

[Back To Part 1](#)

[Back To Index](#)

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Vader's Folly Part 2

From the Blue Falcon Series

by [J.A. Berger](#)

With his 'saber deactivated to conserve its power cell, Vader pressed closer to the granite wall, his senses filled with the haunting and eerie cry of Geko and the unseen others of his kind. He had been left, he suspected, to ponder his own death and grow careless with fear. A prospect he found amusing under the present circumstances, but not one to be taken lightly.

The night had grown darker in the shelter of the mighty wall and colder. Snow was again falling, covering the world around him in a fresh coat of white. Several times he had been forced to increase the temperature of his environmental suit and reset the systems switch on his chest-box to compensate for the drop in temperature. But the displays recording his pulmonary, respiratory, and neural systems were still functioning properly and all readings were well within the safety zone. For how much longer with continuing subjection to the worsening conditions, he could only guess and was not something he cared to dwell on. His best course of action would be to retrace his steps to the settlement and to the customized TIE left there for his return to the Annihilator.

Keeping his senses keyed to the darkness around him, Vader reached a gloved hand to his belt and the familiar controls located there. Increasing his audio enhancement to full, he again checked his temperature regulation system. At last satisfied with his precautions, he drew the heavy outer robe tightly across his chest to hide the small lights that flickered across the life systems computer on his chest box and moved away from the protection of the granite wall.

For the first time, he was fully conscious of the squeak from the well-oiled leather of his boots, the distinctive hiss of his regulator, and the minute scrapings of the duristeel of his helmet against the heavily enforced leather of his chest armor. His movement, despite everything he did, could not be kept from the sensitive ears of a Felarian. For that, he would have to rely on his cunning and skills of Force deception.

Drawing the Dark Side to him, Vader cloaked himself in its invisible aura much as he had cloaked the small lights on his chest box with the dark, heaviness of his robes. Sealed within the protection of his powers, he turned and edged away from the granite wall. Mentally activating the directional finder behind his optical sensors, he programmed his return to the settlement. The data quickly appeared. Orienting himself to his surroundings and the coordinates on the finder, the dark lord moved away from the protection of the outcropping and proceeded unerringly back in the direction he had come.

He had moved only a short distance from the outcropping when doubts of his direction sent him checking and rechecking his finder. Twice he varied his steps away from its heading and each time, upon checking, he corrected and continued on. With each step he'd been forced to reestablish his Force shielding before continuing. And, always he could hear the Felarian cries coming ever closer. He pressed on.

Reaching a disturbingly familiar wall of granite, Darth Vader paused. Despite the precision of the instrument he carried, he had traveled in a circle and returned to the very location from which he had started. Carefully checking his life function sensors, he found the arrays flashing visual warnings already confirmed by what was left of his own damaged body. He was tiring. And with the increased dependency on the environmental suit and its life systems, he had taxed it beyond safe limits. He would have to stop, reset the systems and allow them to recover before he could press on or they would fail. If they failed, his death would be imminent.

From the general direction of the settlement, eerie cries of the great cats broke the night air and were quickly answered by a single cry just north and east of his location. With his back again to the solid wall, Vader reset his systems, drew the heavy robes tightly around him, and sat down. Pressing his armored body deep into the dense brush, he allowed the snow-covered branches to encircle and mask his location.

Almost immediately fatigue and weariness washed over the dark lord. Taking several deep breaths from the recycled oxygen brought in through the air intake vents of his helmet, warmed, enriched, and recycled through his environmental suit, Vader slowed his respiration and drew on the Dark powers. In moments he was in a Force trance, hidden from prying eyes, his own awareness enhanced by the Force. For a while, he would be safe.

* * * * *

Blue lightning clashed against white, filling the hot, arid atmosphere of Tatooine midday with the added stench of ozone. Two men, one younger than the other, dressed in desert robes pressed their attacks, and when neither could achieve an advantage, backed off. The static sound of energy against energy crackled as the blue and white blades of their ancient weapons parted.

The older of the two deactivated his 'saber and snapped the benign-looking tube to his belt. Smiling, he strolled forward to place a brotherly hand on the shoulder of the younger. "Enough for today, Anakin, you have done well. Soon you will be ready to link your fighting skills with the Force."

The man address as Anakin laughed, "Ben, my old friend and mentor, away from the fighting, you grow old and slow. You have forgotten how far your teaching has taken me." Without warning, he threw the activated 'saber high into the air, did a quick backward flip, returned to an upright stance, and beckoned the descending weapon to his hand without looking. The silver tube slapped his open palm and he tightened his grip on the weapon, and then turning, he locked his powers on the belt of his teacher and summoned the weapon. The lightsaber pulled from its snap and flew to the hand of the student. "See, old friend, I have, indeed, learned my lessons well."

The older man stepped forward and retrieved his weapon. And, for the first time, the younger man read concern and doubt in his mentor's eyes. He laughed it off, put his weapon away, and motioned the older man toward the small desert hut. "Come on, I'm thirsty. What do you say we break open that bottle of ale I brought and toast my success?"

The scene dissolved into a cascade of swirling colors filled with familiar but fleeting feelings and long forgotten smells. When they stopped, it was to darkness. He could see nothing, but he could 'feel' intense heat and the roar of some unearthly force that rocked the very ground under his feet.

Suddenly, his senses were overwhelmed by a geyser of hot, molten lava rising from a bottomless pit before him. The heavy scent of sulfa threatened the sensitive membranes of his human lungs as the life-threatening stream touched the very edges of the pit.

He was standing on the brink of an active volcano, his Jedi lightsaber aglow in his fist and his mentor only steps from him. The older man stood passive, his weapon in a double-handed hold before him, his eyes calm, sad. "Put down your weapon, Anakin. This is not the way. If you proceed on this path, it will consume you."

"Ben, you're wrong." He stood tall, bathed in a power he could not explain. "It's easy. Everything you've taught me is suddenly so clear." Without warning, he struck out at the man he had called friend with such lightning speed and cunning that Ben Kenobi had to step back to avoid a killing strike from the glowing blade in his student's 'saber. Immediately, Anakin pushed his advantage, striking and striking again, feeling the power as it surged and pounded within him. Suddenly, the man before was no longer a friend, but someone who stood in his way, someone who had purposely kept the true secrets of the Force from him.

"Anakin, NO!" Kenobi struggled to defend himself from the vicious attack, his words going unheeded. The battle had been joined in earnest, and it would be a battle to the death.

Within the confines of his mind, in pictures more vivid than reality, Darth Vader relived that monumental turning point in his life. He relived again the fight, the attack he'd made against every defensive move from the man who had trained him in the ways of the Jedi and the use of the Force. He felt again the all-consuming fires of the Dark Side as the volcano burst forth from the bowels of the earth and sent spires of lava into the air high above them.

Then, as before, he saw his mistake too late as he lunged to a fake opening and Kenobi's blade locked to his. Shoulder to shoulder they struggled on the brink of disaster, the volcano raining its death around them as each fought for that small opening that could mean the difference between life and death.

He could again smell the stench of the sulfa. His dead nerves again alive to the intense heat on his exposed face and hands. He heard the sound of his own human scream of pain as his hair was torched by living coals, but still, he pressed on...until...a misstep, a grab for the offered hand, and the fall. The endless fall.

Again, he was forced to relive his decent into the fiery pit and his glimpse of his mentor, his friend. Ben Kenobe stood at the crater's edge, his eyes locked to his own, tears streaming down his face. Were they from the heat of the volcano or tears of regret and failure? He would never know.

Vader awoke with a start. The damaged body within the environmental suit was overheated, his heart faltering, his respiration labored. Immediately, he threw his robes aside and carefully reset his life support programs. Badly shaken, he drew several careful breaths, and then again checked his life functions. They were once more in the green, but continued to flash their warnings. He had stressed them too far. He would have to take care.

A sudden awareness of his surroundings and the dark lord felt the first true grip of fear reach for his stabilizing, but vulnerable heart. Desperately, he found and again drew the tattered edges of the Force to him and reached into the darkness.

He was no longer alone. Geko was near. Watching. Waiting. And, for the first time, Darth Vader, Dark Knight and Sith Lord, doubted his control of the Dark Side and its ability to protect its own.

* * * *

From the command section of the Imperial All Terrain Armored Transport, General Veers watched the touchdown of the single troop transport, which had accompanied the five All Terrain Scout Transports reluctantly allotted to him by Commander Faka, near the smoldering ruins of the small settlement. The planet's one small moon had dropped below the highest range to the north, leaving the night in darkness, lit only by the few stars that managed to find their way through the snow-heavy cloud cover. Still, Veers worried.

The M.E., even with the help of the science section and its universal library logs, had been to give him very little useful information regarding the shape shifting feline predators of the small world. Faka thought the predators to be unintelligent animals. While the M.E. had not openly disputed his commanding officer, it was what the medic had left unsaid and the look of honest concern that had furrowed his brow that caused the Imperial officer to worry. During his years of Imperial service, he had survived because he had never underestimated the enemy. And in those years, he had learned that those you knew the least about were those most likely to surprise you with their cunning and their intelligence. He had no reason to expect the present situation to be any different. He turned to his pilot.

"Captain, position for troop pick up. I want the boarding hatch to the transport, with the walker's body between the troops and anyone watching from the northern hills."

"Yes, Sir."

"Lieutenant."

"Sir!" The younger officer seated next to the pilot looked up expectantly.

"Contact the transport and tell them to stand by. They are not to field the remaining ground force until we have assembled the scouts to cover their march."

"Yes, Sir!" The co-pilot opened a channel to the transport, transmitted Veers' orders, and then turned back to his commander. "They are standing by, Sir."

"Very good. Captain, you may proceed with the pick up."

Rotating its massive head toward the transport, Captain Stagl put the great armored monster into motion until the Imperial walker stood in front of the troop

carrier. Another adjustment and its massive body moved smoothly between the spacecraft and the mountains to the north.

"In position, General, and awaiting your orders." Stagl eased back on the AT-AT controls and the great walker thundered to a halt next to the much smaller craft.

"Transport is in contact." The young lieutenant tapped his headset. He spoke confirmation into the mic, than looked up. "They're standing by for pick up, General."

"Kneel."

Stagl reached for another set of controls and the rear section of the great walker settled back on its huge knee joints, then slowly, laboriously, the front settled as well until the AT-AT knelt with its mighty hydraulics creaking.

"Lower off-side boarding hatch and standby." Veers turned to his co-pilot. "As soon as you get a green light on the hatch, contact transport to commence troop pick up."

"Yes, Sir." Two voices spoke as one and four hands reached to control boards as each order was acknowledged and swiftly carried out.

A moment later the co-pilot turned to the general. "Pick up is complete, General. Transport personnel have secured the craft and our hatch has been cleared and secured. My board is green."

"Captain Stagl, you may bring us to our fee and standby. Lieutenant, open a channel to the scouts and get confirmation of my orders. If they are ready, tell the transport to release its ground troops, lock down, and standby for further orders."

A few more minutes at his communications and the young officer again looked up. "Scouts are awaiting your command, Sir. They have their orders and coordinates have been set." Another flash on his com board and the lieutenant turned again to his board. "Acknowledged." He turned away and reported. "We are ready to proceed, Sir."

"Captain Stagl, standby."

With the great walker standing at its full height of sixteen meters, Veers and his command crew looked out over their small, but impressive ground force. A detail of 60 snowtroopers armed with heavy assault rifles stood before them, flanked by the great AT-AT. At point strolled three of the AT-STs, which each of the remaining scouts had positioned themselves at each side of the ground forces. They were ready.

"Give the order to move out, Lieutenant."

Opening a channel to their forces, the co-pilot of the colossal war machine issued the command.

To the accompanying shout of the ground commander to his foot soldiers, the front scouts stepped forward as the direct reinforcements for the frontline of defense. They were on the move.

Veers exalted in the power of the great machine. This was where he belonged. He was never truly a complete soldier until he mounted his armor-plated steed. He was ready for whatever awaited beyond the northern boundaries of the outlaw settlement. Surely whatever lived there, primitive and earthbound, could be no match for what he had fielded against them. But even as the mighty Imperial walker moved out, a touch of something close to doubt played like a cold finger down the center of his back. Keeping the doubt close at hand, but not allowing it to get between him and his duty, General Veers squared his shoulders and readied himself for battle.

They had cleared the outer boundaries of the settlement and moved past the final launch pad when the difficulties started.

At first, he could only watch in puzzlement, then in concern, as the military position of the foot soldiers began to waver then, without warning, break apart.

Veers, at his station behind his crew, frowned and activated his headset to ground command. "Commander Re'tel tighten your ranks!"

It was too late. First one, then two more dropped from the column, threw their weapons to the ground and started pulling frantically at their helmets and life support packs. Still others turned in circles as if clueless as to their whereabouts, while near the back, a soldier turned his weapon on himself and fired.

"Scout commanders, halt and await my orders!" the scout walkers were brought to a quick halt while Veers turned his attention to his immediate concern. "Commander Re'tel," he roared into his headset. "Report! What the hell's going on down there?" Only static greeted the open channel to his ground forces and while he waited the erratic behavior continued.

"General Veers, Scout One reports four-legged feline-like creatures moving through the brush some distance ahead of point. They are asking for orders."

"Check the sensor grids. If the target is not humanoid, kill it!"

The three scouts immediately moved ahead of the growing chaos of the ground troops, each armor-plated cockpit turning right, and then left, as targeting

sensors searched out the hidden enemy. As one they fired, the heavy detonation of their twin blaster cannons easily detected over the higher pitched tat-tat of the lighter singles. Ahead of them, the brush burst into flame, shearing the ground for several meters ahead of the fast paced walkers.

Behind them, the remainder of the ground troops continued their erratic behavior. Several were locked in deadly combat, while others turned and ran back in the direction of the awaiting transport.

"Re'tel report!"

"He's down, Sir," the co-pilot reported somberly. "I...don't know what happened, but I'm getting a report from his second-in-command that he's dead; no sign of a wound, no visible injury, but he's dead. They're asking what they should do."

Veers looked at the chaos below him. The detail was in shambles and they had progressed no more than a few meters from the settlement. What was out there? What could have caused the silent destruction he had just witnessed? What had affected the troops, but not him and his crew or those in the scouts? Toxic gases? He reached to the control board between his crew and touched a button. Readings came back to him in green. The air was thin, but pure.

"Tell him to return the detail to the transport at once! They are not to leave its protection unless ordered to do so by myself, Lord Vader, or Commander Faka."

The co-pilot quickly forwarded the information then turned a questioning glance on Veers.

Ignoring it, the General opened his channel to the transport. "Have the troops boarded?" Confirmation came back to his headset and he nodded grimly. "You have your orders. Veers out."

The general stepped to the view port and glanced out into the darkness where his five scouts stood by awaiting his orders. He opened a channel to them. "Any reported kills?"

"None confirmed, General," Scout One reported. "First they're slinking through the brush coming at you and the next they're gone. Nothing but shadows moving among shadows."

"How many?"

"Can't say. The sensor array doesn't like them. It marks their position, but can't seem to hold it long enough to get a target lock."

"Did you get a good look at them?"

"A glance, Sir. Long, lean bodies covered with fur, small cat-like heads. They're big brutes. I'd guess some of them to be roughly two meters standing upright. On all fours..." He paused. "They're fast, General, real fast."

"Are your sensors picking up anything now?"

"They're out there, Sir. Sitting and waiting. What are your orders?"

Veers' gray eyes hardened as he reviewed his options, few that they were. He had fielded a command to rescue the Emperor's emissary against the threat of large, primitive cats, animals without man's weapons or man's ability to reason. Yet, in five minutes and less than a kilo-meter from the remains of the outlaw settlement, he had been reduced to five scouts with their total of ten crew members, he and his crew of two, and the forty troopers benched in the belly of his walker. Grimly, he opened the channel to the scouts. "We go on."

* * * *

"You are weakening, old one."

The voice was there again in his mind and Vader knew he was no longer hidden from the strange being who had continued its relentless pursuit of him. 'It was just as well,' he told himself, and past time to end it.

Gracefully, the powerful figure rose to his feet and stood tall. Moved by the wind's touch, the great robes fluttered away from his body as a slight motion of a gloved hand brought the silver tube to life with a flash of deadly flame.

"Not as weak as you think, Felarian." Vader countered. *"Show yourself and let's put an end to this. I tire of your games."*

"You think you are worthy to face me?"

There was genuine surprise in the shadowy voice and a confidence so overwhelming that Vader chuckled, a sound eerie in its inhuman resonance through the helmet's mechanical voice box. Reaching out, he found the unprotected mind of the other and threw the might of his dark powers towards it. He wrapped his mind control around the alien presence, made contact and bore down hard!

Surprise was quickly followed by pain, then agony tore a cry of torment from the alien mouth and a great scream rent the air with such anger that it cut through the world with killing promise.

Something dark, evil, and consumed with anger met Vader's attack, engaged his power and pressed hard with a mind force equal to his own. Vader held for another moment than retreated, spent and reeling.

"Your mind is powerful, old one, but like your body, it is damaged." A new respect flickered in the disembodied voice that filled the dark lord's mind, followed by silence.

A moment passed, than two. Suddenly, at the outer edge of the blade's illumination, a lean, cat-like form appeared. The animal was huge, its dark sable coat glossy and slick with health. Its limbs, thick and powerful, gracefully tapered to large, heavily padded, saucer-shaped feet, thickly furred over sheathed claws.

Its small feline head turned and the light of the weapon reflected from eyes dark with anticipation and intelligence. The great cat issued an angry hiss, exposing a mouth full of fangs, large and strong. It took a slinking, predatory step towards him.

"So," Vader purred softly in anticipation, *"we meet at last."*

The great cat paused and the dark eyes flickered with much the same light of anticipation. *"Yes, old one. I, Geko, grant you the honor of seeing the one who will spill your blood."*

Vader felt the alien reach for his mind and quickly fended it off. *"It won't be that easy, Felarian."* He stepped forward. The great cat's eyes followed his every move, but did not seem overly concerned about the weapon in his hand. Vader pondered the knowledge. In the form of the snowtrooper, Geko had seen the weapon parry the laser bolts of the Imperial rifle, but did he truly understand the workings of either weapon? Did he conceive it as a weapon? He decided to find out. *"What form will you take to fight me, Felarian? What weapon do you choose?"*

"Against you, old one, I need no other form, no other weapon. I will fight you as Felarian and before your death you will feel the steel of my claws and my fangs at your throat."

The great, lean body slunk closer to the ground, the small ears atop the elegant head folded down tight against its skull. The long, graceful tail, flecked at the tip with black, twitched its warning.

As the great cat leapt, Darth Vader took a quick step to the right and swung the 'saber. At the feather-like touch of the blade, the great cat howled in surprised pain. Vader pressed the attack, the blade raised for another strike. In a movement faster than the human eye could follow, the Felarian twisted in mid-air, avoided the cutting stroke of the blade, and landed on its feet. Its momentum

carried it past the Sith Lord. The stench of burning hair and sheared flesh filled the air, but a killing blow had been avoided. Vader swore in anger. Geko would not be taken by surprise so easily again. He whirled to face his enemy only to find himself once more alone in the clearing.

"So," he purred to the darkness, *"I draw first blood."* He allowed the thought to fester, than continued. *"One attack and you quit?"* Contempt crept into his voice. *"I have fought many like you, Felarian, and left them for the carrion eaters on many worlds."* Again, he let silence follow his words, than hardened his voice. *"Fight or get out of my way, Felarian. I have wasted enough time with you."*

An all too familiar form moved from the darkness and Vader chuckled. *"You take the form of my teacher? My mentor? Excellent! I killed him once, Felarian. I will gladly do so again."* He stepped forward to meet the gray-haired figure in desert robes that stood before him with a lightsaber clenched in the familiar double-handed hold.

The great 'sabers clashed, locked, than pulled apart as Vader pressed the attack. Unfamiliar with the weapon he held and the discomfort of a body not his own, the Felarian shape changer struggled backwards under the pressure of the dark lords' continuing attack. Another blazing engagement and the figure disappeared. And again, Vader stood alone.

"Felarian, you have failed twice. Are you now to stay in the shadows and lick your wounds or face me like the warrior you claim yourself to be?"

A growl, heavy and menacing, broke the silence of the clearing. *"I need not risk my life to take you down, old one."*

Without warning, Darth Vader felt the cool, oxygen-enriched atmosphere within his suit cease its flow. Out of habit, he reached for the controls and reset. For a moment, the air resumed its programmed flow and then it faltered. He glanced down. The control board across his chest was a mass of fluctuating lights, each reflecting its own warnings of failure. The Felarian had found his one weakness and was pressing the attack.

* * * *

Veers watched in frustrated silence as the scout walkers moved ahead of his AT-AT, their usually swift advance slowed by the snow-heavy brush that caught at the footpads and legs of the smaller transports. They had reached the ridge overlooking the settlement and stood waiting as the larger walker took the slope, its drive motors whining as they engaged and pulled the great machine to the top.

Veers opened a channel to the scouts. "Scout One, have you attempted contact with Lord Vader?"

"Yes, General," the reedy voice answered him through his headset. "We have not been able to make voice contact. However, our sensors have picked up a weak intermittent signal, which we believe could be from an activated directional finder."

"Direction?"

"North of our present location."

"Distance?"

"Approximately three kilometers, Sir."

"That close?"

"Yes, Sir. But we'll be moving into heavier brush and rocky terrain. It will not provide a problem for your walker, but these scouts may not make it."

"Understood." Veers thought for a moment, his attention centered past the scouts to the rocky ground to the north and the rough mountains beyond. He reopened the channel. "Have you seen any more of the predators?"

"No, Sir," the voice came back softly. "But they're out there. You can almost feel their eyes on you." Another pause. "What happened to our ground troops back there, General?"

Veers' eyes narrowed. "I can't speculate on that, trooper. But whatever affected them does not seem to affect us. Let's move out."

"Yes, Sir." There was another pause. "You wish us to scout ahead, Sir?"

Recalling the scout's comment on the hard going for the smaller walkers, Veers sighed. "Fall back, Scout One, we'll break ground. If any of the cats are seen, target them and move on."

"Yes, Sir. I'm feeding the directional signal to your board."

Veers closed the channel. Looking over the shoulder of his copilot, the Imperial warrior watched in silence as a set of directionals appeared.

"Lieutenant, set our course on these coordinates. Captain, move us out, but hold our speed slow enough to allow the scouts to keep up."

"Yes, Sir." Captain Stagl reached to his controls and the great Imperial war machine resumed its steady progress angling slowly to the north.

Uneasiness fell over the general as he stared out the view port at the great snow-covered mountains outlined against the blackness of night. What *had* affected his ground troops? During his initial attack on the settlement, the strike had gone off without a hitch. They had completed their assignment, returned to their transports, and lifted off for the Annihilator without incident. What was so different this time?

He scanned the rough, snowy terrain, thoughts in turmoil. Ground atmosphere, pollutants, possible gases, and elements that could endanger his troops had all been carefully checked prior to the assault. There had been none and, except for a thinner atmosphere, the oxygen levels were surprisingly good. His eyes narrowed. There was only differing factor; his first command had remained in and around the small settlement unlike Vader, his small detail, and now his rescue team.

The great walker ground to a halt as several light canon blasts from a scout at left point shot past them. The heavy brush was blown apart, sending snow flying in all directions, but no target was seen.

"Scout Two, what have you picked up?"

"Nothing, Sir," the reply came back, the voice somewhat embarrassed and puzzled. "I..I could have sworn I saw one of those cat-things, but about the same time I fired, it disappeared from my targeting grid. I...I guess it must have been an anomaly or...something. Sorry, Sir."

"Acknowledged." Veers closed the channel, his brows knit in a tight frown. "Captain, continue on. Lieutenant, keep your eyes on our directionals and alert me to any...anomalies...on our instruments."

"Yes, Sir," his crew answered in unison. The Imperial walker moved on.

"Shape shifters," Veers voiced softly.

"Sir?" Captain Stagl answered, his attention centered on his controls.

"Nothing, Captain," Veers stared out the view port. The M.E. had said the feline creatures of this world were shape shifters with a fluctuating DNA. He frowned. He had fought on many worlds, faced many adversaries, and not all had been humanoid. The universe was vast; its life forms varied. But one thing he had found consistent.

"General Veers, Scout I is reporting something, possibly humanoid, on the ground ahead of us. He's asking for permission to check it out."

"Permission granted. Move us back to his flank and put him on my screen."

A moment later, Veers watched the small walker move ahead. At the edge of the screen, the Imperial officer could make out a dark form on the ground ahead of them.

The small scout stopped and slowly crouched, servos whining as its massive head dropped to rest on the ankle joints, carefully balanced over the thick, heavysset footpads.

In all cases of fluctuating DNA, Veers continued thoughtfully, the being not only had the ability to change shapes at will, but had also been able to read and control...minds.

The egress hatch atop the small scout opened, and the Imperial crewman stepped out...

"NO!" Veers shouted through his headset. "It's a trap!"

The warning came too late. The crewman had already released his hold on the transport and dropped to the ground. Turned away from the scout, he stopped. The figure was no longer there. Standing in its place was a cat-like being. Large. Threatening. A shrill scream and it leapt. Unable to do more than watch, Veers swore helplessly. Their cannons, even the light blasters, could not have taken the alien without targeting their own man.

The Imperial crewman screamed only once and then was silent. Before the cannon could be centered on the alien form, it disappeared into the underbrush.

Silence fell over the AT-AT command section. Veers turned to his crew. "There's nothing we can do, move on." Opening a channel to the remaining walkers, his voice hardened. "Abandon the scout. I repeat, abandon the scout. No crewman is to leave his walker. Keep hatches closed to all outside contact."

But it was already too late.

"General Veers, Scout II is bring its twins on-line. She's moving towards us!"

So, he had been right. "Target the scout. If she fires on us, take her out."

"But, Sir..."

"Lieutenant, you have your orders!"

"Yes, Sir." The young officer brought his targeting computer on-line just as the first volley from the scout's twin blaster cannons hit the AT-ATs heavily armored shoulder and started forward toward the flexible, more vulnerable armored tunnel of the great walker's neck.

"Fire! Now!"

Swinging the AT-ATs head to face the attacking scout, the Imperial war machine returned fire. Struck by the heavier laser cannon, the small scout disintegrated in a flash of exploding fuel and overloaded laser batteries.

"Scouts, close ranks!" Silence greeted his open channels to the remaining scouts.

"Lieutenant, where are they?"

"They're...just standing there, General; Two on point, one to our rear."

"Weapons?" Veers snapped, recognizing the formation.

"Coming on line, sir."

"Their target?"

The young lieutenant looked up in shock. "Us, Sir. All targeting computers have a lock on us!"

A broadside by the one scout had caused little or no damage to the heavily armored AT-AT, but concentrated fire on the more vulnerable neck or on the fuel slug tank at the rear of the great machine could bring them down.

"Scouts, disengage your weapons! This is General Veers! I order you to disengage!"

"Still locked, Sir. Scout IV's weapons are coming on-line. Now Scout III!"

"Captain, to port. Let's give them as small a target as possible."

The mighty titanium beast turned, its head pointed toward the small scout poised at its left shoulder. Time stood still.

"Something's wrong..."

"Lieutenant?"

"Their weapons are on-line. They have us locked on their targeting grid, but...nothing's happening."

"Stand ready to fire."

"Yes, Sir."

Veers again opened a channel to the scouts. "This is General Veers. Power down your weapons, I repeat, power down your weapons!"

The scouts remained as small red dots on his sensor screen: they were still hot, with their weapons on-line and locked.

"Lieutenant, check life readings on the scouts."

Nimble fingers moved quickly across the life sensor board; then paused. "General, I'm not getting any readings from Scouts 3 and 4. Scout 5's readings are very, very faint." He hesitated. "It's gone now, too."

Veers watched the red dots on the screen. The weapons remained on-line, but the hands at their controls were lifeless.

"What's happening, General? What happened the crew of those walkers?"

"Chew your life form sensors, Lieutenant. Are you getting any readings for the cats?"

"I'm getting a few fluctuating signals in front of us, moving northward." He glanced up. "You think they...?"

"Yes, Lieutenant, I do." Veers fell silent. All that remained of his ground force was housed in the great AT-AT. How much dare he tell them? "Are we still getting a good signal from the directional finder?"

"It's not a good signal, General, but strong enough to lock on."

"Then do so," Veers turned and addressed his captain. "Set a course for that signal, Captain, and proceed with caution." He thought for a moment before disclosing his suspicions. "We know these cat creatures are shape shifters. Now, it would seem they might also be able to read and possibly control minds. We must be caution."

"But if they could control the minds of our men in the scouts," Captain Stagl questioned, "Why didn't they attempt control of ours?"

"A good question, Captain. A very good question," Veers voiced softly, his mind busily working over the problem. There could be only one answer. "Until the crewman of Scout 2 opened the hatch and stepped outside, these cat creatures may not have known the scouts were machines operated by humanoids. Our origin may still be in doubt."

"Sir?" The young lieutenant asked fearfully.

"Because of our size, they may believe ol' 842 here is a living, breathing entity of its own." Something, feather soft with lingering tentacles, touched his mind. "And, then again, maybe not," he mouthed, his voice grim.

Reaching across his board, he touched a worn button, pressed another, than flicked a switch. Immediately, the heavy strains of an Imperial march blared from the huge walker's PA system mounted on the outer hull of the mighty head. He upped the gain. The alien threads of contact withdrew. Veers turned to his copilot. "Lieutenant, pip the music into the troop hold immediately. Maximum level."

"Done, Sir."

Veers pushed forward. "Commander Tell, report."

A shaky, but quickly steadying voice spoke to the open channel. "Everything's fine, General. Some of my troops were acting a bit strange there for a few moments, but they've settled down. It's tight back here and a bit claustrophobic." He paused. "Music's a little too loud, General. Other than that, we stand ready, Sir."

"Captain, increase our speed," Veers shouted over the bellowing strains of the rousing music. "I want to reach Vader's coordinates as quickly as possible. We may not have long before the next attack."

* * * *

Forced to his knees with the continuing failure of his life systems, Darth Vader attempted to hold them online with his powers, but was met with only marginal success. When he centered his powers on his life support, he pulled them from his even more vulnerable mind, leaving it at the mercy of the Felarian. It was a situation he could not hope to win and time was running out.

His thoughts began to wander, his brain starving for the oxygen that normally flowed freely through the respiratory systems of his suit. As he struggled for breath, he felt his damaged heart falter. He collapsed and lay still, attempting to conserve as much of his failing systems...and his life...as he still could.

And then, it was gone. The heavy stranglehold of the alien was no longer there.

With a shaking hand, the dark lord reached to his chestbox and swiftly reset the system's switch. His mind centered on survival, Vader consciously pulled the knowledge of the Force to him and willed himself to slow his ragged breathing. Was he too late? Were the systems already taxed beyond their abilities to recover? Anxious, he waited.

After a minute or two, the automated systems rallied weakly and the steady flow of oxygen returned. He drew another thankful breath, than struggled weakly to his feet.

Another check and he knew his relief would be short lived. There were no alien minds controlling the readings now, but the results were far from reassuring. Warning lights flickered across his chest board. He did not have long. His systems were fast approaching critical. When they failed, if he were not safely aboard the Annihilator, he would die.

It was then he caught the distant strains of music. He stiffened. No, he had not been mistaken. It sounded like an Imperial march.

In the cold, stillness of the night, he strained forward. Over the driving, pulsating strains of the martial movements, he heard the ka-chunk of an Imperial walker in motion.

Veers!

He reached to his comlink and opened a channel. It was clear! He started to speak into the small device, than thinking better of it, set the tracking beacon.

Reaching into the darkness with his powers, Vader searched for the Felarian, but could touch only pain and confusion. Of course, he reasoned, most members of the feline species hated loud noise, their sense of hearing so acute many preferred telepathy to the spoken word; silence to laughter.

The walker was closer. He could hear the actual steps taken by the great war machine and feel its vibrations through the ground under his feet. The music swelled and grew still louder. Reaching hurriedly to his belt, the Dark Lord deactivated his audio enhancement unit.

Expecting a possible attack, Darth Vader put his back again to the granite wall, rechecked his comlink, than tightened his hold on the silver tube of his Jedi weapon. The beacon was still sending a strong signal; it would not be long now.

Before him, to his left and to his right, the bushes moved slightly as if by a strong breeze, but the Emperor's emissary knew differently. He could feel their minds as

first one, than another, reached out to touch his, but made no attempt to invade or attack---in all he sensed confusion and pain. The music! Silently, he applauded the general's ingenuity. It just might be enough to save their lives.

The movement around him increased and he sensed more and more of the large cats circling his location. Geko! He had formed a wedge of Felarian bodies around and between his intended victim and the huge war machine coming towards them. Individually, he had sensed several trying to block the music with their powers only to fail under the continuing onslaught of what to them would be mindless noise. But soon...

The AT-AT lumbered into sight. Bright beams of light from twin spotlights mounted on either side of the great head, split the darkness and bathed its forward progress in brilliant daylight. At the edges of the darkness, long, lean forms pressed deeper into the brush to avoid the light, but none made any attempt to run. They were standing their ground.

Vader stepped into the pool of light; his 'saber still dark. A movement caught in the edges of his peripheral vision and he turned. There, just out of the light, stood the dark sable figure of Geko, and behind him, moving closer were more of his kind. In a matter of minutes, the edges of the light were lined with Felarians all seated in a semi-circle around Vader and the huge walker. In the semi-darkness they waited.

"Lord Vader, are you all right?" The voice from his interior comlink sounded strained with worry.

"Yes, General, but your arrival is welcomed."

"I would recommend a speedy retreat, my Lord, I don't know how long this ply of mine will work. If you'll back towards the walker, I'll drop a cable from the port belly hatch. I don't dark risk kneeling under the present circumstances."

"Understood, General." Vader edged backward, his hand firm on his weapon, his eyes on the cat-like creatures around him. Reaching the near from footpad of the walker, he took another step backward. Far over his head he heard the belly hatch swish open and servos engage. A long cable snaked from the belly of the great beast and dropped slowly toward him. Taking his eyes from th4e Felarians, he glanced up.

"Look out!"

The black helmet whipped back in time to see the great cat lunge across the light towards him. The cable dropping from the belly of the AT-AT forgotten, Darth Vader stepped into the attack. A touch of a finger and the scarlet blade on his weapon danced to life.

"Find a target and fire!" Vader heard the commander over his comlink as he steeled himself to receive the heavy body of his enemy.

Driving forward, he met brawn with armored might. He felt the great claws reaching for his body slide from the chest and shoulder armor, breaking Geko's forward momentum and throwing the great cat off stride. But before he could make a kill cut with his blade, the Felarian righted himself in mid-air, touched down on all fours and made another drive at him--this time coming in a groin level.

Vader cut downward with this blade, missing the Felarian by only the breath of one of the great cat's whiskers, driving Geko back in reverence to the weapon and being's inbred fear of fire.

Around them the brush was sheared and burnt from the deadly fire track laid down by the Imperial walker. But no bodies lay in the ruins.

With the Felarian threat momentarily at bay, Vader spoke into his interior comlink. "Veers, Report!"

"We're laying down heavy fire, my Lord, but can account for no enemy dead. They show only intermittently on our target grids and are gone before we can lock on. It's like they vanish into thin air. About all we can do, my Lord, is keep the fight fair. You stand too close to give us a shot at the cat being."

There was no time for a reply as the great cat launched itself again at the tall figure in black.

Vader, his reactions slowed by his failing systems, reeled backward as the Felarian hit him hard at the knees, taking him to the ground. With Geko straddling him, his breath fogging the lenses of his helmet, Darth Vader reached for the cat's mind. Touching a source of power as dark and evil as his own, the Sith Lord forced the attack.

The cat screamed, but gave no ground. His jaws dripping saliva, Geko fought on both fronts, physical and mental. With his mind engaging the weakened mental power of the human, he continued his physical assault on the weakened body that lay beneath his own. His claws reached up and under to scratch at the belly of his enemy. Finding no purchase in the hard, unyielding codpiece of the armor, he struck out with his front feet and teeth, raking, digging, trying for any opening in the mask and armor that would allow him entry to the soft, vulnerable body beneath.

Vader raised a gloved fist, the scarlet blade of his Jedi weapon dangerously close to his own body as he fought to reach the lean, wiry body of the Felarian.

Finding no opening, he wedged the hilt of his saber between the great cat's teeth and, using it for leverage, threw the Felarian from him.

The great cat rolled and was immediately on his feet. Vader struggled to one knee fighting not only his own body's failings, but his left supports as well. He was not getting enough oxygen. If he did not take the great cat down soon, the fight would be lost. Desperately, he reached for Geko's mind.

The two minds engaged; one feral and powerful, the other dark and evil. Finding an opening as the great cat launched another physical attack, Darth Vader pressed hard, commanding the dark forces beyond the other's formidable defenses to the core of his power. There, he touched flame to his attack.

Halfway into another lunge at the armored figure, the great cat screamed out in pain, lost his momentum and fell. He screamed again, his mind aflame from the alien touch of the other. Savagely, his fangs ripped and tore at the empty air as he attempted to free his mind from Vader's grip.

Vader held tight, but reeled backward as the Felarian fought against his domination. One moment, than two...than reeling from pain and weariness both broke contact.

The dark knight struggled to his feet, his rasping, mechanically driven lungs fighting for life from a system flashing red across his chestbox. He hit the reset, than looked up. The Felarian was gone, but not fare. He could sense Geko's presence and the presence of many, many more.

"Veers, lower the cable. Hurry!"

Suddenly the shadows around him came to life as Felarians moved into the edges of the walker's broad beam of light and sat, encircling both he and the great war machine.

Reaching back, Vader found the cable, twisted it around his wrist and arm, before taking a strong hold with his gloved hand.

"Take me up!"

The servos whirled to life and the cable retreated taking the Dark Lord off the ground and upward. Looking down, he watched the great cats edge closer, drawing the circle tighter around the walker. No sound issued from them, but all eyes were centered on him.

Turning his head, Vader saw Geko standing forward of the circle, his graceful head turned to the north, his hackles up, his eyes dark with irritation and something else. Had it been any other being, Vader would have called it fear.

With the Felarian, he could only puzzle at what could be out there that Geko would fear.

Okay an arm's length from the hatch and safety, the cable jerked to a halt. "Veers, check the cable!" Only silence greeted his open link to the cockpit. "Veers!" Only then did Vader realize the music had stopped. Why? "Veers!"

Below him, the cats were circling still closer and he had his answer. Confused and disoriented by the loud music, the Felarians had joined minds to reach beyond the irritation to those responsible. At their bidding, the music had been silenced. Of the men inside the walker, were any still alive?

Desperately, he tightened his one-handed hold on the cable, deactivated his 'saber and snapped it to his belt, freeing his right hand. With a double-handed hold on the cable, Vader started the agonizing hand-over-hand climb to the edge of the open hatch. Below he sensed the ever-closing circle.

"Veers!"

Hauling himself into the walker through the opened hatch, Vader rolled forward and hit a toggle, closing the great hatch behind him. Inside, he stepped into the midst of chaos.

The troop hold was full. Snowtroopers dressed for battle lay in various positions. Each experiencing what seemed to be both fear and pain. Many grabbed at their heads and screamed, while others rolled in agony about the holds, suffering in silence.

Struggling to his feet, the Dark Knight moved through the body of the war machine to the cockpit access tube. Opening the hatch, he entered and closed it tightly behind him. The Felarians had been able to touch the minds of his crew but, between filtering out the music and crushing those who caused it, he suspected they had not cared to push beyond their endurance to kill any of those they now held in agony.

Entering the cockpit, he found Veers struggling against the pain, but upright. He had pushed the incapacitated pilot from his place at the controls and motioned Vader to do the same with the copilot.

"I...I tried to...engage the PA, but something...something..."

"I know," Vader hissed, struggling to slow his breathing. "Oxygen...do you...have tanks...here?"

Veers reached between the seats and struggled with a portable tank.

Reaching to his chestbox, Vader hit his command override switch and disengaged the respiratory systems. Reaching to the left of his belt, he toggled the respiratory sensor matrix to expose a valve. Opening it, he attached the nozzle to the mouth of the bottle, than turned to look out the view port.

The cats had moved no closer nor were they sitting still as they had before. Many were up milling around nervously. Their attention was no longer in sync with each other or turned upon those in the At-AT. Realizing his chance, Veers opened a channel to the troop hold.

"Commander. Report!"

"I don't know what hit us, General, but we're in bad shape back here. I figure at least half of my detail will need medical attention and soon...the other half aren't much better..."

Veers closed the comlink and looked over at the helmeted figure in the seat next to him. "Lord Vader?"

Vader drew deeply on the oxygen as the bottle emptied into his system's recycling reservoir. Another few minutes and he disengaged the bottle and set it aside, closed the matrix, switched back to auto, and reset his systems. Finished, he settled his attention again on the view port. Nothing had changed. The Felarians still sat around the walker, but their circle was breaking as some edged away. Geko paced before the Imperial war machine, his eyes dark with anger, his tail reflecting that anger in stiff twitches from first one side of his great flank to the other.

"What do you make of it?" Veers voiced softly.

Vader remained silent, watching every move of his enemy. At no time had he seen the Felarian exhibit any sign of fear or agitation, but the great cat was exhibiting both now in rising degrees.

"They're waiting," he guessed.

Veers glanced at him, than back to the view port. "Waiting? For what?"

"Whom, I suspect is more likely, General."

"My Lord, I think this would be a good time for us to get the hell out of here," Veers suggested, his eyes hard on the building drama below. "While they're distracted, maybe we've got a chance."

For a moment the helmeted figure remained silent. "No, General Veers. Their orders are to hold us here. They are not to attack unless we attempt to leave."

Veers looked at the Dark Lord, but made no questioning comment. He had served the Sith Lord long enough to know not to question him. He fell silent, his eyes on the scene below.

"There!" Veers motioned to the front of the walker.

The circle of Felarians had broken to form a small opening. Geko stepped forward. Putting his huge form between the opening and the war machine, he sat, his tail twitching in short, quick, nervous jerks.

"Yes," Vader voiced softly, his damaged eyes behind the red lenses settled on a sleek, graceful form that had materialized from the darkness and edged through the opening to pause before the seated Felarian.

The newcomer was a third smaller than the dark sable Geko, but her essence...yes, Vader thought...her...for there was little doubt of her gender. Her every movement was poetry, grace, and elegance. Her coat, a fawn color touched with bronze, shined with youth and good health, while her stance, her movements, were those of a confidently mature adult.

"What do you make of it, my Lord?" Veers whispered as if afraid to offend the beautiful creature.

Darth Vader remained silent, his attention centered on the new arrival, his mind reaching for hers. She looked up. Green, almond-shaped eyes sought him out and her mind opened, without fear, to his. Vader gasped, the sound modified by the rasp of his respirator.

"She's...known as T'Neel, Queen of the Fabora Clan..." Vader voiced through hushed tones. Her mind was powerful, yet strangely gentle; a threat tempered by gossamer wings. This, he realized was the Force sensitive he had touched from space. This was the mind that had reached beyond its planet's confines to come to his son's aid aboard the Millennium Falcon.

She broke contact and the Dark Lord felt both relief and regrettable loss. He drew deeply on his Dark forces and tried to mend the damage done to both his controls and his ego. Only the frightening powers of the Emperor had brought him so close to respect and fear of another. But there was another difference. He had *seen* what the Emperor's powers could do; he could only guess at what the Felarian might be able to do should she will it.

"Lord Vader."

His attention pulled from his disturbing thoughts, the dark lord centered his attention again to the drama unfolding before the walker. The one known as T'Neel had stepped forward to meet Geko. The sable Felarian came reverently to

his feet, but the hair along his back rose in open defiance. They stood nose-to-nose, the fawn and the sable. The others of the clan moved cautiously back.

For a moment, neither Felarian moved. Vader reached out in an attempt to eavesdrop on the conversation, but was rudely and easily closed out. Whatever was happening between the two, it was obvious that the one known as T'Neel was not going to share.

Suddenly, the dark sable was on his knees, his head lowered, his eyes averted. The fawn queen had not moved. Geko made one feeble move to rise, but failing, fell back and rolled onto his side. Only then did the smaller Felarian move from her position in front of the downed clan member. Taking a graceful step forward, she positioned herself over the prone figure in a show of dominance. She held it for a moment, and then backed away. The sable cat rose trembling to his feet and stood with head lowered before her.

Vader reached for Geko's essence and found nothing. He tried again, but there was no echo of the proud arrogance he'd encountered before. Puzzled, he pulled back.

"What's she done to him?" Veers questioned softly. "He's...different."

"Yes," Vader agreed. Geko was different. Vader watched Geko move away from the smaller cat, careful not to raise his eyes to hers. Reaching the edge of the circle, the seated Felarians moved quickly to open a way, careful not to come in contact with the vanquished. A moment later, he disappeared into the darkness.

The fawn-colored queen strolled confidently forward and sat before the AT-AT, her green eyes flashing in the brilliant, artificial light. Her mind requested entry and Vader hesitantly admitted her, fearful of the possible consequences, but suspicious that he could not keep her out if she insisted. Could she possibly do to him what she had obviously done to Geko?

"Geko called you "old one", what are you known by?"

Vader leaned forward until he could see her through the view port of the great walker, her voice belying the seeming vulnerability of the cat sitting before the titanium monster that could flatten her with one mighty step. He answered her telepathically as she had addressed him. *"I am Darth Vader, Lord of the Sith, and emissary to Palpatine, Imperial Lord of the Universe and leader of the Empire."*

"No," she denied softly. "That is who you say you are. It is not your true self."

Vader's mind whirled in turmoil. *"I don't know what you mean?"*

"You hide your true self and deny it the love of a son. How foolish."

"No," Vader whispered. *"The self you speak of is no more. I stand in his place."*

"For now, perhaps," she fenced.

"What happened to Geko?"

"He is vanquished."

"For defying you?" Vader pressed, careful to draw his Force protection closer should he anger her.

"Yes," she admitted calmly. *"But while this is not the first time Geko has disobeyed, it will be his last. He makes no distinction between prey and intelligent beings. He seeks out the weak, the foolish, and lures them to him, toys with them, than takes their lives."* She hesitated as if to give emphasis to her next point, *"Not unlike, I sense, the Dark being you have become."*

Vader stiffened under her directness. She had touched on nerves he had thought long desensitized to such truths.

"Enough." She broke the silence between them. *"Geko can no longer keep you in this place. You are free to go. Leave now and do not return."*

"Leave?" Vader purred in a touch of anger; then quickly squelched it. He was in no condition to deny her request. He did not want to force her to make it a demand. *"We will return to the site of the settlement. Our transports await our return. We will leave from that site."*

"That is good."

"They're leaving! All of them." Veers turned to the dark figure beside him. Together they watched the fawn-colored alien get casually to her feet, step into the semi-darkness of the ring of light, and vanish. "I wonder what all that was about?"

"General Veers, open a channel to the Annihilator. I want an AT-AT cargo module and shuttle barges on site and ready to transport our field equipment off world upon our arrival."

"Yes, my Lord, at once." The Imperial officer shot a quick glance toward the helmeted being at his side and silently wondered how much more the Dark Knight knew. Wisely refraining from exercising his curiosity, the Officer turned his attention to the Imperial walker.

* * * *

Stepping from his TIE, Darth Vader moved toward the tall figure in Imperial uniform standing at stiff attention. He stopped before Commander Faka.

"Lord Vader, all field equipment and personnel have been lifted from the planet's surface. I...understand you encountered some difficulties with the...natives."

"General Veers will brief you later, Commander Faka." Vader moved on, making no attempt to slow his steps for the Imperial officer. "I want security beacons programmed for Alpha Level Beta deployed immediately around the planet. Top priority."

"Alpha, my Lord?" Faka stammered, then rushed to keep in step with the longer stride of the Dark Knight. "Around...this...planet?"

Vader paused and the helmeted head turned, stopping the Imperial officer in his tracks. "Do you question my orders, Commander Faka?" He whispered ominously.

"No, no, of course not, Lord Vader," Faka stammered, then quickly moved to cover his mistake. "It will be done at once."

"I'll be in my chambers," he purred softly. "I would caution against disturbing me without good cause."

"Yes, my Lord!" Faka stood at stiff attention and watched as the figure in black turned and walked away.

"Commander Faka, all equipment is locked down and ready for departure."

"General Veers." Faka stopped the Imperial general. "Lord Vader has issued orders to ring the world below with security beacons set to target and destroy any ship *leaving* the planet. General, could you clarify?"

Veers paused before the ship's commanding officer, his gray eyes cool and appraising. "I suggest you ask Lord Vader."

"No. No, that won't be necessary." Faka hurriedly assured the general. Reading in the cold gray eyes no room for further conversation, he turned and walked away.

* * * *

With a muffled thunk of airtight seals, the great hood covering the meditation chamber settled into its locks. Deep within the chamber, the being known and feared as Darth Vader released the lockdown collar on the black helmet and removed it.

Moments later, he stepped from the confining restrictions of the environmental suit and took a seat in the reclining chair at the center of the chamber. Scarred, deformed hands reached to a multi-banked computer control center and quickly set the chamber's life support systems to compensate for the suit he no longer wore.

Hooked into the life support feeds of the chamber, he leaned back, closed what remained of the lids that covered his damaged eyes, and relaxed. The chamber's controls, sensing his mood, lowered the illumination until only a muted glow outlined the contours of the chamber.

The beacons were in place. He sensed their deadly array scouring the space between their overlaying web and the planet's surface. Nothing could leave the planet without setting off their alarms, activating their programs, and ultimately triggering their defense systems. Nothing...no one...could leave the planet.

He drew the Dark Force to him and bathed himself in its protection. The Felarians had no technology, no means of leaving the planet. He had touched their leader's great mind and sensed the contentment of their lives. But he had sensed something else. Something perhaps even she had not been aware of...the Force...the great power within her had not always dwelt within her kind. From where had it come?

The scarred lungs struggled as the damaged heart pounded, demanding more blood, more oxygen and the being's pulse rate quickened. What if the Felarians one day decided to leave their world? Could the beacons stop them? And what would their power, loosened upon the Imperial universe, mean to him and his kind?

It was with such troubled thoughts that Darth Vader, Lord of the Sith, and the powerful right hand of the Emperor Palpatine, willed his body to rest and his mind to put aside disturbing questions that had no answers...yet...

THE END

[Back To Index](#)