

Dark Soul

By August and Cynthia Hahn

They were flying into a trap. He could see the trap, see its jaws closing in the form of two wedges of red blips on the *Maelstrom's* primary combat display. Each small blip was a droid fighter. Each large blip was a cruiser or gunship. There were entirely too many of both kinds on the display, and their positions were such that if his advance was detected, it would take them no effort at all to reverse direction and snap the trap closed on his entire fleet.



With fortune, his ships had entered the system undetected and could pass straight through the open gap in the planet's defenses without engaging the droid fleet. However, if the last few months had taught General Jeht anything, it was that luck was a commodity he'd been lacking for quite some time. In the absence of fate's favor, he would have to rely on himself and on the Force.

Thinking quickly, he waved his hand over the communications control. A hologram of a clone pilot officer appeared before him. "Your orders, General?"

"I want the lead gunship to open its reactor baffles on my mark to simulate the energy readout of the *Maelstrom* and fly ahead with every other ship in the fleet. My ship will come to a full stop and double up on stealth and passive shields."

It was a gamble, and from the body language of the clone as he hastened to obey his new commands, Jeht could tell he knew it. He was gambling on them having already been betrayed -- a very cynical way of looking at the universe, but these days, it was right more often than not.

In any case, the ruse was a simple one that would only work if the planetary defenders already knew about their approach and were not using active long-range scans. It also banked on the few known weaknesses of droids versus living pilots. Droids used sensors exclusively as opposed to "seeing" anything. Thus, a ship could pass itself off as a different vessel just by duplicating the few things a droid ship used as detection criteria. Having his gunship radiate the energy patterns of the *Maelstrom* was a trick that would never fool a sentient crew, but against droids, it actually stood a chance.

Darrus's command ship came to a full stop as the rest of the fleet traveled ahead through the avenue of optimal approach. He waited tensely as the ships reached the halfway point, the logically perfect point for the trap to be sprung . . . assuming there was one at all. For a fleeting moment, he allowed himself the hope that he'd been wrong.

Emergency alarms flashed all over the *Maelstrom's* tracking systems as both wings of the droid armada changed course rapidly. The impassive metal tide crashed into his fleet on both sides, cutting them off and boring destructively into its numbers with a thousand lances of light. Before Jeht could shout his next order, ten percent of his ships were vaporized in blinding flashes of fire and incandescent steel.

It was a necessary sacrifice, he told himself, as the *Maelstrom* banked a hard right and approached the planet at an oblique angle. The trap's closure left the world of Kromus completely undefended on both flanks. Since his mission was a simple one -- orbital bombardment of a remote research and construction facility -- he wouldn't need much time to complete it. His fleet, even now fighting for their lives against a vastly numerically superior force, was buying him every second they could. He had to trust in the Force that it would be enough.

The *Maelstrom* came into orbit roughly, jarring everyone aboard as the ionosphere's interference shook the vessel. Rather than chastising his flight crew, he was grateful for the haste. A few bruises were acceptable; letting this planet's construction of a Separatist superweapon continue was not. He'd seen the projected capabilities of the weapon, codenamed Starkiller, and if he had to crash this ship into the planet to keep it from ever being used, he would. The alternative was . . . unthinkable.

"Sir, target is in range of the main battery."

"Excellent," he said, picking himself back up into the command chair. "Prepare to --"

"Sir, there's something you should see." His sensor operator touched a control, and across the ship's main screen, an orbital image of the facility flickered into visibility. It was all there, just as it had been described during his briefing on Coruscant, but something was wrong. The installation's silhouette was wrong. There was just too much of it. Could the plant be bigger than the Republic's spies had reported?

"Give me a better visual. Our cover's already blown, so go active if you have to, soldier."

"Right away, sir!" The image magnified and cleared up considerably, zooming in to reveal a six-winged research station with a massive docking bay at its heart. There, cradled and swaddled in scaffolding, was the goal of their mission -- the Starkiller. It looked nearly complete; only a few missing sections of paneling betrayed its unfinished status. It was likely already loaded with

its deadly payload and would be ready for launch within days, if not sooner.

All of that, he'd expected to see, but it was what laid nestled between the long arms of the facility that made his heart stop. Surrounding the facility, a sprawling city filled the entire image. A lifeform counter showed more than two million sentients. The Separatist military had built their facility directly on top of what appeared to be the largest city on the planet. Republic intelligence on this world had indicated a sparse population of pre-sentient beings; apparently, the census had been incorrect.

"Commander, I need a scan of the planet's surface. Give me a lifeform total and try to find a place for us to land. We'll have to take that ship out with a ground operation."

The deck officer snapped to a salute and started barking orders. Within moments, each one bought at the expense of another ship in Jeht's fleet, his first request had been processed and granted.

"Sensors indicate a planetary population of 1.3 billion, sir, with thousands of dominant animal and plant species. Our records of this world actually match Kromol, the fifth planet in this system. There seems to have been a clerical error, sir."

Jeht scoffed. "A clerical error? I'll say!" He looked at his chair's readouts, watching the nearby space battle. His ships were fighting valiantly, but numbers were starting to wear them down. "How's that drop zone coming? We need to land quickly!"

Before the commander could answer, one of the bridge crew interjected. "Sir! The target designate is showing a power spike. Its systems are coming online."

"What?" He leapt out of his chair and ran across the bridge to look at the readout himself, even though he knew the clone's report to be true. The Force was screaming in his mind, warning of an impending danger so immense, there might be no escape if he did not act *now*.

There was no time to land, no time to take the Starkiller out with a ground assault. His fleet was getting sliced to ribbons, and if the superweapon was allowed to launch, it would leap into hyperspace and escape. That would cost hundreds of billions of lives; he could feel the ramifications stretching out before him. The Starkiller had to be destroyed, and it had to be destroyed at this moment. There would never be another chance.

"Commander, open fire on the facility. Every gun, maximum power."

For their part, the clones did not hesitate. The order was relayed and carried out within the space of a single second. General Jeht could feel the decks of the *Maelstrom* vibrate as volley after glowing volley tore through the atmosphere. The Starkiller, the research facility, and more than two million lives disappeared in a fireblossom of purifying light. The world itself shook, clouds of vapor and debris swirling for hundreds of miles around the impact site.

Darrus closed his eyes, trying to shut his mind off from the screams of the Force, the echo of so much death and shock. Strangely, it was not as hard to silence the terror in his thoughts as he'd feared. It was as if some part of him, the part that felt the horror of what he had done, was going numb.

"Sir." He realized suddenly that the deck officer had been trying to get his attention for more than a minute.

"Yes . . . yes, Commander?"

"Half the droid fleet has gone out of control. The rest is in full retreat. Shall I order the pursuit?"

Jeht shook his head. "No. Recall our ships and form them up on our wings. We've done what we came here to do. I want us underway back to Coruscant as fast as possible." And with that order, the soul-weary Jedi left the bridge with every intention of returning to his quarters and being quietly ill.

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In a dark chamber lit only by a pair of blood-red sconces, a robed figure listened impatiently to news he already knew.

"The world is almost uninhabitable, my lord. The loss of the hyper-point destabilizer and its delivery vehicle has caused a thermal shift in the planet's atmosphere and tectonic instabilities that may yet tear Kromus apart. We are continuing to monitor the world as you instructed, but it is increasingly difficult to remain in orbit."

The cowed shadow nodded, feigning disinterest and omniscience while silently plotting. "Yes, yes. Remain until the last possible second and then proceed to Count Dooku with your findings. The data may prove useful for another weapon project."

"Yes, my lord. We live to serve."

That elicited a wry chuckle as the hidden figure terminated the transmission. "Of course you do. For a while longer, at least."

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In the commons of the Crosstown Bar on Cularin, the assembled patrons fell silent as a wartime update broadcast came over the tavern's Holonet projector. It was one of the few times the Crosstown could be called quiet, but as the Clone Wars had grown more violent, information had become too important for anyone to miss.

"The Senate has issued a statement of remorse and regret over the destruction of all life on Kromus, the fourth world in the Kro'eval system on the border of Separatist-occupied space. While the Republic Army maintains that the strike was an unfortunate necessity to prevent illegal weapons development, Separatist sources continue to deny such activity and are calling the incident a 'scouring' and an 'act of murder over a billion fold'."

"In the wake of these allegations, four more systems have sided with the Separatists as part of a growing protest movement over the increasingly violent nature of military actions taken by the Army of the Republic and its Jedi leaders. Separatist bounties on notable Jedi commanders and Council members have been doubled as a sign of the Separatists' increased resolve to combat what Count Dooku has been quoted as calling the Jedi Council's 'terrorist regime.' The Council has once again declined to comment."

Living Force Game Notes

Effective immediately, a galactic shift in opinions regarding the Jedi has begun to take shape. While this decline in reputation and prestige has no game effect on Cularin due to its relative isolation from the rest of the galaxy, all nonplayer characters encountered outside the Cularin system during **Living Force** adventures are more inclined to react unfavorably to Jedi heroes.

If a hero can be easily identified as a Jedi (wearing robes, displaying a lightsaber, or using obvious Force abilities), he or she suffers a –2 penalty to all Charisma and Charisma-related skill checks while outside the confines of the Cularin system. Individual Gamemasters can determine just how easily someone can identify a Jedi, but if it's in doubt, assume that the penalty is in place. The galaxy is becoming a very suspicious and fractious place.

This hostility and violence is not ignored by the Force itself. As the galaxy descends into warfare, the Force has become more attuned to conflicts of all kind. From now until the official end of the **Living Force** campaign (January 31, 2006), all Force point rolls made during combat gain a +1 bonus. Force-sensitive heroes can gain a +3 bonus instead, but doing so comes at the cost of gaining a Dark Side Point immediately.