Star Warped

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Extract

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Chapter One

The Beginning

A tiny spacecraft flees zigger-zagger, passing over the pole of a yellow-brown desert planet and flying into the distance.

And, a moment later—

—an absolutely *massive* spaceship appears in pursuit, as if flying directly over your head: a vast crenellated white-metal ziggurat of a spaceship, larger than a cathedral, larger than most cities. On and on it comes; it just seems to *keep on coming*, steamrollering with insolent force over the top of your line of sight; its ten thousand space laser cannons blasting, its bay doors opened ready to gobble the little craft up. It is by far the more powerful and massive of the two craft. The little spaceship doesn't stand a chance.

So tell me: which of these two spaceships is more likely to enlist your sympathy? Just on your gut response?

Yes, I thought so.

Well, since you've already made up your mind, is there likely to be any mileage in me describing the

small ship as 'a terrorist craft', flown by 'dangerous criminals, murderers, smugglers and social deviants'? Or in referring to the big ship as 'an official law-enforcement vessel', staffed by 'dedicated law enforcement officials doing a difficult job under trying conditions for too little money'?

No, I didn't think so.

Alrighty then. So, the small ship, called *Viva Galaxia Libre!*, carried aboard it a tired crew of heroic freedom fighters, who had flown half the width of the Galaxy to escape the remorseless tyrannical pursuit of the Imperial Empire of the Imperium. The large ship, on the other hand, was the *ISS Order Through Fear and Obedience XVII*, a Phagocyte class space destroyer, and the very embodiment of Imperial repression, oppression, depression, and four or five other words ending in -pression. Its holds held forty thousand fanatical shock troops, dressed in shiny white plastic space armour. It easily accelerated its colossal engines and pulled alongside the *Viva Galaxia Libre!*, grabbing the hull of the tiny battered ship with massive grapnels and hauling it inexorably into its cavernous cargo bay.

Aboard the *Viva Galaxia Libre!* a young woman was crouching next to a 'Dusty Bin'-shaped robot, looking nervously over her shoulder. She had good cause to

be nervous; for there was a secret stored inside the robot; and no petty secret. It was the biggest Secret of all, the Secret her mother had entrusted her with, the Secret that was the key to Everything, that explained the entire cosmos, the continuing battle between the forces of good and evil – the Great Secret. This Secret was so secret, in fact, that even the Princess did not know it. She merely carried it, locked away inside a specially designed data containment cube. But now that the Imperial Empire of the Imperium had captured her ship she did not dare allow this cube to fall into the hands of the forces of evil. And so she lodged it inside the little droid, and sent it on its way.

Acting on the orders of the young woman this little robot, and his robot 'friend' (or 'longtime companion'), hopped straight out of an airlock, and plummeted directly to the planet below. Being robots, they were not discommoded by the vacuum of space, or the heat of re-entry, although the humanoid-shaped robot landed on his legs and compacted them by eleven per cent of their length, which annoyed him, and gave him an unfortunately stumpy look.

What's that? You want to know what the Secret was? This immense Secret that this Princess considered more important than her life?

All in good time, dear reader. You must be patient.

Why? *Because*, that's why. Because I'm telling you to be patient, that's why.

What's that? Well – if you *really* want to know the nature of this Secret right now this minute – if you're *that* impatient – then I can only suggest you flick to the back of the book, where the devastating Universe-changing reality of the secret is finally unleashed upon a startled Imperial Order. Go on – if you want to – just ruin the book for yourself. Why don't you?

Still here, eh?

I thought so.

Now. Where was I?

And meanwhile, aboard the *Viva Galaxia Libre!* the Imp-Emp-Imp forces prepared to board. They primed the airlock. The ship's own crew waited nervously, guns ready.

Then, with a flash that looked like (but, obviously, which *wasn't*) a cheap firework, the door (which, being a spaceship main airlock, was made of dense metal, clearly, and not hastily painted wood – although the force of the explosion *might* give an observer the impression of the latter) blew in. Sterntroopers came stumbling through the smoke, firing their laser rifles and occasionally smacking their heads on the low overhangs. Bolts of red laser light of a surprising

uniformity and consistent thickness bloomed amongst the smoke and dust. This laser fire was not only uniformly thick, but also came in surprisingly short bolts (imagine how briefly you'd need to press the trigger in order to get a laser bolt rather than say, a line). Although each laser bolt looked, perhaps, no more dangerous than the sort of thing you'd find in a provincial disco, they had a dramatic effect on any Rebelend soldier they happened to strike, who tended to fling their arms wide and hurtle backwards to lie, motionless, on the floor.

The *Viva Galaxia Libre!* was lost, captured, gone, defeated, overwhelmed. It and all its passengers were in the grip of the ruthless Imp-Emp-Imp space fleet.

Against the backdrop of the vastness of space, the *ISS Order Through Fear and Obedience XVII* flew inexorably on.

And on the planet below them, two droids hit the sand with the force of a double meteorite, throwing up a huge mass of sand. It's a strange, and little-known, fact about sand: that any impact which throws up a huge mass of the stuff will tend to make the sand thus thrown look as though it has been superimposed upon an otherwise placid desert scene. Funny, that.

Chapter Two

In which Luke, on the planet down below, learns that his Uncle Sven is not truly his father after all, but only his uncle

Luke Seespotrun had clothes on again.

He was working on his hovercar in the garage in one of the outbuildings of Uncle Sven's farm, and he had put on slacks and a top. Experience had taught him that naked male bodies and whirring metal motors did not make a good combination. But, as if by a sixth sense, Uncle Sven was calling to him from the main house. 'Luke! Luke!'

Luke sighed. Holding out his sonic screwdriver, he adjusted one of the sonic screws.

Uncle Sven came barrelling into the workshop, his naked flesh jiggling with the effort of running. 'I knew it!' he cried. 'I knew it. You're *clothed*, disgustingly *clothed*.'

'I'm sorry, Uncle,' said Luke, eyes downcast.

'We are Swedes before we are Galactic citizens!' barked Uncle Sven. 'We *will* be true to our heritage. We *will* be naked.'

'Yes, Uncle.' Wearily Luke unzipped his pants.

'You can go wearing your fancy clothes,' said Uncle Sven, his belly quivering with indignation, '*after* you've left the farm to join the Imperial Empire of the Imperium's flying squad. Not before. Do you hear? Not before.'

'No, Uncle.'

'Well,' said Sven, his anger calming a little. 'I won't go on about it. Come through and have breakfast.'

'Yes, Uncle,' said Luke, obediently.

'Come and have breakfast,' repeated Sven. 'I have something important to tell you. Something of the utmost importance. A most important thing. A thing of ut importance.'

Intrigued, a now naked Luke followed his uncle out of the workshop.

Auntie Svenessa was in the kitchen, nude and pendulous, reading a news-flimsy with close attention and popping slices of yam toast into her mouth at regular intervals. She greeted her husband with a peck on the cheek, and Luke with the same gesture, although aimed at a different cheek.

Sven lowered himself onto his PVC-upholstered kitchen stool with a sound not unlike a smoochy kiss. He began tucking into breakfast. Luke sat down too,

although, as was often the case, the sight of his naked relatives eating had robbed him of what little appetite he possessed.

'Luke,' said Uncle Sven, his mouth full of cream curd, 'I have something important to tell you, Luke.'

Luke looked up expectantly, but Uncle Sven did not meet his gaze. For a while there was nothing but the sound of eating. Luke waited.

'I am not your father, Luke,' said Uncle Sven, shortly.

'Which would be why I call you uncle,' replied Luke. 'It makes sense. So who *is* my father?'

'I cannot say, save that he is dark.'

'How do you mean? Are you talking of his skin colour?'

'No – no – in terms of ethical bias. He has gone over to the Dark Side of the Farce.'

'The Farce?'

'A universal quantity of tremendous supernatural power. It has a Dark Side, and a Pale Side. He, your father, is definitely on the former of these two sides. Hence he, your father, is dark.'

'Strange,' mused Luke, 'that I have never heard of this "Farce".'

'Few have,' said Uncle Sven.

'Even though it is universal and tremendously powerful?'

'Yes,' said Uncle Sven, looking at the floor in a faintly embarrassed manner.

'Odd, that.'

'Some people might say so,' said Sven, disdainfully.

'So,' said Luke. 'My father has converted to the Dark Side of this Farce, has he? He could have chosen the Pale Side, but instead he has chosen the Dark, has my father. What is his name?'

'I cannot say,' said Uncle Sven.

'Why not?'

'I just can't.'

'I see,' said Luke, uncertainly.

There was an awkward silence in the kitchen-diner-area.

'Dark Father's in the news again,' said Auntie Svenessa, turning a page of the news-flimsy. 'Apparently he has killed another one of the Security Council.'

'Who's that?' said Uncle Sven. 'Did you say Dark Father?'

'Dark Father, yes.'

'Sorry,' said Luke. 'I didn't quite catch that. *Dark Father*, did you say?'

'Dark Father, yes.'

'Dark Father.'

'Hmm, Dark Father.'

'He's a dark one, that Dark Father,' said Uncle Sven. 'Killed another one of the Security Council, has he?'

'That he has,' said Svenessa. 'Throttled him with his bare hands.'

'Bare? No gloves?'

'Indeedy. No gloves. Or skin. Or bone. So bare, in fact,' Svenessa went on, reading slowly from the newspaper, 'that he didn't even use his hands.'

'Not at all?'

'Apparently he held his hand in front of the councillor's throat and made this little beaky pinching motion with forefinger and thumb, and the councillor was throttled. Here,' she added, 'see for yourself.' She passed the news-flimsy over to Luke.

DARK FATHER KILLS THIRD-IN-COMMAND, ORDINARY SOLDIER

Throttles them 'without even touching their necks, how weird is that' says eyewitness

[*Deep space, Thursday*] In a move guaranteed to enhance his power base amongst hard-line Imp-Emp-Imp supporters, military leader and Imperial *eminence noire* Dark Father today handed out on-the-spot execution tickets to two members of his loyal and terrified staff. 'Grand Muff o' Tartan had called a meeting of the Security Council,'

recalled Imperial Sterntrooper 3449#6a889~1447 Larry Drehe, who was on guard duty that day, 'and Deputy of Internal Repression the Lord Myna Bridishacta raised a point of protocol under point seven of the agenda. So Dark Father, like, totally crushed his windpipe. Without even getting out of his chair. He just sort of held out his black gloved hand and made this, like, pincer gesture, and the Lord Bridishacta started gargling and wheezing, and pretty soon he was solid *gone*. To say it was cool,' Drehe added, making a circle shape with his thumb and middle finger and wagging it in the air in front of him, 'would be, like, *understatement*. It was *way* cool.'

Myna Bridishacta was the third most powerful officer in the Imp-Emp-Imp military machine, in the line-of-command directly behind Dark Father himself and Grand Muff o' Tartan. 'The other guy on guard duty,' said Drehe, 'was my pal George' [Manzarek, Imperial Sterntrooper 3449#6a889~1466] 'and we were pretty impressed, behind our helmets, I don't mind telling you. But when the Lord Bridishacta fell to the floor, George made this sort of *eek* noise, almost under his breath, so Lord Father squashed his thorax as if he was testing a tube of pasta with his fingers to see if it was cooked. And all without actually making contact with him! Like, wow.'

Item seven on the agenda for that meeting questioned the appropriateness of continuing to refer to the 'Jobbi religion' as 'a Galactic-wide movement' when there is presently only one registered worshipper.

A spokesman for Dark Father's press office later issued the following statement: 'Myna Bridishacta was 100% loyal to the Empire, to the Emperor and to Dark Father himself, and was a fanatical believer in the Imperial ideology of Order. But it transpires that he was only 97% terrified of Dark Father. Frankly, the trillions of decent

Imp-Emp-Imp citizens are no longer prepared to put up with that level of insubordination.'

OLAF, the leading Citizens Group of the Empire has declared itself '100% behind the Imperial policy of randomly killing off senior members of military staff for trivial reasons.' 'What you must bear in mind,' said Blun 'Boba' Kett, Chairman of the 'Our Loyalty and Fear Are 100% In the Service of the Imperial Programme of Order Through Oppression' organisation, 'is that this is the only language these people understand.'

'That's pretty Dark behaviour,' said Sven. 'Even for Dark Father.'

'I don't understand,' said Luke. 'If he's going to the bother of holding out his hand, why not just throttle the guy? Or if he's going to use dark telepathy to throttle him, why bother with the hand? Why not just do it from his chair? I mean he could presumably do it with his arms crossed, or in his pockets, if he wanted to.'

'How do you mean?'

'All I'm saying,' said Luke, 'is that it seems to me a little *superfluous* to hold one's hand out in mid-air in front of a person's throat if one has the power to throttle a person with thought alone. What purpose does the hand-holding-out bit serve?'

'It's a puzzle,' agreed Sven. 'But there are many mysteries about Dark Father.'

'Perhaps it was, at root, a theatrical gesture?' suggested Auntie Svenessa. 'Done less for reasons of telepathic communication and more for the benefit of the others watching? It says here that he was wearing his stage magician cloak, and his special helmet.'

'Ah,' said the others, as if that explained everything.