vision wouldn’t allow it.

Between him and the target were wandering drones. The flying drones were small, but the ground drones were large and scary.

Luke sent his own drone out. The drones converged and took it out with a spray of bullets.

“Damn,” Luke muttered. The training exercise was getting dangerous.

Luke hid behind a boulder and took out the nearest drone. Others sprayed the area with bullets and then stopped to conserve ammo. Luke took that opening to down several before hiding again.

The land drones attacked. This time, Luke lowered the power to 5% and destroyed the closest drone’s weapon but left it intact. He then immobilized it without destroying it.

Once the area was clear, Luke moved forward and used the disabled drone as a shield. Drones are stupid. They never attack friend drones.

After ten minutes, the area was depleted of drones.

Half way to the destination the cannons began shooting. Fortunately the terrain aided Luke.

Luke aimed at the nearest cannon. The first shot was a direct hit, but it did nothing. It kept firing.

Luke increased the power but missed. The next was a hit. The cannon continued firing.

“Damn,” Luke cursed and raised the power level to max. That took the cannon with an impressive explosion.

The process was tedious as he slowly advanced.

Finally only the last cannon in front of the building remained.

Bang!

The cannon hit next to Luke and scared to shot out of him. In panic Luke shot and missed.

There was an explosion as the building was hit.

*Was Lex Luthor there?* Luke wondered. Impossible. Everyone knew Luke had bad distance aim, which worsened under stress. Only a fool would be behind the target.

There was no activity from the building, making Luke nervous. The cannon stopped firing. That was a bad sign.

Luke took out the cannon, just to be sure.

Running a zigzag pattern, Luke arrived at the building and ran into the hole in the wall. He got the shock of his life. There in front of him was Lex Luthor. He had been hit.

Luke ran to Lex and knelt by him. Chunks of wood and metal stuck out of him and one had pierced his heart. Blood was everywhere.

“Sorry Luke, I goofed up,” Lex said and spat up blood. “Even an evil genius can mess up.”

Lex closed his eyes. The sound of Lex’s heartbeat faded and was gone. The sound of his blood flowing in his veins stopped as well. The room was in complete silence.

The weight of what Luke did hit him like a pile of bricks. He had killed his friend.

Years ago Luke had run over a cute squirrel. The creature had dashed across the road and Luke was unable to avoid it. Never the less it hurt to think that the life of such a cute thing was lost because of him.

The death of his friend was worse. Far worse. Human life has infinite value and it was gone, and he was the one to destroy that value.

Tears flowed as Luke struggled to prevent himself from crying. Coughing like an asthmatic, Luke got up and staggered to the flag. He grabbed the flag and wiped his face with it.

A horn blew, signaling that the mission was complete.

Looking out the window Luke saw an alien ship in the distance. The pain of loss was replaced by intense anger. His friend was dead because of those stupid aliens. If it weren’t for them he would be living a peaceful life and Lex would still be alive and plotting world domination.

Luke also felt anger towards the military, the government and the world. They all knew the date. Everyone gave up before a shot was fired. He felt equally certain that Lex’s death was no accident.

Luke looked back at his friend, even thought the sight was extremely painful. Half a minute later he turned around and left the building.

Far off in the distance vehicles approached. Luke popped out the fusion reactor battery from his blaster and placed the tiny device into his shirt pocket. He then discharged the weapon into the ground and returned it to its holster.

An ambulance stopped near the wrecked building and people with a stretcher entered. Moments later Lex was taken out. The ambulance drove away. There was no siren.

Edward placed a hand on Luke’s shoulder but didn’t say anything. Luke felt like breaking Edward’s nose.

As Luke stared off into the distance, the pain in his chest was replaced by giddy euphoria. Luke tried to suppress that feeling. He didn’t want to feel the pain of loss, but he didn’t want to feel euphoria either.

The rest of the gang stood behind Luke but he ignored them.

“Come sir,” a staff sergeant said and guided Luke to a jeep. They headed back.

The group watched Luke drive away. “What do you think of his performance?” Edward asked as he watched Luke drive off.

“I’m always amazed by his skill,” Hans said. “Using live ammo has pushed him to the next level.”

“And the fact he killed one of his best friends?” Edward asked.

“We must all kill, now that the aliens are here,” Hans said. “I remember the first man I killed when I was deployed. However none of us knows what it’s like to kill a friend.”

The others nodded.

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Luke sat silently next to the drill sergeant and stared out the window. The whole episode seemed unreal. Even now he felt that cops should come and arrest him for man slaughter at the least.

They returned to the main building and the drill sergeant led him to the cafeteria. The smell of the food made him hungry. It was almost 7:00PM and time for dinner.

The kids congregated around Luke.

“That was incredible,” thirteen-year-old Jerry said. “Did you really make those flips or was that CGI?”

“That was the Force guiding me,” Luke said with a fake smile. He wanted to give them something to believe in, because he no longer believed in either the government or his so-called friends.

“Remember kids, the Force is the evolutionary impulse of the universe. It sustains us and allows us to evolve. Without it there would be no life in this universe.”

“How do I become a Jedi Knight?” ten-year-old Joe asked.

“I don’t know how I became one or why I was chosen,” Luke replied.

“Kids, please let Luke get something to eat,” Hilary said. “He has had a very taxing day.”

*Not you too,* Luke thought as he looked at Hilary. But off course she would know, being the head of the government.

Luke entered the serving area and loaded up. He returned and watched the news on a large screen someone had set up.

“Hi, I’m your news reporter Wendy. As you may know, yesterday we discovered with no uncertainty that we are not alone.

“The first thing they did was to release bee-like creatures that stung everyone, causing some people to die within minutes of being stung.

“Shortly after, the war in Afghanistan abruptly ended when aliens attacked both sides. All combatants were knocked out with non-lethal weapons. The same pattern followed in other war-torn regions.

“Riots broke out throughout the world in response to the arrival of the aliens. They were handled in a similar fashion. According to the Guardians, as they call themselves, they do not want unnecessary killing.

“According to government officials, Guardians are a conquering race who originated in the Andromeda galaxy…”

Luke ate in silence as the announcer described the history of the Stellar Warrior game.

“Today the military put on a demonstration of one of their elite officers conducting a training mission,” Wendy continued.

Luke watched himself perform tricks on the screen. He watched as he took out the tanks, snipers and other obstacles. They also showed him fight Hans with a glowing light saber, complete with sound effects. Finally his flip when he got Hans and sent him over the edge. Then came the showdown with Lex’s drones.

The last scene showed the back of his head as he held the flag in triumph. That didn’t happen since he had used the flag as a handkerchief. They also didn’t show Lex’s body or the accidental damage he caused.

“Wasn’t that incredible? You can count on this man and many others to fight for our freedom in this tumultuous period,” Wendy applauded.

Someone handed Wendy a paper. She read it and then said, “We have a breaking announcement. The Guardians have an announcement to make. Mike.”

The scene changed to that of an Envoy.

“Greeting people of Earth,” the Envoy said. “We have decided to designate your race as a warrior race. However, not all of you are worthy of being called warriors.

“To prove that you are worthy of calling yourselves warriors, you must take the life of at least one human. You have one month to complete this task, if you are an adult according to the definition of your community.

“Children have until they become full adults to complete the task.

“If you have taken a human life sometime in the past, that will count towards your quota and you will not have to take another life.

“To aid you on your mission, we shall distribute weapons.

“We understand you may not want to kill your own people. As a result, we shall provide you with free transportation to all parts of the world. You may kill someone you don’t like where you live, or you may go to another country and kill someone at random.

“We will not permit governments to interfere with this operation.

“We shall release drones that will place a red star on the foreheads of all whom we deem are worthy of being called warriors. We will not tolerate interference with these drones while they are performing their mission.

“Those who fail to prove they are warriors shall be executed. The Andromeda Empire doesn’t need useless people.”

The scene changed back to the news reporter. She continued giving news about the invasion.

The news made Luke feel sick. He didn’t feel like eating. Never the less, he forced the food down as best as he could. A little bit of fasting was fine for most people. However that wasn’t an option for him since his metabolic rate was too high.

Luke looked around the room. Both the adults and the children were in shock. The powers that be had declared that he was a hero. It was time to play the part. He got up and faced the people.

“Hi everyone, I’m Luke Skywalker,” Luke said in a loud voice. “I know the news is grim. However I can assure you that our leaders have a plan for dealing with the Guardians.

“If you have studied the game Stellar Warrior, than you know that we have hope. The Galactic Empire is supplying us with assistance in the form of equipment and advisors.

“I myself have benefited from the Galactic Empire training. As you saw in the video of me, we can win if we are determined enough…”

Just then dozens of alien drones flew in. The flying things had scorpion-like tails.

People reacted by panicking and running around.

“Please be calm everyone,” Luke said in a commanding voice. “They will not harm us as Wendy said.”

One of the drones approached Luke and flicked its tail against his forehead and then left. The process took a fraction of a second. Other people were marked as well. Having completed their missions, the drones left.

Everyone stared at Luke’s forehead. Feeling the pressure of all those eyes, he felt he had to explain. “I accidently killed someone on a training mission. It was my good buddy James Madison. We always called him Lex Luthor, since that was his handle in Stellar Warrior. His funeral should be in a few days from now.

“Everyone needs to make sacrifices, since we have been conquered. However, I can assure you that we can prevail, because we are human.”

Luke sat down, having completed his speech.

Hilary got up and gave an inspirational speech. Luke was impressed. She sounded incredible, which was why so many people voted for her.

Luke felt dizzy. Too many thing happened all at once and he felt overloaded.

“Come on son,” Lisa said. “It’s time to go to bed.”

“Okay mum. Good night everyone,” Luke said and headed for his room.

That night he relived the death of Lex in his dreams. Following that he dreamt of little babies carrying guns and going to war. Finally he dreamt of the white dragon. She sang of hope for the future and a world where all races could coexist.

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Luke got up as light streamed into the room. A good night’s sleep calmed his nerves, but left him with a feeling of sadness.

Luke finished his morning routine and headed for the cafeteria. The kids were there, making their usual noise. He felt as if everyone was staring at his forehead. He adjusted his hair to cover the evil pentagram.

The kids congregate around Luke. He smiled at them and knew that they too would one day have red stars on their heads, or be dead.

“Luke,” Edwards called. “We finished creating a light saber for you. Here it is.” The sword was in a high-quality holster.

“Can I see it?” Sam asked.

“Okay, but you can’t use it,” Edwards said and handed the device to Sam. “It will only work for Luke.”

Sam handed Luke the sword in its scabbard. Luke swapped the fake with the real one and handed the fake one to Sam.

“Have fun with the kids,” Edwards said sat back down on a nearby table.

“Hi kids,” Luke said cheerfully and headed for the cafeteria line. “Who knows the basic tenants of being a Stellar Warrior?”

“Always strive today to exceed the person you were yesterday,” Zack, 16, said.

“When faced with a challenge, pause a moment to analyze the situation,” Joe said.

“When faced with a challenge, let your experience be your guide,” Jerry said.

“Analyze your actions and correct your errors based on feedback from others and yourself,” Susan said. “However, you must use your judgment and experience when analyzing feedback.”

“Excellent Susan,” Luke said with enthusiasm. “I think that’s a hard one to master.”

At the counter the attendants loaded Luke’s plate with triple the usual servings of everything.

“I knew. I know,” Sam said excitedly. “To grow fastest, always challenge yourself slightly beyond your abilities.”

“You too get a gold star,” Luke said. “In fact all of you deserve gold stars.”

Luke went to a table and ate breakfast. At the same time he thought the basics of Stellar Warrior philosophy. The kids weren’t the only ones listening to the lecture. The grownups were listening as well.

Hilary came up to Luke and said, “If you don’t mind, we would like you to come to Washington, DC with us.”

“As you wish, Madam President,” Luke replied.

Someone reached around Luke and grabbed his blaster. “I always wanted to assassinate a president, and now I can do it without getting into trouble,” he said.

The tension in the room skyrocketed as everyone waited. The man pressed the trigger but nothing happened. Panicking, the man asked, “Why isn’t it working?”

“That’s because it’s missing its battery,” Luke replied and showed the battery to him. “I took it out just after I…my best friend.”

The man tried to dash away but Luke grabbed him by the wrist. He struggled to get away but Luke’s grip was like a vise.

“You can’t punish me,” the man squeaked. “The aliens said governments can’t punish.”

“Who said anything about governments?” Luke asked and got up. He returned the blaster to its holster and said, “Look about you. They all want a piece of you.”

“But you can’t just kill someone,” the man pleaded. “There are laws.”

“Are there any brains in that stupid head of yours?” Luke asked angrily. “This is no longer a sovereign country. The governments of the world knew the date of this invasion years previously and knew they had no chance of winning. We were defeated even before they officially arrived.”

Luke released the man and military police grabbed him.

Luke looked at Hilary, but she didn’t say anything. Her face was pale. No doubt this was the first time anyone tried to kill her.

“So there is no hope?” someone asked.

Hilary didn’t say anything so Luke did. “There is hope. As you know Adipose has been conducting competitions every six months. They then offered jobs to everyone who scored in the top 1024.

“What you don’t know is that they have been giving us secret military training in order to create super-elite soldiers. This training includes gene therapy. Years ago they found a gene that prevents lactic acid from building up, thereby eliminating exhaustion. That’s just one of many gene therapies given. In addition, we were given treatments that increased our muscle and bone strength. I am the end result.

“The thing is I’m not all that strong. In fact, I’m just 87 in the rankings,” Luke said.

“89,” Sam said. “You dropped two points in the ranking.”

“No way,” Luke said in shock. He recovered and then added, “That goes to prove. There are plenty of people much stronger than me. Don’t forget those super-elite X Fighters who are stronger than all of us.

“Keep in mind that we are getting stronger every day. They have designated us as a warrior species. That means they will train us and give us weapons to fight in their wars. All we need is an opening and we can win.

“So you see, there is hope,” Luke ended.

“What should we do with this man sir?” one of the military police asked.

Luke sighed. “President Jameson needs a star in order to lead the country.”

*Damn it!* Luke cursed to himself. *Why was everyone acting like idiots?*

“You. You’re a secret service agent, aren’t you?”

“Yes sir,” the man said. The man was a big burly guy. There was no doubt he was competent, but he was helpless without someone to tell him what to do.

“Your superior officer will know what to do,” Luke said. “Take the president and the prisoner and tell your boss what happened. They will handle the needful.”

“Yes sir,” the secret service guy said. “Ma’am, please follow me.”

“Sam, you can’t come with me,” Hilary said. “Please stay with Luke.”

“Sam, everyone, let’s go play some video games. Let the adults do what they need to do,” Luke said.

Luke watched the secret service guy leave and wondered why big burly guys seemed to have such tiny heads as compared to their bodies.

“Someone, I need a room filled with computers where we can play video games,” Luke called out.

“Right this way sir,” a senior master sergeant said.

*Why were there so many grades of sergeant? Couldn’t they have come up with more titles than that?* Luke wondered as he followed. “Just call me Luke or Master Luke, if Luke is too informal for you.”

“Yes Master Luke,” the senior master sergeant replied.

They entered a large room filled with computers and Luke said happily, “This is the life, don’t you think everyone? A bunch of friends playing video games and eating junk food. I won’t play this time. However I’ll help anyone who needs help.”

They spent the next half hour setting the machines up for Stellar Warrior, and began playing.

Blood Will Flow

In times of war,   
unspeakable things occur

The nurse entered Mrs. Wilson’s room and approached the elderly woman.

“Dear, can you please put some ointment on my feet? In the good old days, people were more polite and caring. Now they just text and do drugs and orgies. It’s terrible.”

“Mrs. Wilson, you sicken me,” the nurse said in disgust. “You’re always driveling on about stupid things. You smell, you are disgusting and I hate you. Good bye Mrs. Wilson.” The nurse took a kitchen knife and slit the woman’s throat. Seconds later a marker entered and tattooed the nurse’s forehead with a red star.

The nurse called the ambulance for a pickup. As she headed to her car, an unshaven man who had seen better days looked at her and saw her star.

Obeying the unspoken rule that you don’t attack people with stars, unless you don’t have a choice, the man moved on, looking for a sacrifice.

A woman in a car drove by and stopped. She backed up and looked at the man. “You’re unmarked,” she said.

The man looked at the driver and fled in terror. The woman gave pursuit and slammed into the man. She then backed up and did it again, making sure she had crushed his skull.

The woman saw a marker approaching and got out of the car. Moments later she had her star. “Damn, I need to go to the car wash,” she said and drove away.

Several streets away a man went on a rampage and shot several marked people. He was killed moments later. You don’t attack marked people. Other marked people won’t allow it.

Day by day the carnage continued as people without stars strove to save their lives. Those with stars banded together in a sea of anarchy. Those without stars had no one to turn to, for they were competing with each other.

Then one month passed. Trash piled in the streets and the economy was at a standstill. There was no longer need for hospitals, because the sick and elderly were the first to die.

One month passed and those who considered killing to be a sin got green circles on their foreheads. The Guardians, in their infinite wisdom, decided that those people should be saved for the future generation to kill. And the future generation, in the form of teenagers, eager to prove that they were adults, was happy for the targets.

“Joey, we have a target for you,” the sixteen-year-old gang leader said. Joey nervously approached the terrified woman with the green circle.

Another teenager said, “Wait a minute. Let’s not waste her. Let’s do her first before Joey wastes her.”

“That’s a great idea Oliver,” the leader said.

Half an hour later the thirteen-year-old boy placed a gun against the victim’s chest and pulled the trigger. A marker approached and tattooed a star on the boy’s forehead.

“Now we all have stars,” the leader said. “It’s time to celebrate. Let’s drink some beer.”

“We can’t,” Oliver objected. “It’s illegal for minors to drink.”

Life Goes On

Even in hell,   
People still have to perform daily chores

And babies need to be born

Luke looked out of the window of the White House.

“Luke, do you want to play?”

Luke looked sadly at the star on twelve-year-old Sam’s forehead and nodded.

Was it even possible for humanity to regain its dignity?

After only two months of being conquered, all living adults and most older teenagers had stars. The human population had been driven down to less than three billion, from almost eight billion.

Now, only teenagers had to compete in the bloody war called survival. Of the adults, those considered weak or useless were in danger of being killed by the said teenagers.

Alien workers immigrated in droves. Their jobs were to take care of the remaining people as humanity was forced to train to become soldiers for an alien race of conquerors.

Preparations were already under way for the first of the human soldiers to leave for their tour of duty. The Galactic Empire failed to protect humanity, and now it had more enemies to deal with.

Luke pondered the fate of the world as he played video games.

Hilary entered the living room and sat beside her son. “It’s time to go to bed sweetheart.”

Luke exited the game and switched to regular TV. A sitcom appeared.

“Can I cuddle with you mom?” Sam asked. “I didn’t think killing would be so unpleasant.”

“I know,” Susan agreed as she snuggled up to Luke.

Just like Sam, peer pressure forced her to take a life, long before her deadline.

“Don’t worry children,” Hilary said. “We will soon find all the doomsday devices and then we’ll be free. How is it going Luke?”

“I’m not in the loop on what’s going on,” Luke said. “All they want me to do is train and make public appearances,” Luke replied. “On the plus side, my vision has stabilized. Doctor said my eyeballs have stopped growing, at least for now. My vision is sharp as an eagle now.”

“You’re like a cute little baby with your big eyes,” Susan said.

“Yes, a 5 foot 10 inch, 258 pound baby who can bench press 347 pounds, one who has gained 3 inches in 1 year,” Luke agreed. “Congratulations Mrs. Giant. It’s a boy.”

Hilary chuckled and then said, “Unfortunately you will need to give a speech tomorrow,” Hilary said.

“Oh man,” Luke grumbled. “I wish they would give me some time to prepare. How can I prepare if I don’t even know what I’m going to talk about?”

“Welcome to the world of politics,” Hilary said. “That’s not true. I have speech writers.”

Just then everyone’s phones beeped. At the same time the TV signal was interrupted.

An envoy appeared.

“Congratulations people of Earth,” the envoy said. “You have complied with our command to take a single human life. This has shown that you can obey your superior officers.

“Therefore the order to take human life is now rescinded. Its purpose has been achieved. We shall now erase the marks on your foreheads as they are no longer needed.”

The sitcom resumed airing.

“Oh my God,” Hilary said in shock. “I don’t believe it.”

Just then markers entered the room. One approached Luke and tapped his forehead. Luke looked at Susan and found her star had been erased. The stars on Sam’s and Hilary’s foreheads were erased as well.

Luke felt as if he was given an atomic wedgie. So many lives were wasted for nothing.

Susan cried like a baby and Luke cuddled her. Sam was also crying, as was Hilary.

“I promise you this,” Luke said. “I will do everything in my power to defeat those bastards.”

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Luke stared at an audience devoid of stars. The resending of the kill order had devastated the psyches of everyone. Overcome with guilt, a significant number of people committed suicide.

Luke spent more and more of his time on TV. His fulltime job was now to be a superhero for the world. It was more acting than actual superhero work.

“Thank you, Master Luke, for coming on such short notice,” a Mr. Cooper said.

“You’re welcome Mr. Cooper. I’m always glad to be of service.”

“This will be mostly a question and answer session,” Mr. Cooper said.

“Please ask your questions and I’ll answer them as concisely as I can,” Luke said.

A woman in the audience asked, “What can we do against aliens that can mess with us so badly?”

“The only thing we can do is endure,” Luke said. “The history of our people is filled with oppression and fighting against oppression. Every time the conqueror has been defeated. Our job is to endure and never give up.”

A man in the audience raised his hand and asked, “What precautions are you taking to ensure the Guardians don’t find out we are trying to rebel against them?”

“Let me give you a brief history on their empire,” Luke began. “Mr. Cooper, what’s the network password?”

Mr. Cooper wrote down “AliensAreEvil2” on a notepad. Luke took out his phone and connected it to the room’s projector. Within seconds the projector turned on.

Using a stylus, Luke projected saved images onto the screen and began his talk.

“To begin with, the Guardians are a hive based species, like bees or ants. There is an empress who is responsible for giving birth to queens and other empresses. Queens give birth to workers, scouts, warriors, controllers and other types and subtypes.

“A queen is assigned to a system when the Guardians acquire that system. We don’t know anything about queen, except that they can’t fight after they have been enthroned. That’s not surprising, since enthroned queens exist only to reproduce.”

“Mates go out and look for queens to mate with. However, in order to do that, they must breach the defenses of another hive and outsmart everyone to mate with the queen.

“Once a season the mates that have successfully mated with a queen get together and fight to the death. The winner then mates with the empress and the cycle continues.

“The Guardians are a caste-based species where everyone is born with a role that is determined by birth. The idea that anyone wants to deviate from their role is inconceivable, unless they are defective.

“Defective units are killed.

“Over the course of millions of years they gained intelligence and with it, science and technology. They ventured into space and eventually discovered other intelligent life.

“Being what they were, they decided to incorporate the new species into their own society, cubby-holing them within their limited view of the universe.

“One by one the races of the Andromeda galaxy were conquered. Almost three thousand years ago, they came to this galaxy and clashed with the Galactic Empire…

“Sorry I got a little sidetracked.

“To make a long story short, they will not interfere for the simple reason that we are conforming to their expectations. As long as we do our jobs, and don’t act like crazy people, we can plot whatever we want to plot and they won’t care. Think of us as soldiers who like complaining, but still do their jobs.

“Based on human nature, there is a danger that we will be trapped forever, just like all other species that have been incorporated into their society.

“If we don’t free ourselves within the next year or two, then we will never free ourselves.”

“Why do you think that?” a woman asked worriedly.

“It’s basic psychology,” Luke replied. “Forcing us all to take life has left an indelible mark on our psychics, fundamentally altering our hearts and minds.

“Add to this to the deaths of so many of our loved ones.”

Luke paused as he tried to suppress the pain in his chest. His sister was fine, but his parents went missing last week and were no doubt dead.

“Now that order has been reseeded,” Luke continued. “You all know what that felt like.

“Then there’s the knowledge that we’re under constant surveillance.

“Finally is the constant propaganda.

“When put under extreme conditions, and forced to do unspeakable things, our minds change and we become very susceptible to suggestion. All our culture, society, everything is nothing compared to such mind altering experiences.

“Here let me show you something.”

Luke opened up a web page. It showed the number 37.5435443%. Very slowly the number increased.

“This is the percent of the human population that has been subverted by the aliens. These people are now completely obedient to the role the guardians have assigned us. Their view of the world and their place in it has changed. They have no worries and are now happy members of the Borg Collective, feeling secure with their place in the world.

“Yesterday this number was 17%.

“That number wasn’t surprising. Before the invasion, over a billion people lived below the poverty line and in destitution. Now server races are taking care of all their needs. Their only requirement now was to train for combat. They are most definitely grateful to the Guardians for their improved life conditions.

“After the kill order was rescinded, the number dropped to 7.7%. This morning it shot up to 37.5%.

“Our old world is disappearing. Very soon we will all be living in an Orwellian Brave New World. We will never be the same, even if the Guardians are defeated. This isn’t speculation because it is happening now.

“I don’t know what will happen to the unconverted humanity after this number stops rising.”

“Is there any hope?” a man asked.

“Yes,” Luke said. “Queens don’t live forever. Eventually they have to be replaced. If we can get someone to be recognized as a queen, then that person will have the right to challenge the hive. If our campion wins, then they will become the new queen.

“This is only speculation on my part, but once we reach the queen and dispose of her, we then place our own people in the hive, and they feed false information to the district level bosses.”

“Wouldn’t they catch on?” a scientist asked.

“No, because it’s inconceivable to them for a queen to lie to them,” Luke replied. “It’s pretty much hardwired into their DNA.”

The plan, while simple and brilliant, had never been successfully executed. That wasn’t surprising, since once a species is assimilated, they stop desiring to fight the system.

“So once we take over we are safe, isn’t that right?” Mr. Cooper asked.

“Unfortunately no,” Luke said. “Once a season we will have to face drones trying to mate with the queen. They are ass-kicking strong, and they come in droves.

“Corrections. That’s not true. Drones must pass a well-established path. Those who reach the queen’s antechamber must fight to the death until one drone remains. We just use a decoy queen. The winning drone mates with the decoy queen and dies. Problem solved.

“The real problem is adolescent queens. They are monster fighters and far stronger than mates.

Luke paused, and then said, “If we can defeat the hive, then our only course of action is to formally join the Galactic Empire as soldiers. Either way our species will never be the same.

“Don’t worry everyone,” Luke added, acting like a football coach on game day. “We are human and shall prevail.” That got a standing ovation.

“On a personal note, people have wanted to know, are you interested in anyone?” Mr. Cooper asked.

“No,” Luke replied. “I don’t have time for that.”

“But all fighters are required to leave a legacy, based on their strength,” Mr. Cooper objected.

“That’s classified for the time being,” Hilary responded. “We shall reveal that hopefully in a month or two.”

The question and answer session continued.

Eventually Mr. Cooper said, “I’m sorry, but the time is up. Master Luke, do you care to say any final words?”

“Yes,” Luke replied. “We will seize control of the hive and we will get back our freedom. Have faith in the Force. It will help us take back our happiness and our freedom.”

Luke took out his light saber and saluted the audience. “May the Force be with you.”

The audience responded by giving Luke a thunderous applause and a standing ovation.

They walked off the stage and Hilary said, “Thank you for that information. It has clarified much for me.”

“No problem ma’am,” Luke replied. “I only wish people wouldn’t ask me the same questions over and over. This isn’t rocket science. Then again, rocket science is now obsolete.”

“I think you underestimate your own intelligence,” Hilary said.

“I doubt that,” Luke replied. “I took an IQ test just after joining Adipose and it was only 119. I’m not stupid, but that’s way below genius level.”

Hilary only smiled and said, “I need to go. I have another appointment.”

“If you need me, I’ll be at the White House,” Luke said. “But first, I need to eat.” Luke waved and headed for the nearest restaurant.

Luke sat at the restaurant and stared at the mega burger and heaping stack of French fries. *Why aren’t they sending me on missions?* Luke wondered. *Are my skills that bad? Also, why do they keep asking my opinion on everything? I’m barely drinking age. My experience and knowledge is nothing compared to theirs.*

Luke absentmindedly ate his food and then drove back. At the gate he greeted the guard. “Hi Wally, how is it going?”

“Everything is good Master Luke,” Wally replied with a smile.

“You’re about my age,” Luke said. “You don’t need to call me Master Luke. Luke is fine.”

“I can’t sir,” Wally said emphatically. “You’re Luke Skywalker, Jedi Knight.”

Luke rolled his eyes. “Jedi Knight,” he said. “The only one who’s allowed to carry a light saber. See you later.”

Luke entered his room and changed into his street clothes. He strapped on his light saber because people got jumpy when he didn’t have it.

It was once again time to train. He entered a Star Trek holodeck and visited a world with 2.6 gravity.

If only it was as simple as giving the aliens a virus like they did in the movie *Independence Day*. But of course there was no such thing as magic or the Force. There was just the hard work of trying to understand the world and creating solutions based on that understanding.

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Saturday, January 6, 2030 was bright and sunny.

“Happy birthday Luke,” Hilary said as Luke entered the dining room. They sat at table and an alien served breakfast.

“Happy Birthday,” Sam and Susan greeted.

“Thanks everyone,” Luke said. “Why am I getting so many presents?”

“Can’t help it dear,” Hilary said. “You are a national hero in the eyes of the world. All the women of the world want a piece of you, including my daughter.”

“Mom,” Susan screamed in embarrassment.

“She’s too young,” Luke complained.

“The age of consent is sixteen in half the states in the union, and next month she will be seventeen,” Hilary said.

“Should a mother say such things?” Luke asked as his face turned red.

“Only if the boy is exceptional,” Hilary replied.

“Or if he’s Luke Skywalker,” Sam added. “Aren’t all elite warriors supposed to leave offspring?”

“Yes,” Luke admitted. “This is especially true for those in the top 100 ranking. I don’t have to worry about that since they have been milking me once a day since I joined Adipose.”

Sam giggled and Susan covered her face in embarrassment.

“That can’t be helped,” Hilary said. “That is the philosophy that the Guardians live by. Only the best have the right to leave offspring. Luke, you just have to endure it. The plan is to continue collecting until your first assignment offplanet.”

“Will Susan get some?” Sam asked.

“Sam,” both Luke and Susan said at the same time. Sam just giggled.

“It’s funny isn’t it?” Luke said, trying to change the subject. “If I never thought of using the Luke Skywalker alias and didn’t create a R2 unit, or if Sam wasn’t living in Seattle at the time, then I wouldn’t be here.”

“That was no coincidence,” Sam said. “That was the Force guiding you.”

In the distance Luke heard Brenda and Hans approaching.

Hilary said, “Luke, we need to leave in ten minutes. We have a big day planned.”

“Still eating kid?” Hans called.

“Hans,” Luke called happily to his friend. He hadn’t seen Brenda, Hans and the other squadron members in over a month.

“Sis, why are you dressed like that?” Luke asked.

“It’s your fault,” Brenda accused. “My name has been officially changed to Leia. I am now officially recognized as a princess. Now I have to wear this embarrassing getup for special occasions. Hi R2.”

R2 beeped at her.

“These are my clothes for special occasions,” Hans grumbled. “Happy Birthday Luke and here’s my birthday present,” Hans said and gave Luke a noogie.

“By the way, what were you talking about when we came?” Hans asked.

“Sis wants to have Luke’s child,” Sam said with a giggle.

“Sam,” Luke and Susan screamed together.

Hans laughed. “I think you are both too young. Susan, because she’s underage, and Luke because he’s still just a kid,” Hans said.

“What is this, embarrass Luke day?” Luke asked.

“Actually it is,” Hans said. “If you’re finished, it’s time to go. The entire world wants to see you get roasted.”

Breakfast finished, they got up and exited. They entered a limo and they headed out.

As they drove, Luke commented, “Why are there so many people? It’s like the 4th of July.”

“I don’t know why but we are having a parade for you,” Leia said.

“The world demanded it dear,” Hilary explained.

They stopped at the corner of Constitution Ave, NW and 7th Street and got out. The place was crawling with secret service people.

“Luke, you will ride on the float,” Hilary said. “We’ll follow behind you.”

Luke, Hans, Leia, and R2 exited the limo.

“I hope you know this is embarrassing,” Luke said as they climbed on the parade float.

“At least you’re not wearing this revealing dress,” Leia complained.

“Quit your whining Leia,” Hans said. “You have a sexy body.”

Leia sat on a throne and Luke and Hans stood beside her and waved. R2 rested in front of Leia.

“Enjoy yourself Luke,” Hans said and waved at everyone. “You should be proud. It’s not every day you get to be with a cool guy such as me.”

Luke waved at the crowds as the parade progressed. Children in the crowd waved toy light sabers, pretending they were Luke. Others dressed as Han Solo or Princess Leia.

“Having fun doing all these public appearances?” Hans asked.

“No I’m not,” Luke replied. “I wish I was helping.”

“We all have to fight in our own way,” Hans said. “Do you think I’m happy being your sidekick? Leia and I and the gang were flown in just for your birthday.”

“Sis, you play Stellar Warrior?” Luke asked, surprised.

“She’s starting to get good,” Hans said. “Although she’ll never be as good as me,” Hans added.

“Unfortunately I’m just a beginner,” Leia admitted. It’s hard to rank when you have billions of rivals.

The float stopped at 17th Street and they got off. A short walk brought them to their destination. There they met the rest of the squadron.

Luke, Hans, Leia, and R2 got on stage and posed for pictures. Luke held his saber in the air while Hans pointed his blaster into the sky.

After that the other squadron members joined them. Followed that were some speeches.

Then Leia took the podium and showed some embarrassing pictures of Luke as a child. “Here is Luke after seeing Star Wars for the first time at age 5. Look at those funny looking ears. Strangely enough, he still looks the same.” The audience laughed.

The rest of the day was spent split between watching entertainers and watching people from Luke’s past embarrassing him.

Near the evening Edwards appeared on stage. His name tag read Lando Calrissian.

The Emperor

Hail to the chief,   
he's the chief and he needs hailing.  
Movie: My Fellow Americans

“Happy birthday Luke,” the renamed Lando greeted. “Just call me Lando.”

“Luke, this is a recently declassified video we want you to see,” Lando said. “The Galactic Emperor has instructed we reveal this to you at this time.”

“What?” Luke asked, confused. “Why would the Emperor know about me?”

“Probably because you are Luke Skywalker,” Lando replied.

Luke looked at Lando and knew Lando was absolutely serious. For a moment Luke wished he was in the good old days, when people treated him like a normal person and not like some sort of god.

Luke sighed and said, “Go ahead.”

A Russian man appeared on the screen and spoke. He was a 6 foot 3 inch bodybuilder, but he looked like an oversized toddler.

“Hi, I’m Vlad, an X Warrior from Russia,

“Throughout the universe there exists an evolutionary impulse. Because of your own X Warrior, you Americans have chosen to call it the Force.”

“Holy crap, when did that happen?” Luke asked in astonishment, realizing for the first time he was the X Warrior.

“This Force causes life to evolve when faced with adverse conditions. Both adversity and the Force combine to enable evolution.

“Ordinarily, this Force is tiny, and so evolution proceeds very slowly. Occasionally the stars align and evolution gets boosted. A perfect example is the Cambrian Explosion.

“We have also entered such a time. However, the process is too slow to help us overcome our enemies.

“Therefore, using knowledge given to us from the draconic race, we created the vortex generator.”

A professionally built vortex generator was shown in a state of the art facility, probably costing hundreds of millions.

“This allows us to concentrate the evolutionary force to billions of times above ambient levels, enabling us to hyper-accelerate our evolution.

“Thankfully, no other motor or generator configuration can concentrate the energies like this device. The geometry is absolutely unique.

“Why thankfully? Because viruses and bacteria are millions of times more receptive to the Force than more complex organisms. Every animal test we conducted resulted in the deaths of the animal and the release of superbugs.

“Governments panicked as the set date of the invasion approached. As a result, they began human trials with prescreened volunteers. The attrition rate is classified, and so no one knows the death toll.

“Thankfully I and eleven others survived. Our desire to evolve exceeded everyone else’s, allowing us to survive. Even then it was touch and go as we fought to overcoming the superbugs within our system, using state of the art medicine.

“Now we have a fighting chance against our enemies.”

The video ended.

“We know you overcame our surveillance by getting friends to buy the superconducting wire and equipment,” Lando said. “We want to know why you thought of building the device.”

“I really can’t explain in five minutes,” Luke said. “I know Cooper Pairs have effects billions of times greater than quantum mechanics predict. I’ve seen the movie *Contact*. This was something no other researcher ever talked about. Considering the difficulty, that wasn’t surprising. For some reason, I felt the overwhelming urge to build it.”

“The Force guided you,” Lando said with full understanding.

“We confiscated the first device and decontaminated the area the moment we spotted the telltale signature,” Lando said. “We then put a watch on you but no flags showed up.

“Then without warning you created the full-sized device and entered it. Members of the Grey race were dispatched and shut down the device and decontaminated the area. Fortunately containment was 100% successful.

“Thankfully we no longer need this technology, since we have you and the other X Warriors. The new generation of humans will all benefit from your improved genetics.”

“Are you saying I almost caused a pandemic?” Luke asked in horror.

“Don’t feel bad. You couldn’t know how dangerous that experiment was, and we couldn’t tell you,” Lando said. “Who would have guessed it would accelerate evolution?”

“What about your genetic experiments?” Luke asked.

“All species are defined by what is called the morphic field,” Edwards said. “Genetic therapy has no effect on the evolution of a species. Instead, what happens is that the morphic field changes, causing the species to change. The use of genetic therapy can however assist evolution. Double muscles are a potential within our species, as is making us immune to lactic acid buildup. Those and other therapies have had major successes. All sentient races take advantage of these technologies.

“By the way, no genetic experimentation has been conducted on any of you X Warriors. You represent the future of the human race. Your evolution is being directed by the collective unconscious of our species as we fight for our freedom.

“You are beloved by the Force.”

“Isn’t this happening to the other sentient races?” Luke asked, although he knew the answer.

“The races of the Andromeda Empire are static and bound by their rigid society. They can’t take advantage of the technology. The races of the Galactic Empire don’t need to evolve. Although threatened, they are still free. Vortex generator technology will have no beneficial effect on them. They have no compelling need to go beyond their current state of existence.

“We alone have a unique opportunity to become more like the draconic race. Weather we do so rests entirely with you X Warriors, and if you can eventually defeat the system hive queen.

“Keep in mind, the un-enthroned queens are as strong as dragon warriors, so us having X Warriors is a big thing.

“The Emperor is very interested in this experiment, as is his daughter.”

“Is the princess snow white?” Luke asked.

“I don’t know. The Emperor is very protective of her,” Lando said. “We will be sending you X Warriors to meet them. The ship leaves tomorrow.”

“I see,” Luke said. “So my rankings have been fudged.”

“We artificially cranked up the difficulty level for you, which is why your rank is only 94. We have no idea what your true ranking is, or the rankings of the other X Warriors. The only thing we know is that you can kick the butts of all ordinary humans.

“What about the other X Warriors?” Luke asked, slightly annoyed. “They all knew from the start.”

“Correct,” Edwards said. “You are unique that way. More importantly, you are unique in that you never intentionally took a human life. That has left your innocence pure and innocent. This is a perfect time to show you another video.”

Lex Luthor appeared on screen. He was in the room with the flag, on the day Luke played the lethal game of capture the flag.

“Greetings Luke,” Lex said.

“Yes, we all knew that the world was going to be invaded. We also knew that you are an X Warrior. So I, being the evil genius that I am, suggested a brilliant plan. If you were tricked into taking a life, then you would get a star. However, since you never intentionally took a life you would retain your innocence.

Tears flowed down Luke’s face as he watched.

“Why were you out of the loop? It’s because the Emperor said so.

“And yes, the Emperor approved of the idea, impressed by my brilliant plan.

“Why did it have to be me? It’s because I am the bad guy. In all hero movies, the villain gets defeated by the hero.”

Lex paused and then said, “According to the monitors you have arrived. It’s time to take pot shots at you and scare the snot out of you. Hopefully that will rattle you enough to make a mistake.”

Lex attacked with the cannons and said, “Waiting like this is scarier than you can imagine.”

Then there was an explosion and Lex was hit with shrapnel. Lex screamed in pain and fell. Some thirty seconds pass and Luke entered.

“Sorry Luke, I goofed up,” Lex said and spat up blood. “Even an evil genius can mess up.”

The final image showed Luke wiping his face with the flag.

Luke wiped his face with his sleeve, but his eyes kept leaking.

“Lex loved telling everyone how evil he was,” Lando remarked. “However he gave his life to protect your innocence and shield you from alien mind control. He was without doubt a true hero, and I salute him.”

The audience stood and saluted as well.

“Here is the statue of him we commissioned,” Lando said.

Behind them a statue was unveiled. It read, “Lex Luthor, Evil Genius.”

Leia and Susan gave Luke a hug as he cried in front of the world. Hilary, Hans and Sam stood nearby. The other squadron members stood nearby.

The final images played onscreen, showing the squadron having fun together.

The events of the day wrapped up and Luke returned home.

Strangely enough the assimilation number jumped by 12%. It then stood at 57% at the end of the day. The next day the rate was back to its normal slow climb.

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The trip to the Emperor’s planet was made into a big deal. The press and VIP were on hand to see the X Fighters head into space.

While talking to his friends the previous day, the Mad Anarchist just said that he was now part of the conspiracy and couldn’t divulge things that would ruin Luke’s fun.

Luke waved bye to everyone and stepped aboard the saucer shaped vehicle. Aboard, Luke stood by a monitor that acted as a window.

The capacitors charged and Luke saw the ground rapidly receding. Above, the sky darkened. Then stars appeared. Far in the distance was a 5-mile long needle shaped object that was the interstellar craft.

Size matters when it comes to interstellar craft. Just like aircraft, interstellar craft need to be aerodynamic; hence the needle-shaped design. Larger craft can generate more intense warp fields, which protected the craft from interstellar debris. On the other hand, craft that were too large suffered from various instabilities. As a result, the current ship was the standard.

They docked and Luke found Lando surrounded by generals from various countries. “Welcome aboard Luke. Please follow us,” Lando greeted Luke.

They got on a cart and headed down a spacious corridor filled with aliens going about their business.

Eventually they stopped. Someone higher in rank than Lando said, “This area has been specially designed for you for the trim. It will help you get acclimatized for when you reach the Draconia.”

“Luke, if you don’t mind, we would like the Vulcoids to update R2,” Lando said.

Luke recalled that Vulcoids were similar to Vulcans, except they were more mechanically inclined, while Vulcans were more intellectual.

“Sure thing Lando,” Luke said. “R2, go with Lando.”

“We will arrive in about 3 weeks,” Lando said. “A recent supernova has forced us to make a slight detour.”

“See you later,” Luke waved and followed the other X Fighters through the indicated door.

Luke passed a second airlock and into the main socializing area. The large room had doors lining the walls. Luke entered the door with his name. Inside, Luke found a simple bachelor style apartment with exercise equipment.

“Greetings X Fighters,” an announcer called. “Please put on the breeding device on your bed.”

Luke strapped on the backpack and connected the breathing tube to his nose.

“Normally spacesuits recycle CO2, allowing people to live indefinitely in space suites. However, since you don’t have suites, you will be constantly losing oxygen.”

Luke stepped back to the main area, where the rest of the X Fighters congregated.

“The breeding device has the equivalent of 5 liters of liquid oxygen. As long as you breathe through your nose, it should last days. Refill your oxygen from the wall outlet as needed.

“Isn’t it interesting? The only reason we can only store all that oxygen, is because of the absorptive properties of carbonine.”

“He talks too much,” Vlad grumbled.

“This breathing apparatus is unique in that it will remove all nitrogen from the air, allowing you to better tolerate greater swings in pressure. That will also be part of your training.

“We shall reduce your oxygen supply over the course of one day. Therefore you must wear your breathing apparatus at all times.

“We will be increasing the gravity by 1G the first day, then 1G over two days, then 1G over four days, then finally 1G over 8 days for a final gravity is 5G. Your health will be monitor at all times.

“Make sure you get comfortable playing your bi-flute. Other than that your time is free.”

Luke looked at his fellow X Fighters. There were seven women. That surprised Luke. He was expecting more men. Even in the late 2020s, there were still gender inequalities. The only explanation was that more men volunteered, but something in a woman’s makeup made the process safer for them.

“Hi everyone,” Luke said. He paused and took out his bi-flute. He resumed speaking with the instrument. “Hi everyone, you know me but I don’t know you.”

“Hi, I’m Chekhov,” the second Russian said. Luke laughed, thinking of the classic Star Trek episodes his parents liked watching.

“Actually Chekhov is a relatively common name,” Chekhov explained.

They continued introductions, and then Vlad suggested they did a free-for-all battle.

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Interstellar travel relied on gravity sensors, since light was inadequate for navigation. As a result, the view of the universe was vastly different when seen with gravity.

What is gravity? Gravity is a quantum-mechanical effect that is fundamentally electrical in nature.

People like Einstein couldn’t understand gravity for at least three reasons. First, they treated electrons and protons either as imaginary points or vibrating strings. What a ridiculous concept.

Second, they assumed, just because we couldn’t see something, then it didn’t exist or had no effect on the universe.

Third, they believed that matter was fundamentally different from the space it was embedded in.

There were no speed barriers to gravity, since all was connected in a unity that spanned the holographic universe.

The view from Luke’s window monitor showed the real-time gravity view of the universe.

Draconia was a solitary cool gas giant in the void at the galactic center. It was ten times bigger than Jupiter and engulfed in vast energies.

The center of the galaxy was like the eye of a hurricane that concentrated the electrical energies of the galaxy, and spewed forth highly charged jets of matter into space.

In the past, people assumed there was a black hole in the center. This was because people assumed gravity was the only thing that shaped the universe. That assumption was ridiculous. The electric force was billions of times greater than gravity, and the telltale signs of inter-galactic electrical currents were there for decades.

There was no need for dark matter and dark energy. Electric forces explained everything in the universe.

The ship dropped to below light speed and the view shifted to visible light. Within moments Draconia appeared in view.

Life on Draconia was powered by electricity. The largest life forms were the floating islands. They ranged from babies only a hundred feet in diameter to adults that were over a mile in diameter. Tendrils at the bottom would collect energy as a result of the fair weather potential of the world.

The islands were vegetative in nature and passive. They would collect nutrients by travelling the air currents using use buoyancy control and rudimentary lifter organs.

The lower levels of the planet had more nutrients, but were more dangerous. However all levels, down to crushing debts had life.

Just like the islands, the animals could collect energy directly using their tails, but the young were too small for that. Animals would use the islands as a natural habitat and as a food and energy source.

Luke stepped out of the airlock and into the main area of the ship, and accidently launched himself three feet into the air. The drop from 5 Gs to 1 G was unexpected.

The X Fighters got on the cart and they headed for the hangers.

“How was training?” Lando asked. He and the other generals were wearing space suites.

“Exhausting,” Luke replied. “Every morning I had a problem getting out of bed. Fortunately, my muscles adapted. Now the lack of gravity is making feel too buoyant. I can’t believe I have to drink cooking oil just to get enough calories.”

“On the bright side, you will be able to eat like a pig when the mission is over,” Lando said.

“That sounds like fun,” Luke said. “I think I gained an inch. My clothes are starting to get tight.”

The other X Warriors reported a similar height gain.

The shuttle stopped and they exited. Within moments they were on the saucer shaped shuttle.

“Are you okay?” Luke asked Lando. “Your heart is racing.”

“I’m a little scared about meeting the Emperor,” Lando said. “By all reports, he is as proud and fearful as any dragon in legend. He may not breathe fire, but bolts of lightning are just as scary.”

Except for the X Warriors, everyone showed fear.

Luke watched a screen and saw the planet approach. They descended and landed on an island.

“The island was moved to a location that gives us about one atmosphere of pressure. Also, the island is giving one G of gravity.”

Lando and the other generals put on helmets and they exited through the airlock.

Luke stepped of the ramp and looked at the sky. It was an amazing sight, seeing multicolored clouds.

Turning his head to the waiting dragons, Luke saw something that took his breath away. It was the dragon from his dreams. She smiled and opened her arms to him.

Without a moment’s hesitation Luke dashed towards the white dragon.

“Stop Luke, you can’t,” Lando screamed. The words were conveyed by a speaker built in Lando’s suite.

Just then Luke felt an overwhelming threat. Luke spun around to face the danger. He was just in time to see a tail whip out. The tail hovered between Luke and the other humans like a barrier.

The Emperor’s tail was so fast that Luke knew he would be dead if the Emperor intended. It was then that he understood why the others feared the Emperor.

“No lesser being may approach my daughter,” the Emperor declared.

The white dragon shot out her own tail and Luke instinctively raised his hands. The tail wrapped around his waist and placed him next to the white dragon. She then held Luke in her arms.

“Don’t be afraid,” the white dragon said in a beautiful melodious voice. “My daddy won’t hurt you.”

“Why him?” Vlad asked, expressing anger through his bi-flute.

“Why are you helping us, if we are just lesser beings?” Lando asked. It was clear all the humans were offended by the Emperor’s words.

“You have nature preserves, do you not, where you let the creatures evolve as they see fit?” Emperor began. “Yet you don’t view the creatures as your equals.

“That is the same way with us regarding all other creatures of the galaxy. Only the First Ones are our superiors.

“First, you need to understand, the Guardians can’t hurt us. We live in an environment that is too extreme for them. That’s not why we fight.

“Us Dracos view this galaxy as our home. We enjoying seeing all the different life forms evolve as they struggle to overcome the challenges their environment gives them.

“However, we view the Guardians as a disease that is interfering with the natural balance of the galaxy.

“Both the Guardians and us have contacted you because you have discovered FTL travel. You still have a choice. You can join our forces and help protect our galaxy form invasion, or you can become a mindless, disposable cog in their meaningless existence.”

“Who are the First Ones,” Lando asked.

“They have existed for countless billions of years,” Emperor said. “On your and many other worlds they seeded life. We too are one of their seeds. They left monuments and artifacts on your world that are billions of years old. In time you will recognize them for what they are and use them as intended.

“They are what you call a type 3 civilization that can draw on the power of an entire galaxy. We, on the other hand can barely use 80% of the power output of your sun, and so are just a type 1 civilization.

“This world is an artificial world created and maintained by the First Ones. We just live here.

“So, in the scheme of things we aren’t that great. We know almost nothing about the First Ones or that which sustains the universe.

“It’s too bad the First Ones don’t help with the Guardians. However, that is understandable. They are watching us grow and evolve; even as we watch others grow and evolve.”

“Why him?” Vlad asked again.

“The evolutionary force is the greatest force in the universe. It cultivates and nurtures life everywhere,” Emperor said, beginning his explanation. “We call it the Holy Spirit. It acts as one in a trinity of guiding principles in the universe.

“Normally we wouldn’t give you vortex technology, but it was a desperate gamble and because we were negligent in protecting your world from outside influences.

“On the other hand, Luke discovered this on his own. He put all the pieces together without any help.”

“But I didn’t know about any of this,” Luke complained.

“It doesn’t matter,” Emperor said. “You were most definitely guided by the Force.

“Now tell me young Jedi, in what attitude did you enter that sacred chamber?”

“I felt excited and overwhelmed by how amazing the universe was,” Luke said. “I knew intellectually nothing would happen. However I just wanted to explore the endless possibilities the universe had in store for me.”

“That was the correct attitude,” Emperor said excitedly. “By the way, you used DC current, didn’t you?”

“That’s correct sir,” Luke replied. “It was the favorite of a genius among us called Tesla. Also, some people view AC as being unhealthy.”

“Direct current is superior,” Emperor said. “Now compare that to the attitudes of those others who entered the sacred space. They were all filled with fear and the belief in limitation. The only reason any of them survived is because I instructed them to use AC. It reduced the efficiency to less than 0.01%. The superbugs generated were the direct result of their negative attitudes.

“But something more happened with Luke. Luke, tell them what you experienced.”

“I experienced connecting with a beautiful white dragon,” Luke said. “She sang to me and warned me of danger. Unfortunately, I couldn’t grasp what she was saying.”

“Somehow Annie connected with Luke’s life force in that moment,” Emperor explained. “Annie then decided to bond with him. That is her prerogative. I accept him and view him as a newborn child. Be warned. That joining is guiding his evolution. Eventually he will no longer be able to sire human children. After that I don’t know what will happen, or when.”

“You mean telepathy exists?” Luke asked.

“Yes,” Emperor replied. “It’s a quantum mechanical effect that’s based on the same principles that FTL radio works. However it can’t be used as a general means of communication with the lower races. Your people can safely ignore it, since it can’t help them.”

“But Luke can use it?” Vlad asked. He was still angry that someone was superior to him.

“No I can’t,” Luke denied. “I only get sporadic dreams of Annie.”

“That will clear with time,” Emperor assured.

“May I ask when you discovered our world?” Lando asked.

The Emperor spoke.

The story of your human race began some 500 thousand years ago. At that time there were no modern humans.

The Anunnaki civilization was facing a crisis. They needed monatomic gold to protect their atmosphere from lethal doses of radiation from their parent sun.

They explored nearby brown dwarf stars looking for hidden planets. One such star had your planet hidden within its corona.

To their delight the planet had gold. However they were too lazy to do the mining, so they mixed their genetic code with the indigenous life, creating you modern humans as a slave race.

Eventually us Dracos discovered their violation of the prime directive of non-interference of indigenous life.

We banished them from your world.

Left on your own, you then created an idealistic society, where night was unknown and neither were the stars. All was hidden by the corona of Saturn, your primary sun.

We withdrew, since you were free from external influences.

Some twelve thousand years ago, Saturn entered the gravitational influence of Sol. That was a tempestuous time as the electrical environments of two systems collided.

It was then that Saturn gave birth to Venus, in order to neutralize the excessive electric charges.

We did not interfere since this was the natural order of the universe.

Everything eventually settled down and formed the Solar system as you know it. Of course there were casualties. One was the massive electrical scar on Mars.

The other casualty was your people. Not only were you traumatized by the experience, but all your culture was lost.

Because of your trauma, later civilizations tried to cover up the past. The ancient tools and knowledge scavenged from previous civilizations were intentionally destroyed.

That trauma is the reason for your deep-seated hostility and why you are now classified as a warrior race.

By this time we were in conflict with the Andromeda Empire and so weren’t paying attention.

We apologize. If we were watching, we would know that, with a clear night sky, and a once again advancing civilization, space travel would eventually come.

Because of our lapse in attention, the Andromeda Empire reached you first when you performed your first trans-luminal test flight.

Again we apologize.

We can’t directly interfere now because of the doomsday devices.

You are in a critical point in your history. If you become subservient to the Guardians, all is lost. If you can defeat your hive queen, then you can take back control of your world.

Should you succeed, we will give you aid in keeping your Luna Hive secure.

The Emperor ended his story and said, “Luke, my daughter wants to spend some time with you. She will help you train.”

“Okay sir,” Luke said.

The white dragon picked up a riding saddle with her tail and placed it on her back and strapped it on. Luke jumped aboard.

“Master Luke,” Lando called. “We shall bring a saucer for you to stay in while you train. Call us when you need us.”

Luke looked at Lando. He was fine with Luke’s status with the Emperor. However the other X Warriors and their generals didn’t like him. There was nothing Luke could do, so he said “Okay.”

Annie extended her wings and an electric field enveloped them. Annie shot into the sky like a rocket without moving her wings.

Adjusting her wings, she changed directions.

“Your word is beautiful,” Luke said as he put goggles on.

“Thank Luke,” Annie sang back at Luke. “I’ll show you where I was born and grew up. What are your tolerances to pressure changes?”

“I’ve been breathing pure oxygen,” Luke said. He was having problems playing the bi-flute because of the wind. “According to my watch, I have negligible nitrogen in my blood. I should be safe from the bends as long as we ascend slowly. I’ll warn you if there’s a problem.”

“Being powered by electricity, we don’t need to breathe. However high pressures force nitrogen into our bodies,” Annie said. “As a result we can’t tolerate extreme drops in pressure.”

Of course dragons could tolerate extremes that would kill ordinary creatures.

They approached a large group of dragons. The group ranged from adults to babies. In terms of color no two were alike. The females were more pastel in color while the males were more vivid.

They landed on an island and dragons surrounded them. The little babies were so cute that Luke wanted to give them hugs.

“So this is your chosen one,” an aunt Luke decided to name Solar said. “It’s amazing that Zeus has acknowledged a non-dragon. Welcome to our home.”

“Thank you Aunt Solar,” Luke said. “This is the first time I have left my home world.”

“That’s not surprising,” Solar said. “You are still a baby.”

“In my world I’m a full adult,” Luke said.

“I didn’t mean to offend you, but you have entered a new world,” Solar said. “There’s no going back.”

“I’m Annie’s mother Hera,” a new dragon said. “You can be sure that we gave Annie a stern lecture. However Annie is still a child.”

“Mother,” Annie said in embarrassment. “I’m 82 years old,” she said, used the earth calendar year.

“Annie, if you were a human, you would be a grandmother,” Luke said. “Humans have short lifespans.”

“Your offspring will have longer lifespans,” Hera said. “We promised that we would help you train. Zeus has assigned other people to train your other X Warrior friends.

“You will wear this. The other kids will try to tag you. If they hit the target you lose. If you can outlast the timer you win.”