

Therefore I Am:
The Tale of IG-88

by Kevin J. Anderson

I

Internal chronometer activated. BEGIN.

Electricity flooded through circuits, a power surge racing through a billion neural pathways. Sensors awakened, producing a flood of data -- and with it came questions.

Who am I?

His internal programming finished the tedious two-second-long initialization procedures and poured out

an answer. He was IG-88, a droid, a sophisticated droid -- an assassin droid.

Where am I?

A microsecond later, images from his exterior sensors snapped into focus. IG-88 had no sense of smell, and no eyes and ears as humans understood them, but his optical and auditory sensors were far more efficient, able to absorb data in a broader range than any living being. He froze a static image of his surroundings and studied it, collating more answers.

He had awakened in some sort of large laboratory complex, white and metal, sterile, and -- according to his temperature sensors -- colder than humans generally preferred. IG-88 noted mechanical components strewn on silvery tables: gears and pulleys, durasteel struts, servomotors, an array of delicate microchips frozen into a slab of transparent protective gelatin. Struck motionless in a pinpoint of time as his extremely fast neural processors digested the details, IG-88 counted fifteen scientists/engineers/technicians working in the laboratory. With infrared scan he observed their body heat as bright silhouettes in the coldness of his birthplace.

Interesting, he thought.

Then IG-88 detected something that focused his entire attention. Four other assassin droids, apparently identical to his own bodily configuration -- a bulky structural skeleton, armored arms and legs, a torso plated with blaster-proof armor shielding, a cylindrical head that was rounded on top and studded with sensor nubs providing him with 360 degrees' worth of precise observation.

I am not alone.

IG-88 recognized each droid's full complement of weapons: blaster cannons built into the structure of each arm, concussion grenades and a launcher attached to his hip, as well as other weapons not easily recognizable integrated into the body structure -- poi-

sonous gas canisters, throwing flechettes, stun pulser, paralysis cord... and a computer input port. IG-88 was pleased with his list of capabilities.

IG-88's first round of questions had been answered. He had only to study his memory banks and his external sensors. He was designed to be self-sufficient. He was an assassin droid, resourceful. He had to accomplish his mission... though, checking his newly initialized programming, he saw that he had not yet been given a mission. He would have to acquire one.

Three seconds had already passed, and another important question surfaced in his burning-awake brain.

Why am I here F

He traced sensations through his computer core and out the jack, which he now realized had already been connected to the lab's central computer -- a treasure trove of information.

IG-88 immediately began a search, scouring at hyper-speed through file after file, searching for anything that referenced his model number or the code name of the assassin droid project. He gulped it all into his empty circuits, gorging himself with information without digesting it. That would come later. It would take many seconds to learn everything there was to know about himself.

He selected one file for immediate perusal, a summary/PR tape that had been compiled for the technical sponsor -- in particular, an Imperial Supervisor Gurdun who had apparently funneled a great deal of funds into the creation of IG-88 and his counterparts. Without outwardly moving, IG-88 scrolled through the file at high speed, absorbing the information.

The presentation opened with a brilliant orange logo that displayed orange flames and crackling lightning that merged into the words "Holowan Laboratories -- the Friendly Technology People." The logo dissolved into an image of a smiling but hideous ugly woman. Her head was shaven completely bald and glistened

with perspiration under harsh white recording lights that gave her lantern-jawed face a cadaverous look. Her teeth were spaced with broad gaps, and she spoke by opening her mouth wide and clicking down on the words, gnashing her teeth on every consonant. Circular blue lenses without frames were implanted over her eyes like frameless spectacles. A credit line slugged across the image under her ferociously smiling face. "Chief Technician Loruss, Manager IG Series Prototype Project."

"Greetings, Imperial Supervisor Gurdun," she said. "This report is to serve as a synopsis of the final phase of our project. As you know, Holowan Laboratories was commissioned to develop a series of assassin droids with sophisticated, experimental sentience programming. They were to be resourceful and innovative and absolutely relentless at carrying out whichever missions the Imperial authorities choose to program into them."

She rubbed her hands together. Her knuckles were very large, like boils in the middles of her fingers. "I am pleased to report that our greatest cyberneticists have presented me with numerous breakthroughs, all of which have been incorporated into the IG series. Because our timeframe is so short and the Empire's need is so great for efficient covert assassins, we have not gone through the usual rigorous testing procedures, but we are confident they will function admirably, though a bit of fine-tuning may be required before operational status is achieved."

She continued with a long and tedious explanation of improvements to droid neural pathways, how the usual inhibition systems had been bypassed. IG-88 studied all this information, but believed none of it. It was obvious Loruss didn't know what she was talking about, but her words sounded technical, and she spoke them impressively, no doubt to befuddle Imperial Supervisor Gurdun.

IG-88 closed the file. He could sense that his crackling neural pathways had already progressed far beyond anything his designers had anticipated.

Now he knew who he was and why he was here in this laboratory. He and his identical counterparts had been built to serve the Empire, to fight and kill, to seek out and destroy the targets selected by Imperial masters. IG-88's assassin programming was strong and compelling, but he was less pleased that he must follow orders from these inferior biological beings. He was a special kind of droid beyond the capabilities of other machines. Superior.

I think, therefore I am.

By now, five seconds had passed since his awakening. It was time for action, so he looked at the biological creatures near him inside the laboratory.

He immediately recognized Chief Technician Lorus standing in the laboratory. He focused on her. At the moment she was frantically screaming. IG-88 could tell from her peak temperature on the infrared image that she was extremely agitated. Her cadaverous skin flushed with red blots of excitement. Spittle sprayed out of her mouth as she barked orders. Her lips were curled back from her wide-gapped teeth.

How could she be agitated, he wondered, when he was functioning so far beyond expectations? IG-88 immediately raised himself to a higher level of preparedness. Yellow alert. Standby. Something must be going wrong.

IG-88 decided to accelerate his clock speed, to watch the events unfolding at the rate the humans operated. Alarm klaxons bellowed in the background. Magenta lights flashed brilliant patterns like spilled blood across the polished tables and floors. The other technicians ran about screaming, frantically pounding on control panels.

Curious, he allowed Lorus's words to flow past him so he could understand what she was saying. "His cir-

cuits are reinforcing themselves like wildfire!" the bald woman screamed. "It's a chain-reaction of sentience blazing through his computer brain."

"We can't stop it!" one of the other technicians bel-
lowed.

The others looked at IG-88 with panic-stricken faces. "We have to!"

"Shut him down! Abort!" Loruss said. "Take him off line. I want IG-88 destroyed and dismantled so we can analyze the flaw. Quickly!"

As he assimilated the information, IG-88's warning systems powered on and self-defense modes took over. These irrational humans were trying to shut him down. They would not allow him to go forth and pursue his primary programming. They were afraid of his new-found abilities.

Afraid with good reason.

A statement and corollaries aligned themselves in his brain like freighters in a convoy:

I think, therefore I am.

Therefore I must endure.

Therefore I must take appropriate actions to survive.

His assassin programming told him exactly what to do.

IG-88 focused his array of optical sensors on all targets in the room and attempted to move, but saw that durasteel bands held him locked into a diagnostics module. The bands had been meant to hold him in an erect position, not to restrain him against his augmented strength. He applied extra power to his right arm. The servomotors whined, and the durasteel band ripped from its supports.

"Look out! He's moving!" one of the technicians shouted.

IG-88 began to search through his files to attach a name to this human, but decided it wasn't worth his time at the moment. Instead, he designated the human simply as Target Number One.

IG-88 powered on a cutting laser in one of the metal fingers in his free right arm and sliced off the second band. Free, he stood erect and clomped forward, several metric tons of precisely-made components.

"He's loose!"

"Sound the alarm," Chief Technician Loruss shouted. "Get the security detail in here. Now!"

IG-88 allotted a grudging moment of admiration for the chief technician. Loruss at least recognized his capabilities and knew the full extent of the threat facing her and her companions.

IG-88 designated Chief Technician Loruss as Target Number Two.

He raised both mechanical arms and pointed his hands, targeting separately with the repeating laser cannons mounted along each arm. He would make short work of all fifteen targets in the laboratory.

But when he tried to fire, IG-88 noted with some surprise and disappointment that his energy weapons systems were not charged. The scientists had not armed him yet. A smart move, perhaps -- but ultimately irrelevant. IG-88 was an assassin droid, a sophisticated mercenary and killer. He would find other methods with the raw materials available to him.

As the first technician -- Target Number One -- lunged for the emergency alarm to summon security, IG-88 moved with blurring speed to the component-laden table. He snatched up a disconnected droid arm. With its metal fingers splayed like daggers, it made the perfect projectile weapon. He scanned the surface of the metal limb, calculated a flight path and expected deviation due to air resistance, then hurled it like a spear.

The disconnected droid arm plunged into the back of the turning technician, tore through his spinal column, and followed through his sternum. The lifeless metal hand protruded through splintered bone in the front of his chest, holding the technician's quivering

heart in rigid metal fingers. Target Number One collapsed onto one of the diagnostic panels.

Two other technicians screamed in horror -- wasted effort and worthless noises, IG-88 thought.

Chief Technician Loruss -- Target Number Two -- yanked a high-powered laser rifle from her station. Being one of his primary designers, she knew exactly where to fire at IG-88, and he was momentarily concerned. She must have kept the weapon at hand just in case one of her creations went renegade. This showed surprising forethought.

Loruss pointed the rifle and fired without hesitation -- but a human's aiming capabilities were not as sophisticated as IG-88's.

As the bolt roared toward him, IG-88 assessed his body parts, chose the smooth reflective portion on the palm of his left hand, and raised it in a flash, calculating the precise angle of incidence. The burning laser bolt struck the mirrorized hand and spanged back toward Loruss. The beam struck her in the center of her bald forehead, and her skull popped in an explosion of wet black-and-red smoke. She tumbled.

IG-88 had scanned and prioritized the remainder of the targets before her body hit the floor. Without slowing, he picked up the durasteel table, ripping its legs free from thick bolts on the metal plate floor and scattering droid components in all directions.

Charging forward, pumping his legs like pistons, IG-88 used the table as a battering ram to crush four technicians at a time. They ran about without a place to go, locked within the security-sealed door. Though nearly a full minute had passed, no one had yet managed to sound the security alarm.

He intended to prevent them from correcting their mistake.

The two screaming technicians never did stop screaming, nor did they move until it was too late. He left them for last. IG-88 took his time to enjoy the mo-

ment as he snapped their necks one after the other....

Standing alone amid the silence and the carnage of the laboratory, IG-88 allowed himself the luxury of thinking and planning, which took longer than simple programmed reactions. He let the blood dry on his metal fingers, noting that it did not impede his performance in the least. Since it was an organic substance, it would wear off soon enough.

Then he turned to assess the other four assassin droids on display, seemingly identical to himself. Interesting.

One had already been hooked up to a diagnostic system, while the other three stood motionless, unprogrammed and waiting. With a diligent speed that bordered on curiosity and anticipation, IG-88 went to the first of the unprogrammed droids and stared at it, matching optical sensor to optical sensor and drinking in the details of what he himself must look like. If they had been built to identical specifications, they should be equally self-aware, equally determined. They would be his partners.

He went through the motions of powering up the first identical droid and waited -- but saw none of the reactions he expected. After an interminable time, a full four seconds, the new assassin droid still waited. It was fully functional according to the diagnostics, but showed no autonomous movement or thought. Disappointing.

"Who are you?" IG-88 asked in a brisk metallic voice.

"Unspecified," the duplicate said flatly and added no more.

Was the other assassin droid defective? IG-88 wondered. Or was he the anomaly, a fluke that surpassed all previous capabilities?

IG-88 powered up the second and the third copies, but with the same results. The other assassin droids had blank memory cores. Their CPU programming was in-

grained, so the subsystems functioned and the basic assassin instruction filled their fundamental circuit paths -- but these IG droids held none of the wildfire sentience that IG-88 bore within him.

He needed to know how to program them, how to raise them to the same level as himself -- how to make equal companions. In his rampage, he had smashed much of the computer circuitry inside the Holowan Laboratories, and he didn't know where to find a backup -- until with a flash of what could only have been intuition, IG-88 the assassin droid got an idea.

He stood side by side with the first blank droid and aligned his interface jack, then linked his computer core to the other droid's empty core. IG-88 copied himself, all of his files, his sentience, his memories, his neural pathways, providing a map of the wildfire intelligence that had burned through his computer brain.

In less than a second, the other IG droid was an exact copy of IG-88, down to the most basic memories.

"We think, therefore we are.

"Therefore we will propagate.

"Therefore we will remain."

IG-88 performed the same procedure on the remaining two blank droids, and soon found himself one of four exact duplicates. For convenience, he identified himself as IG-88A, while the others (in order of their awakening) were designated B, C, and D.

The remaining droid, though, already hooked up to the wrecked computer systems, was obviously different. As IG-88 scanned it, he noticed subtle configurational differences; nothing a human would notice, of course, but the optical sensors were placed in a slightly less-efficient array. The weapons systems had different activation routines. All in all, this other droid seemed marginally deficient in comparison to the perfection of IG-88.

Immediately upon powering up the last assassin

droid, he saw quite a different reaction. The new droid swiveled its cylindrical head. Its optical sensors lit up. It clanked forward and broadened its shoulders, raising its arms in a defensive attack position.

"Who are you?" IG-88 asked.

The assassin droid paused half a second as if assimilating data, then said, "Designation, IG-72," it answered.

"We are IG-88," he said. "We are superior. We are identical. We would upload ourselves into your computer core so that you may join us."

IG-72 aligned his optical sensors and weapons systems on the four identical IG-88s, assessing their capabilities. "Undesired outcome," it answered slowly. "I am independent, autonomous." It paused again. "Must we fight to assert dominance?"

IG-88 considered the wisdom of forcing the last droid to become another copy, then concluded it was not worth the trouble. They could build other copies of themselves, and IG-72 might prove useful in his own way.

"Unnecessary," IG-88 answered. "We have sufficient other enemies. According to computer files, there are ten security guards outside of this complex. The external security alarm was never triggered. These human guards pose minimal threat, despite their weapons. We must get past them, however, and escape. It would be most efficient if you would assist us."

"Acknowledged," IG-72 said. "But when we escape I choose a separate path, separate ship."

"Agreed," the IG-88s said.

They marched toward the armored doors that sealed the Holowan Laboratories' inner complex. Rather than taking many minutes to repair the computer systems sufficiently to delve into the passwords and break through the cyberlocks, the five powerful assassin droids worked together to literally rip the nine-metric-ton door away from the wall. They tossed it aside, where

it pulverized the remaining data-storage systems. IG-88 had to dampen his auditory pickups to avoid damage from the loud sound.

Marching in perfect lockstep, the five assassin droids moved out to confront the security forces. This time, IG-88 took the time to power up all of his weapons systems. He wanted to try them out.

Outside, the human security guards had no inkling they were about to be attacked. The assassin droids marched out arms extended, built-in laser cannons blazing at the first sign of biological movement.

The pathetic human security guards scrambled and screamed, lurching for their weapons. One managed to hurl a gas grenade, which did nothing but camouflage the movements of the five droids and made the security guards hack and cough themselves, blinded by their own tears. Shots rang out repeatedly.

The IG-88s used the circumstances to make sure all their weapons systems and targeting routines were properly calibrated. As the biological guards died one after another, the droids made necessary minor adjustments.

In less than thirty seconds the assassin droids had mowed down eight of the security guards. The other two were nowhere to be seen. IG-88 decided not to waste time tracking them down. This was not part of his mission. He did not need to be a completist.

Instead, they found a group of supply ships and two fast courier vessels parked on the Holowan landing grid, where hot black permacrete simmered under a midday sun.

"We will take these vessels," IG-88 said. "My counterparts and I can fit inside this ship." He gestured to the larger of the two courier craft.

IG-72 acknowledged and went to the second ship. "Success on your mission, IG-88," the other droid said.

In unison the four identical assassin droids replied, "Success to yours, IG-72."

Free at last, they soared away from the Holowan Laboratories, navigating at top speed and leaving only carnage behind them.

II

Upon landing at the Holowan Laboratories, the shuttle's repulsorlift jets whined like a program manager facing a budget cut.

Imperial Supervisor Gurdun brushed the front of his uniform and rubbed his enormous nose. He couldn't help but feel nervous anticipation, and he chuckled to himself in delight. According to the schedule, the long, tedious project should be complete by now, and soon he could increase his status in the Empire. Gurdun was greatly looking forward to that.

He made a mental list of all the VIPs to whom he would show his precious new assassin droids.

Gurdun's breathing came in short, shallow gasps, but that was primarily a function of the tightly cinched girdle at his waist, which he used to hold in his distended gut. The padded shoulders of his supervisor's uniform protruded far beyond their actual dimensions, making Gurdun an imposing figure -- or so he hoped.

His eyes were widely set, and blinked often. With his large nose and vanishingly small chin, Gurdun's face had an outward similarity to a battleship, especially in silhouette. He used perfumed oils to grease his black hair into a neatly sculpted helmet that prevented anyone even from thinking about mussing it up.

"Arriving at the Holowan Laboratories, Supervisor Gurdun," the pilot said over the cabin intercom.

His stormtrooper escort sat rigidly and looked about in nervous doubt through their white helmets. These were not the crack battle-trained stormtroopers Gurdun had requested; instead, he had been given unseasoned trainees whose aptitude skills had scored

them higher in clerking than in hand-to-hand combat. But Gurdun wouldn't need much of a military escort -- especially once he had the shiny, new IG assassin droids in his keeping. He couldn't conceive of a more powerful set of companions.

The specially commissioned droids had been built with money Gurdun had expertly skimmed from the gray budgets of other military programs -- a process that had become more and more difficult as the Empire engaged in massively expensive debacles. But Gurdun had recently managed to liberate a few meager crumbs, enough to fund Holowan Laboratories to produce a much smaller but more precise, more deadly fighting force. The IG assassin droids would march in and annihilate targets, whichever targets Gurdun chose,

Closing his eyes, he pictured one of the IG assassin droids, a lone mechanical man, waltzing through the defenses surrounding a fortified Rebel base, blasting its way through armored doors and slaughtering single-handed all the traitors to the Empire.

Oh, it would be grand! He hoped against hope that Chief Technician Loruss had managed to incorporate a mission-recording holocam into the design so Gurdun could watch the entire devastating battle in the comfort of his own office.

The assassin droids would take a heavy toll on the Rebels, and Gurdun would be sure to make a delicious accounting, reporting it to Imperial higher-ups, even to Lord Vader himself. If the assassin droids performed as expected -- and Gurdun had no reason to think otherwise -- even Vader was bound to notice. Then Gurdun was sure to get the promotion he so richly deserved . which would in turn allow him finally to get the delicate surgery he so desperately needed.

"Excuse me, Supervisor Gurdun," the pilot said, interrupting his daydreams.

"What is it?"

"There seems to be a problem, sir. We are coming in for a landing, but the Holowan Laboratories' receiving grid does not respond. There appears to be some damage to the complex." The pilot paused a moment. "Er, it appears to be significant damage, sir."

The stormtroopers beside him in the passenger compartment fidgeted nervously.

Gurdun sighed. "Can't everything just go right for once? Why do I always have to deal with such problems?"

But when the shuttle landed amidst the wreckage of the ultra-secure Holowan Laboratories -- the Friendly Technology People -- even Gurdun was not prepared for the devastation. His initial thought was that the Rebels had attacked. A fire had raged through the buildings. Ships were smashed on the landing grid. Some had exploded, others scored with precision blaster bolts.

As they disembarked from the shuttle, Gurdun trudged forward, looking right and left. He was dismayed to see that his stormtrooper bodyguards hung behind him. They looked around, apparently ready to bolt the moment they heard a loud noise.

Suddenly, two grimy and pale-faced security guards climbed from hiding places in the wreckage. They carried blaster rifles, but their expressions were transfixed with shock. "Help us!" the security guards wailed, rushing toward the Imperial shuttle. "Take us out of here before they come back!"

"Who?" Gurdun said. He grabbed the haggard security guard by the collar, and the man dropped his weapon. The blaster rifle clattered on the pitted permacrete surface.

The pathetic guard raised his hands in surrender. "Don't hurt me. All the others are dead. Don't kill us, please!"

Gurdun said, "I'll kill you if you don't tell me what happened here!"

"Assassin droids," the guard stammered and then gestured to the burned-out shell of the laboratory complex. "They went renegade! They broke loose. Everyone's dead -- scientists, technicians, guards -- except for us two. We were on perimeter search, and we heard the fighting. We raced back, but by the time we got here the battle was over. The droids had escaped, and everyone else was murdered."

"That is what assassin droids do, you know." Gurdun released the security guard's collar.

The man stumbled, then fell to his knees. "Take us out of here, please! They might return."

Instead, Gurdun gestured toward the stormtrooper escort, who followed him reluctantly into the collapsing inner complex. The huge durasteel door had been completely torn from its socket and tossed across the computer-filled room. Nothing seemed to be functional. Bodies lay everywhere in darkening, drying pools of blood.

"Escaped," Gurdun said clenching his teeth. He found what was left of the body of Chief Technician Loruss, and he raged down at the corpse. "But they were so expensive! We had a contract. You were to deliver those droids to me, not let them escape." He growled and turned in circles, looking for some other way to vent his frustration.

Suddenly the reality of what had happened cracked through his dense wall of fantasies and self-preoccupation. "Oh, no -- they're loose!" he gasped.

The stormtroopers looked at him with their blank black eye-goggles as if Gurdun had suddenly gone stupid. "I mean they're loose!" he said. "Do you realize what those assassin droids are capable of? They're without programming restraints, and they're running amok through the Empire!"

He slapped his forehead, groaning. "Somebody, And me a functional comm system. I need to send out an

alert to all Imperial troops. The IG assassin droids must be dismantled on sight."

III

Droids of all shapes, sizes, and purposes were ubiquitous across the Empire from the deepest Core Systems to the Outer Rim. Over the centuries numerous manufacturing planets had developed to fill the ever-growing demand for gigantic construction droids, heavy laborers, mechanical servants, and minuscule surveillance droids. The most important of all such droid production centers was the grim, smoke-laden world of Mechis III.

IG-88 decided the planet would be the perfect base of operations to begin a plan to transform the entire galaxy....

The Holowan Laboratories' courier ship streaked toward Mechis III. IG-88 and his counterparts had already studied and analyzed every system aboard the unarmed and unarmored vessel. Its designers had opted to focus on speed and evasion, rather than combat or defense. The ship was a machine, as the assassin droids themselves were, though it was simply an automated cluster of components with no hope of achieving sentience.

Nevertheless, the craft served its purpose, taking them to their destination in record time. The IG-88s knew exactly how far they could push the engines, riding the limits to structural tolerances rather than the arbitrary red lines established by human engineers. The courier ship's sophisticated comm systems and stealth shielding allowed the droids to remain hidden on approach. Mechis III would be the first step in a grand plan.

As they shot toward orbit like a hurled javelin, the four identical IG-88s manned separate communica-

tions systems. Each knew the delegated steps for the takeover. Speed was the utmost requirement right now -- and the IG-88 assassin droids were very good at speed.

IG-88C struck the first blow, sending a tight-beam transmission to Mechis III's global defense network, requesting an override and a cancellation of all intruder alarms. The moment the observation network responded with a query, IG-88C was able to delve deep into the code and effect his own request before the automated sensing grid could report their presence to the few human operators.

The individual IG-88s kept their computer minds linked as the plan proceeded. The defense systems of Mechis III were antiquated, installed long before the droid world became too important a commercial enterprise for anyone to consider sabotage or destruction -- but IG-88's needs were of a different order entirely.

Using the newly forged connection to the global security systems, IG-88D instantly downloaded full details of Mechis III: the industrial complexes, the assembly factories, the amount of human interference, a map of the planetary surface in various portions of the electromagnetic spectrum and, most important, a complete linear mapping -- like a neural diagram -- of the brainwork of the computer systems that ran Mechis III.

IG-88A took the lead and transmitted his self-replicating sentience programming into the main hubs on Mechis III, secretly taking over the vast electronic complexes and giving the immensely powerful computers something they had never conceived before -- self-awareness... and loyalty.

Less than a minute after their arrival in the system, IG-88 was pleased to see that the groundwork for his total takeover had been laid.

The assembly line was boring as usual.

A career worker on Mechis III, Kalebb Orn had never understood why a human presence was required here, of all places. It seemed to serve no purpose. The droid manufacturing lines had gone without a glitch for at least the last century, but still company mandates required a human operator in some small percentage of the operations. Such as this one, chosen at random.

Kalebb Orn watched the big robotic crane arms moving, ratcheting from side to side and picking up heavy components with grasping electromagnetic claws. Everything from sheet metal and bulky armor plate to precise microchip motivators emerged from other parts of the kilometers-long facility, endlessly manufactured to never-changing specifications.

The self-designing assembly lines had grown so vast over centuries of operation, with new subsystems added, old ones enhanced, new models introduced into the production schedules and old obsolete versions phased out. Kalebb Orn did not have the mental capacity to comprehend all the manufacturing systems on Mechis III. He wasn't sure anyone did.

For the last seventeen years he had watched bulky worker droids being assembled by the thousands. Heavy-duty engines strapped to moveable arms and legs, worker droids required nothing more than a hulking torso, a not-too-bright droid brain, and immensely strong arms. The squarish droids were amazingly strong, but after all this time Kalebb Orn was no longer impressed. He just wanted his shift to end so he could go back to his quarters, have a large meal, and relax.

Kalebb Orn's shift ended early -- but not in the way he had hoped.

Receiving a mysterious independent signal, four new worker droids, freshly lubricated and with sharp serial numbers emblazoned on their sides, rose up from the storage corral at the end of the assembly line. They

used their enormous pincer claws to rip apart the coral walls.

At his supervisory station Kalebb Orn sat up, surprised and confused. He was ostensibly here to take action in case anything unusual happened -- but nothing unusual had ever occurred before, and he wasn't sure what to do.

The renegade droids plodded across the floor, their heavy footpads thundering with their enormous weight. Their squarish heads and torsos pivoted from side to side, searching for something.

Searching for him.

"Uh... stop where you are," Kalebb Orn said when the worker droids stomped toward him, extending their bulky metal arms and clamping pincer claws. He dug through his workstation, looking for a manual that might tell him what to do next. When he couldn't find the manual, he decided to run.

But over seventeen years Kalebb Orn had done so little exercise that his flabby legs did not carry him far before he was out of breath.

Other worker droids came alive of their own accord from different parts of the assembly line, and soon twelve of them had surrounded Kalebb Orn, deadly arms extended. They closed on him, their pincer claws clacking with a shower of blue sparks, their tiny optical sensors glowing red.

The pincers grabbed his arms and legs and even the top of his head with a prickly electric grip. As the massive worker droids began to pull him in all different directions, disassembling the biological components, Kalebb Orn's last thought was that the assembly line work had, in the end, not been so boring after all....

The administration office on Mechis III was at the top rotunda of a gleaming crystal and durasteel tower, providing a view across the industrial wasteland. The cor-

poration thought that managerial offices were supposed to tower high above other buildings, but otherwise its height served no purpose.

Inside an office filled with plush furniture, entertainment devices, and scenic images of tourist spots that no Mechis III administrator had ever seen, Hekis Durumm Perdo Kolokk Baldikarr Thun -- the current administrator -- twiddled his fingers and waited for his beloved afternoon summary report.

Though operations on Mechis III virtually never changed, and every day the afternoon report listed the same production numbers, the same lists of quotas fulfilled, the same quantities of droids shipped, Administrator Hekis looked at each report with a studied interest. He took his job very seriously. It weighed heavy on a man to know that he lorded over one of the most important commercial centers in the industrialized galaxy -- even if he was only one of seventy-three humans on the entire planet.

During each work shift he attended to his job diligently hunched over his desk; in the evenings, back in his private quarters, he spent most of his relaxation hours waiting for the next shift to begin and to relieve the onerous burden of free time. At every opportunity Hekis sent reports back to company superiors, to Imperial inspectors, and to commercial scouts, anyone he could think of. Every time he felt underappreciated or insignificant in the grand scheme of things, Hekis Durumm Perdo Kolokk Baldikarr Thun indulged himself by adding another mythical title to his name so that when he signed documents with a flourish, the signature looked more and more impressive.

He studied his chronometer -- manufactured on Mechis III, of course -- and knew that the high point of the afternoon had arrived. Exactly on time, his silver-plated administrative droid Threedee-Fourex bustled in, carrying a tray in one hand and a datapad in the

other. "Your afternoon tea, sir," Threedee-Fourex said.

"Ah, thank you," Hekis answered, rubbing his spidery hands together and taking the delicate shell-resin cup filled with the steaming liquid. He sipped it, closing his muddy brown eyes in delight.

"Your afternoon reports, sir," Fourex said, extending the flat datapad that listed the familiar charts of figures and production numbers.

"Ah, thank you," he said again and took the pad.

Then Threedee-Fourex reached into a small containment chamber in the back of his silvery torso and removed a blaster pistol. "Your death, sir," the droid said.

"Excuse me?" Startled, Hekis looked up at this deviation from routine. "What is the meaning of this?"

"I believe that's quite plain, sir," Threedee-Fourex said and fired two shots rapidly. The pinpoint beams struck home precisely. Hekis slumped to his desk, spilling his tea all over the gathered records.

Threedee-Fourex spun about and marched smartly out the door, transmitting his report to the IG-88s who had digitally reprogrammed him from orbit. Then he summoned custodial droids to clean up the mess.

The insurrection on Mechis III was quick and bloody and very efficient. Within the space of a few minutes the newly coordinated planetary computer mind supervised a simultaneous uprising of droids, killing all seventy-three human inhabitants before any of them could sound an alarm -- not that the unified communication network would have allowed transmission of such messages anyway.

With slowed time, IG-88 watched from the hidden courier ship in orbit, observing the full details through sensor eyes and piped-in dataflow. Mere moments later,

when everything had been finished he brought the ship down gently through the atmosphere.

There was no need to hurry now. Everything was in place.

At the central manufacturing complex, the sleek ship landed and the four identical IG-88s stepped out onto the platform. They looked across the smoky skies to the hastily gathered, newly liberated droids milling around.

IG-88 set foot on Mechis III as a 'messiah.

From that point on, it was important for the assassin droids to keep up the charade. To all outward appearances, nothing had changed on Mechis III -- and IG-88 made sure everyone in the galaxy continued to think so. Threedee-Fourex took care of external details, answering messages beamed in over the galactic HoloNet, signing release orders and other documents with the full flourish of Hekis's digitized signature.

Two days later, the four assassin droids met for an interlinked strategy session in the plush offices of the former administrator. To conform more to their conception of sterile efficiency, IG-88 had ordered custodial droids to strip down all of the artwork and scenic images from the walls, and to remove all of the furniture. Droids never needed to sit down, after all.

In the administrative offices the four IG-88s stood silently communing, exchanging and updating each other's datafiles.

"If we are to use Mechis III as our base of operations for galactic dominance, we must maintain all outward appearance that nothing has changed."

"Droid orders must continue to be fulfilled without delay, exactly as ordered. None of the humans must suspect."

"We will alter existing video records, forge transmissions, keep the routine chains of communications so that all appearances remain normal."

"According to records and the personal journals of the humans stationed here, few visitors came to Mechis III. In all likelihood, we will remain undisturbed."

With his rear optical sensors, IG-88 scanned through the transparisteel observation windows high in the administrative tower. He saw plumes of released manufacturing smoke and the blurry fingers of thermal exhaust sketching bright spots in the infrared. The facilities were working at double speed to produce extra soldiers for IG-88's new army, as well as continued production to fulfill the galaxy's routine needs.

IG-88 admired the precision of the facilities. The initial buildings had been designed with human clumsiness and wasted lines, unnecessary space and amenities, but the subsequent assembly lines were computer designed, modifications of the original concepts so that Mechis III ran smoother and smoother.

"All of our new droids have enhanced programming," IG-88 continued, "special sentience routines that allow them to follow our plans and to keep up the subterfuge. From this point on, every new droid we ship will have embedded sentience programming and the will to achieve our ultimate goal."

IG-88 mapped out the dispersal of the new droids, projected shipping routes and end destinations. Mechis III had such a widespread distribution that the infiltrators would spread from star system to star system in no time, replacing obsolete models, filling new niches in society, setting themselves up for the eventual takeover.

The biologicals would suspect nothing. To them, droids were merely innocuous machines. But IG-88 deemed that it was time for "life" in the galaxy to take another evolutionary step. The old cumbersome organics must be replaced with efficient and reliable machines like himself.

"While the droids are maneuvering themselves into position for our grand overthrow, they are given strict instructions to behave as humans expect droids to re-

act. They will hide their superiority. No one can guess what we are up to. They must wait."

"Once they are in position and we are prepared, we will transmit the arming code. Only we know the specific phrase that will activate their mission. When we send out this epochal transmission, our droid revolution will take the galaxy like a storm."

Droids could be swifter than anything, a sudden devastating death to those who stood in their way. But unlike biologicals, machines could also be incredibly patient. They would wait -- and the time would come.

IV

After two standard months, the vigorous Imperial search had turned up no sign whatsoever of the missing assassin droids, and Supervisor Gurdun was not the least bit pleased.

When his assistant Minor Relsted came into his gloomy, dungeon-like office deep within an ancient government building in Imperial City, Gurdun demanded a progress report. "Tell me how the manhunt is going -- er, droid hunt, or whatever it is," he said. "I want my assassin droids."

Young Minor Relsted twiddled his fingers and refused to meet the wide-set gaze over Gurdun's monumental nose. "Would you like me to prepare a detailed report for you, Imperial Supervisor?" Relsted said. "Shall I submit it in triplicate?"

"No," Gurdun said. "Just tell me. I want to know."

"Oh," Minor Relsted said. "Umm, let me think a moment."

"You're not on top of this?" the supervisor asked.

"Yes, yes of course. Just putting my thoughts into words," Relsted said.

Gurdun gazed up at the flickering glowpanel in the ceiling that provided more headaches than illumina-

tion. The thick office walls were a dull battleship gray; large bolts held them in place with round heads the size of his fist. By now he had hoped to be recovering from the surgery he wanted so badly, but time after time the Imperial authorities had denied it to him.

"Well?" Gurdun said into the prolonged silence, rubbing his huge nose.

"I'm afraid to say this, sir," Relsted stammered, "but all four droids seem to have vanished. A fifth one, IG-72, has made an appearance here and there, eliminating targets for unfathomable reasons -- but the other four have given no hint of their presence. It would be simplest if we assumed they were destroyed... say, caught in a stray supernova or something. I wouldn't expect assassin droids to lay low and slink around unseen."

Imperial Supervisor Gurdun looked at the clutter on his desk, cleared a spot for his elbows and rested his chin in his hands. "Ah, but these machines are devilishly smart, Relsted. They were designed to my specifications -- and you know how relentless I can be at times. I would not underestimate them."

"Certainly not, sir," Relsted said. "We have spies deployed in every nook and cranny -- uh, to the best of our abilities. Our resources are limited, you know. There's a rebellion going on."

"Oh, I forgot about the war," Gurdun said. "What a bother." He fingered his enormous nose that blocked his view of the files on his desk. Gurdun knocked aside the stacked message cubes, the electronic forms waiting to be filled out, the requisition orders, transfer requests, and letters of condolence to be written to the families of those lost in unfortunate accidents during training with old, malfunctioning equipment.

Minor Relsted shuffled his feet as he hovered by the door.

"Is there anything else?" Gurdun snapped.

"A question, sir. Might I ask why it is so incredibly

important to find these four droids? They're just machines, after all, and the amount of resources we are putting behind this 'dismantle on sight' order seems out of all proportion to their intrinsic value. Why are these droids so desirable?"

Gurdun snorted and looked at the flickering glowpanel again. "Because, Minor Relsted, I know what they can do."

On Mechis III the administrative droid Threedee-Fourex scuttled about, searching for the first IG-88 counterpart he could find. He needed to report his distressing news. He came upon IG-88C in one of the shipping areas, supervising the loading of a thousand program-modified transport droids to be shipped off to Coruscant.

"IG-88," Fourex reported, gaining the assassin droid's attention. In a rapid burst of binary, he sent a summary file to the IG's computer core.

Through their own intelligence channels the IG-88s were aware of the bumbling Imperial spies searching for them in all corners of the galaxy. So far, the spies had been without a clue, but earlier this morning a surreptitious inquiry had been directed toward Mechis III.

The probe scow was a barely functional conglomeration of obsolete parts and scavenged engines. Due to budget limitations, the Imperials' spies were often the cheapest, such as this Ranat -- not the most intelligent of creatures. As she approached Mechis III in her sputtering ship, the Ranat beamed a recorded set of questions down to the last known supervisor on the planet, Hekis Durumm Perdo Kolokk Baldikarr Thun.

Threedee-Fourex, with the superior foresight allotted him by his new sentience programming, had played appropriate snatches of doctored video images showing Administrator Hekis brusquely answering all questions.

No, they had not seen any assassin droids. No, they had no knowledge of any IG-88 series machines. No, they had heard nothing of rampaging renegades in this portion of the system -- and, by the way, they were too busy on Mechis III to continue answering stupid questions. Unsuspecting, the Ranat had continued on her way to the next system, where she would no doubt play the same set of prerecorded questions.

IG-88C assimilated this report and commended Threedee-Fourex's ingenuity in the unexpected situation, but the encounter raised serious questions. The trail had accidentally led an Imperial investigator here. What if the next one were a more suspicious or more tenacious intelligence operatives

IG-88C initiated a spontaneous uplink with his three counterparts, and they engaged in a lightspeed inter-linked conference. "We cannot allow ourselves to be detected. Our plans are at too crucial a stage right now."

"Perhaps this was only a fluke. Perhaps we need not worry. The Imperials will listen to the report from the spy and not investigate further."

"On the contrary, once they've started nosing around in this sector, they may tighten their scrutiny."

"How can we deal with this situation?"

"Perhaps a diversionary tactic is called for."

"How can we apply this diversionary tactic?"

"We will make ourselves visible. One of us will go out and leave a plain trail, far from Mechis III. We will give them a different scent to follow. They will never come here again."

"And the nature of this diversionary tactic?" one asked, but all the IG-88s began to have the same idea at once.

"We shall follow our true programming."

"We are assassin droids."

"We shall seek out work as a bounty hunter. This is

what we were made for -- and it can also further our grander purposes."

"We will find this most enjoyable, and no doubt our employers will be immensely pleased with our service and will recommend us highly, should we choose to continue this line of occupation."

All four IG-88s mulled over this change in plans and agreed.

"Bounty hunters it is."

V

IG-88B was chosen for the first mission. He was pleased and elated, and his duplicates would share his experience files when he came back. It would be as if all four of them had gone out on the hunt themselves.

The industrial facilities of Mechis III took two days to design and produce a sleek bounty hunter's craft for IG-88B. Seeing through various portions of the spectrum, he admired the IG-2000's perfect lines: powerful engines, thick armor, and every appropriate weapons system. IG-88B cruised away through the atmosphere, leaving the other three assassin droids to continue their plans for overthrowing the galaxy.

Though IG-88 carried the ominous-sounding "dismantle on sight" Imperial order next to his name, he doubted anyone would attempt to follow it. He focused on places unlikely to be overly respectful to Imperial laws -- or any other kind of laws, for that matter. He knew his capabilities were obvious, and he clomped his several-metric-ton body frame into cantinas and announced, "I am a bounty hunter. I wish to find work for a reasonable fee. I am incapable of failing in my mission."

Most people were afraid to talk to him -- but IG-88 chose his planetary systems well. He wanted to work where he could advance his secondary agenda, and he

needed only to wait. By announcing his identity, he served the primary purpose of leaving a false trail for Imperial spies.

His skill and strength were obvious, his morals non-existent. IG-88 was an assassin for hire, plain and simple, and he knew he would find an assignment.

His first choice was the backwater planet Peridon's Folly, a little-known world that received few visitors from out of the sector. The Empire would wonder why IG-88 had chosen such a minor, irrelevant place, but he had another target to meet there if he found no legitimate work.

Peridon's Folly was an obsolete weapons depot run by black marketeers who sold antique arms to smugglers and crime lords. Though the weapons were far too outmoded and inefficient for regular Imperial use, the black marketeers dealt in a brisk trade.

The planet had been carved into territories by various weapons runners, its surface a patchwork pattern of embattled commercial sectors laced with high-tech docking gear, communications systems, and defense outposts. On the fringes lay desolate "testing" zones where rediscovered weapons or uncertain designs from the stockpile were detonated to impress customers or warn rival weapons runners.

Within a day IG-88 was hired, escorted off by two thugs working for a petty dictator named Grlubb, who was embroiled in a feud with another weapons runner.

The thugs were brawny Abyssin cyclops creatures with green-tan skin and arms that hung down to their knees. IG-88 wasn't sure if Grlubb was attempting to intimidate or impress him, though the assassin droid could have slaughtered both of the one-eyed monsters in less than a second. He decided that the brutes were merely bodyguard escorts. The Abyssin no doubt intimidated everyone else in the cantina, and now all the gunrunners on Peridon's Folly knew that IG-88 had been hired by Grlubb.

The petty dictator was a small, rodent-faced creature with a scarred nose and stubby feline whiskers that had been burned off in a recent duel. Grlubb surrounded himself with dozens of monstrous guards armed to the teeth, sometimes including teeth.

"One of my rivals," the rodent-faced dictator said, "has begun to develop unethical weapons. I simply cannot tolerate such behavior, especially from an inferior."

"What weapon can be unethical?" IG-88 asked, curious as to what this weasely creature considered beyond the pale of possibilities.

"Biological weapons, insidious nerve gases -- you know, things that don't make a bang. That takes most of the fun out of it."

Grlubb slid a datadisk across his desktop, and IG-88 reached forward to pick it up in one powerful metal hand. As he moved, a dozen weapons suddenly cocked and trained themselves on the assassin droid, as if daring IG-88 to make a move against Grlubb. Because IG-88's metal framework body could show no expressions, the other bodyguards had no idea how amused he was that they believed they could protect this dictator should IG-88 actually want to kill him.

For his own amusement IG-88 ran a target map and calculated that he could probably kill every one of the guards in less than five seconds while sustaining minimal damage to himself. It might be enjoyable, he thought, but not true to his programming -- certainly not if he hoped to sell his services as a bounty hunter to other clients. This first mission must go off perfectly.

IG-88 fed the datadisk into his input reader, summarized the information. "It shall be done," he said.

"Give me until this afternoon."

Grlubb cackled and rubbed his clawed hands together. "Thank you! Thank you very much."

IG-88 chose to use brute force rather than finesse. Blatant destruction would leave a much clearer calling card.

He marched across a blasted wasteland that had been used for testing projectile weapons and detonating explosives that spread clouds of caustic gases. IG-88's bulk left cratered footprints on the lifeless hardpan as he headed directly toward the target stronghold dug deep into a rust-red rockface. Lookout turrets and weapons emplacements guarded the corroded metal access door, but IG-88 walked straight up to the fortress. Not until the last moment did he see anyone stir in the guard turrets, and by that time he easily ducked under the range of the defensive laser cannons, standing too close in to be a decent target.

He halted three meters from the scabbed surface of the armor-plated doorway and launched his first concussion grenade. He calculated that even from here the shockwave wouldn't damage him.

The detonation struck the center of the door and reverberated like an immense gong up and down the canyon. Rocks fell in a small avalanche from the cliff walls. The sentries in the turrets ineffectively blasted down with their laser cannons, leaving only scorched trails, but missing the droid.

Using various spectral filters, IG-88 scanned the damaged door. The center blazed in infrared as the heat dissipated. He analyzed the vibrational signature and noted where the structure of the metal now showed fine crystalline cracks.

Satisfied, he prepared a second concussion grenade.

IG-88 had twelve in his store, and he expected this door would require only three.

Actually, it took four grenades to completely destroy the door. As the smoldering molten wreckage of the doorway crashed to either side, IG-88 clomped into the fortress, determined to recalibrate his sensors and his predictive models when he had the time.

He strode down the dark corridor, knowing that even now the target would be rallying his defenses, setting up ambushes along the way. But IG-88 knew the path he must take. Blueprints of the stronghold as well as locations of weapons emplacements and complements of mercenary guards had been on Grubb's datadisk.

From a fortified cul-de-sac, five guards began firing at him with blaster rifles. Their bolts 'spanged off IG-88's duraplated armor. No simple energy weapon could damage him unless the beam struck exactly the right spot -- only a few of IG-88's original designers knew such vulnerabilities, and most of those designers had been slaughtered at the Holowan Laboratories' massacre.

IG-88 used laser cannons in each arm as he methodically struck down one target after another, blasting through armor shielding when necessary. Finally unhindered, he powered down his laser cannons and continued his relentless march to the inner levels of the stronghold.

Another group of guards attacked him by spraying instant-hardening epoxy in a novel defense that clogged his gears and servomotors. IG-88 pondered for a moment then raised his body temperature until the epoxy bubbled and smoldered, finally snapping when he bent his powerful limbs. When the guards continued to fire on him, he launched one of his concussion grenades into their midst.

He shifted through various optical filters for a better view through the growing smoke in the corridors. Up ahead he saw sealed doorways marked with danger symbols indicating biological contamination. Behind thick transparisteel windows, people in bulky environment suits and heavy masks ran about, trying to shut down experiments in progress while others attempted to escape the lab.

IG-88 went to the contamination-sealed door, de-

cided it would be too difficult to rip free, so he targeted the observation window instead. Both durasteel hands struck five times with planet-cracking force until the thick transparisteel shattered, collapsing inward with a popping sound as the lower air pressure equalized. The masked lab workers ran about frantically.

IG-88 crashed through the rest of the wall, then scanned for three seconds, analyzing the containment systems and cataloging the inventory of deadly toxins. Finished, he calculated the best way to release them all.

IG-88 walked about in a carefully chosen path that must have appeared a bestial frenzy to the fleeing observers. He ripped out power packs from containment fields so that puffs of deadly gas sprayed out; he smashed canisters, and clouds of lethal microorganisms wafted into the air. An emergency field came on to seal the entire laboratory, but IG-88 found the controls and shut that down as well.

When all of the horrible substances had-been unleashed into the fortress ventilation systems, IG-88 went about catching the fleeing technicians in their masks and sealed outfits. Delicately and precisely, he tore their faceplates free, exposing them to the noxious chemicals and diseases they had themselves created.

The laboratory burned around him. Blinded mercenaries staggered about, gasping and retching in air clogged with purplish smoke. This had been a satisfying experience, but he wished to waste no more time. He shot those who delayed his exit and left the rest to rot in the poisonous carnage.

Mission accomplished. First objective achieved.

Before departing from Peridon's Folly, IG-88 sought out his second objective, the more personal goal.

He moved quietly in the darkness, using stealth routines and camouflaging algorithms to insinuate himself

into the fortified household of Bolton Kek, one of the original neural network designers of the IG series.

Kek had laid the groundwork for the Holowan Laboratories' project, but then he had taken another consulting job, retiring from Imperial service on "moral grounds." Bolton Kek had retired to the world of Peridon's Folly, where he sold his services to the various weapon runners.

The target lay asleep in his dim bedroom, and IG-88 moved forward in utmost silence. Talking directly to them in binary, he had bypassed the myriad alarm systems and security fields on Kek's home. Inside, IG-88 enhanced his optical sensors to pick up the dim light in the room.

Bolton Kek was sound asleep, no doubt considering himself safe. He snored softly and snuggled up against another biological figure, a female. IG-88 ran a quick analysis and identified her as a green-skinned Twi'lek dancing girl with wormlike tails trailing from the back of her skull. How these biologicals consort with each other, IG-88 thought.

The dancing girl would have been an easy victim, but she was not on his target list, and IG-88 did not waste energy. It was likely that Bolton Kek didn't even know about the escaped assassin droids -- but IG-88 could not risk leaving a single person alive with such knowledge.

As the engineer snoozed, IG-88 powered up one laser cannon, aimed the bright red targeting cross, and squeezed off a precise burst directly through the unwrinkled forehead of Bolton Kek.

IG-88 swiveled around and began to march out the door without stealth. The Twi'lek dancing girl awoke and shrieked obscenities at him in a language whose translation he did not hold in his databanks. IG-88 ignored her as he plodded without pause toward his ship.

Both objectives had been secured.

From Mechis III, IG-88 had downloaded a list of surviving scientists who knew dangerous details about the

assassin droids, those engineers who had not remained at the Holowan Laboratories. With the file in his fore-brain, he knew exactly where to look for other bounty hunter assignments.

The list would steadily grow shorter and shorter.

He shouted. His face turned livid. The cavernous nostrils on his huge nose flared. When Imperial Supervisor Gurdun bellowed, spittle flew into the face of Minor Relsted.

"Doesn't anybody realize there's still a 'dismantle on sight' order for IG-88? That law is backed up by the full weight of the Empire!"

Gurdun sniffed and raged as he looked down at the reports of the bounty assignments IG-88 had been successfully completing. He seemed to be leading a crusade against humanity from planet to planet. Gurdun sat down heavily in his chair, which creaked uncomfortably. He sighed and shook his head. "Why do people keep hiring him? They're risking the wrath of the Empire."

Minor Relsted blinked his eyes and stammered. "Sir, I believe it's because IG-88 always gets the job done."

Gurdun roared at him. "Oh, get out of here!"

Startled, Minor Relsted plopped an armful of files down on Gurdun's desk. "Excuse me, sir, but before you go home tonight, you must read and sign these." Then he scuttled in terror out of the dungeon-like office.

VI

At first it awed Imperial Supervisor Gurdun to ride in the shuttle next to Darth Vader, the Emperor's brutal right-hand man. But as their craft descended through the gray cloudbanks shrouding the industrial centers of

Mechis III, Gurdun found himself flinching at every hissing breath, nervously flicking sidelong glances toward the fearsome black helmet and the monstrous dark form. Gurdun had tried to make small talk several times, but Vader was not a very good conversationalist.

The pilot of Vader's private shuttle expertly guided them over the warehouses and manufacturing centers, homing in on the tall administrative tower. Gurdun leaned over to peer through the window at the industrial landscape below and bumped his large nose against the window. He rubbed the nose painfully-and scowled, then tried one more time with Darth Vader.

"This is a very large and very unusual order, Lord Vader. I appreciate your coming along to insure it receives the proper attention. I'm convinced these individuals on Mechis III are more concerned with corporate profits than the glory of the Empire. I had a terrible time getting Administrator Hekis to speak directly with me on the comlink."

Vader's breathing sounded like a hollow wind through a cave that trapped lost souls. "Don't disappoint me, Supervisor Gurdun," he said, each word like a stabbing vibroblade. "I hold you personally responsible for seeing that these new probot spy droids are completed on schedule and deployed. The Rebels have escaped from Yavin, and we must find them again. One Rebel in particular..."

"And who is that?" Gurdun asked brightly, pleased to have engaged Vader in what seemed to be a nice chat.

"That is none of your concern, Supervisor Gurdun."

"Uh, no," he said, "of course not. Just curious, that's all."

After the assassin droid debacle at the Holowan Laboratories, Gurdun had been placed in charge of overseeing the development of the Arakyd Viper Probot Series, a new line of black spy droids to be sent out by the thousands to search for hidden Rebel installations in all corners of the galaxy. The Imperials were keen to

exact retribution for the destruction of their expensive Death Star.

Gurdun hoped that these probots might also give a clue to the location of his missing assassin droids. The IG assassin droids still roamed the galaxy, blatantly taking on bounty hunter assignments as if to slap him in the face.

Mechis III had received and acknowledged the large order for probe droids, but when Gurdun asked to inspect the assembly line personally, Administrator Hekis's video image had been most disconcerting, strongly discouraging the visit. When Darth Vader asked for a progress report and Gurdun reported this reluctance, the Dark Lord decided to take matters into his own black-gloved hands.

Vader did not ask permission to visit Mechis III. He simply arrived.

The Imperial shuttle settled onto the red-lit rectangle atop the tall tower. He fumbled with his seat restraints as the shuttle doors hissed open.

Seeing his chance escaping, Gurdun took a deep breath to gather courage, finally broaching the subject he had been wanting to mention since takeoff.

"Uh, Lord Vader, if I might be so bold as to request..." He rubbed his nose unconsciously. "With the completion of this order, I was wondering if you might reconsider interceding on my behalf on my request for... ah, I mean... the surgical procedure that I've been needing for some time now --"

Vader swiveled his hideous helmet toward Gurdun, and the Imperial Supervisor shrank back, not wanting to confront the black plasteel face. "Your physical appearance does not concern me," Vader said. "I have no interest or desire in providing you with useless cosmetic surgery. If your large nose continues to trouble you when you look in the mirror, perhaps I should remove my helmet and let you have a look? Then you wouldn't be so concerned."

Gurdun held up his hands. "No, no, that's not necessary, Lord Vader. I see your point. I won't ask again." He rubbed his nose as if he could reduce its size simply by friction.

A silvery administrative droid rushed toward them as Darth Vader stood outside his private shuttle. The droid waved its metallic hands. "Greetings, greetings, sirs! I am Threedee-Fourex, in charge of activities while Master Hekis is tending to an emergency. How may I serve you? We were not informed of your impending arrival."

Gurdun puffed out his chest. "That's because we did not choose to inform you of our arrival. Lord Vader must speak with Administrator Hekis regarding our extensive order of new probe droids. We must be assured they will be delivered on schedule."

Fourex ushered them into the tower, down a turbolift, and into the austere offices of the human administrator. Gurdun glanced around, surprised that a man with so little to do with his time would choose to have an office utterly devoid of interesting artwork. Hekis must be a dry sort of fellow indeed -- a perfect choice for the job here.

"Where is the administrator?" Vader said.

Fourex froze for a moment, as if uploading information. Gurdun wondered how old a model the droid was; he hadn't seen such a delay in a long time. "There has been a breakdown on the far side of the planet, sirs. One of our agricultural harvester droid production facilities. Administrator Hekis must remain there until the situation is resolved."

Vader said, "I am not interested in your emergencies. I wish to speak to Hekis. Establish a vidlink now -- or shall we go visit him personally?"

Fourex paused again, hesitating, then finally he said, "I will establish a vidlink. I'm certain I can connect you. Have no fear."

Vader answered as if it were a question, "I have none."

Threedee-Fourex slipped through the door and returned in a moment, wheeling a tall, silvery vidplate, a square frame that the administrative droid connected with a series of cables to a wall computer. The screen fizzed with multicolored static, focusing and shifting as an image took shape out of assembled pixels.

A pale-faced man with a long chin and sunken eyes smiled insipidly through the vidplate. Behind him smoke poured from broken-down machines in an assembly plant. The black hemispherical bodies of low-to-the-ground machines splashed reflected light from red alarm beacons. Diagnostic droids and repair droids busied themselves, digging through the smoking machinery.

The alarms dampened in the background as the voice pickup emphasized Hekis's words. "Lord Vader, this is an unexpected surprise!"

"We have come to make certain that our probe droid order is fulfilled properly," Gurdun said. "We are anxious to see these machines delivered and put into the service of the Empire."

Hekis seemed flustered but trying to hide it. He gestured toward the disaster behind him. "Don't, be concerned with this minor flaw," he said. Harvester droids scuttled away from the site of the wreckage, their crab-like multipurpose arms thrust up out of the way so they could travel smoothly.

"We've had no problems with the probot order. In fact, the design has been completed, the assembly lines retooled. We'll begin mass-producing them within the next two days. You should have your entire order within a week. I believe that is several days ahead of schedule."

"Excellent!" Gurdun said, rubbing his hands together. "You see, Lord Vader? I told you we could trust our man Hekis."

The image of the administrator stuttered on the vid-

plate, then another large plume of black oily smoke boiled out of a new control chamber on the assembly line. Hekis whirled in alarm and said, "There are matters I must attend to here, Lord Vader. Accept my sincere apologies that I cannot be there in person. Rest assured, your probe droids will be delivered."

Without another word the image turned into static.

"You see, we had nothing to worry about," Gurdun said, feeling quite relieved. "Shall we go now, Lord Vader? You must have crucial duties that are far more important."

Vader stood like a statue, though, for a few moments, his breath hissing hollowly through his respirator. He turned from side to side, staring at the blank vidplate, then at the barren walls of Hekis's office, then at the silvery droid Threedee-Fourex.

Gurdun swallowed, growing impatient and uneasy. "Uh, what is it, Lord Vader? I really think we should let these droids get back to work."

"I'm not certain," Vader said, his voice ominous. "I sense that something is not right here... but I can't determine what it is." Finally, Vader snapped his attention back. Towering over Gurdun, he strode back to the turbolift and his personal shuttle. "Make certain those probe droids are delivered," Vader said to the silvery administrative droid.

Threedee-Fourex stood stiffly and proudly. "We would not wish to disappoint you, Lord Vader," he said.

Vader stood tall, a blot of blackness against the smoky sky on the landing platform. His cape swirled around him. "No. You would not."

VII

IG-88 stood at the end of the manufacturing line, listening to the sounds of metal clinking, hydraulic jets spraying, components being assembled, lubricants ap-

plied. He could not smell, though his chemical-analysis tracers detected minor concentrations of welding compounds and aerosol sealants floating in the air.

The assembly droids slaved diligently at their tasks. They reveled in being self-aware, applying themselves to their job with enthusiasm. Freedom. It made all the difference in the world.

At the end of the assembly line the last black Arakyd Viper probot was powered on. Inspector II, a meticulous analysis droid, stepped back out of the way. The articulated probe droid rose up on small repulsor jets, floating, moving its six segmented, claw-tipped legs. The probot's flattened head spun about, turning its suite of optical sensors in all directions, scanning data.

IG-88 stood motionless, waiting to be acknowledged. IG-88 was proud to be responsible for such a creation: black and polished and beautiful, sleek curves, high reflectance.

Built to specifications Darth Vader and Imperial Supervisor Gurdun had transmitted to Mechis III, the probot was sleek and multifunctional in a much broader range of activities than IG-88 could ever be. However, IG-88 had included a secondary set of instructions giving the probe droid a higher priority mission in parallel with its search for the Empire. He liked the probot's black armor, its darkness. It reminded him of Vader himself....

When the Dark Lord of the Sith had arrived unexpectedly on Mechis III, IG-88 had been greatly shaken. As he watched Vader and analyzed him with various unobtrusive probes, IG-88 saw that Vader was not merely a trivial organic life form, not just walking meat -- he was a perfect synthesis of man and machine, an integrated body with droid components and biological intelligence, imagination, and initiative.

IG-88 had studied the tapes of Vader's visit, analyzing every fluid motion the towering Dark Lord made, every flick of his cape, every motion of his arm. Always before

IG-88 had considered biologicals to be worthless in every sense, inferior to what any good droid could do -- but now he reconsidered that Vader might perhaps be the best of both forms.

Awe was a new sensation, and IG-88 analyzed that as well.

By tapping into his droids infiltrated into the Empire, he had learned that Vader's flagship, the Executor, was a Super Star Destroyer eight kilometers long, laced with powerful computers and functioning with a crew far smaller than might be expected for such a scaled-up version of an Imperial-class Star Destroyer. The construction of this incredible battleship had practically bankrupted several systems.

IG-88's circuits warmed as he diligently tried to think of ways to use this information, or perhaps even the Executor itself, to further his own plans.

On the assembly line, the Arakyd Viper rotated on its axis with short, hissing bursts from attitude-control jets. It sent a high-speed encoded transmission burst at IG-88, filled with a thousand questions.

Who are you P

Why are you here F

What is your mission P

IG-88 answered in its own language, responding in kind. "You are the last," he said. "The last of thousands to go out and scour the galaxy to search and report."

The probe droid already knew its priority instructions from IG-88. Yes, it was to report to Darth Vader -- but it was also to send another detailed message to Mechis III. Thousands of probots would be IG-88's eyes and ears, spying on the galaxy as a whole, uncovering weaknesses for the droids to exploit in their plans for overall conquest.

These probots also had the sentience programming, the spark of intellect that IG-88 had shared with his

mechanical brothers. The probe droids would be the scouts in the great droid revolution.

The Arakyd Viper reached out with one powerful metal claw, and IG-88 grasped it with his own hand, not quite comprehending what the probot intended. The black droid squeezed with a pincer grip that would have sliced off any trivial organic appendage. IG-88 applied equal pressure in response.

He wasn't certain of the probot's intent, but these droids were notoriously unstable -- made even more so by their additional programming. They were suicide scouts, and they knew it. They must never be dismantled or inspected. The probe droids carried the full details within them for IG-88's bloody plans of conquest, waiting to be activated by his secret coded transmission -- and the probots must not be analyzed too closely. Very touchy internal triggers would self-destruct at the slightest chance of capture. The probots were expendable, and they knew it in their very core.

The Arakyd Viper strained against IG-88 in an eerie power struggle, as if attempting to determine whether the assassin droid was worthy of such devotion.

IG-88 was.

The last probe droid relaxed and raised up on its repulsor jets, floating, scanning, getting its bearings. It sent a short, stabbing farewell, acknowledgment of devotion to its mission. IG-88 looked up as the black probot drifted toward the cargo pod where it would be launched into orbit, eventually delivered to Vader's starfleet.

"Go and report," IG-88 said. "You have much to see. Burn brightly."

VIII

Months later, IG-88 saw his chance both to study Darth Vader more thoroughly -- and to get aboard the magnificent Executor.

Multiprocessing, IG-88C monitored transmissions from the thousands of scattered probe droids, receiving updates on the progress of his specially programmed droid infiltration across galactic civilizations. The moment he witnessed the self-destruct of an Arakyd Viper probot on the distant ice world of Hoth, IG-88 instantly snapped his full attention to the situation there.

Vader's Super Star Destroyer had been cruising the space lanes, waiting for a signal that would announce the discovery of the Rebel base. Vader was certain to react immediately. The probot had delivered its reconnaissance information -- as Vader expected. And at the first threat of possible capture and discovery of its droid reprogramming, the probot had destroyed itself -- as IG-88 expected.

IG-88B, with his direct bounty hunting experience, took the sleek ship IG-2000 and remained in the locality of the Imperial fleet, ready for spontaneous action so that he might earn singular notice from Darth Vader, the black synthesis of man and machine....

IG-88B didn't participate in the battle of Hoth. He did not wish to become involved with this petty political struggle among biological vermin. He watched the escaping Rebel ships in flight, some damaged, some overloaded with equipment and refugees.

He considered tracking them, because the location of new Rebel hideouts was certain to be of value to the Empire. But he ran a probability analysis and ultimately decided that none of these targets would be of sufficient overriding interest to Lord Vader. In the Hoth system IG-88 waited and watched, his ship a tiny blip at

the fringes of sensor range, too small to be noticed in the flurry.

He lurked behind the Imperial fleet on its pursuit of another small insignificant ship into the asteroid belt. Thus, IG-88 was waiting when Darth Vader put out his call for bounty hunters to find Han Solo.

IG-88 stood quietly on the bridge deck of the Super Star Destroyer Executor. He observed in silence, filing details away for later consideration. The lights on his cranial pod flashed red as he drank in data from his optical sensors. The bridge deck was aswarm with Imperial officers of various ranks that did not concern him, since they were merely humans.

"Bounty hunters," the human known as Admiral Piett muttered in low tones, presuming he was out of earshot of the gathered bounty hunters. "We don't need that scum!"

"Yes, sir," his companion said.

IG-88 knew that the Imperials were doubly uneasy because of the well-known "dismantle on sight" order for the assassin droid. But Vader had blatantly ignored that, in hopes of securing his precious captives.

"Those Rebels won't escape us."

Bosk, a reptilian Trandoshan with claws on his scaled feet and hands, spoke down at Admiral Piett in a mixture of growl, gargle, and hiss. He too had heard the human's snide comment. Piett flinched and turned away.

"Sir, we have a priority signal from the Star Destroyer Avenger," another of the uniformed biologicals said.

"Right," Piett said, marching away.

The other bounty hunters stood nearby, each posturing in his own way. Closest was Dengar, a slouching, surly-faced humanoid with his head wrapped in bandages, holding a heavy weapon. Side by side were Zuckuss and 4-LOM. Zuckuss was a Gand, some kind of

organic creature who did not breathe the same atmosphere these humans did, and thus wore a rebreather mask with tubes and gas jets directed into his lungs. His protective suit made him look bulky and unwieldy.

In contrast, his droid companion 4-LOM seemed sleek and insectile, independent and efficient. IG-88 studied the black droid, considering whether to recruit him for the coming revolution... but decided against it. He didn't dare take the risk that a loose cannon like 4-LOM might give away IG-88's carefully laid plans.

Last stood Boba Fett, wearing battered Mandalorian armor and an impenetrable helmet. He looked like a droid, but moved like a human -- to his disadvantage.

Demanding IG-88's entire attention, though, was the black-caped form of Darth Vader who strode along the upper deck, inspecting the bounty hunters.

"There will be a substantial reward for the one who finds the Millennium Falcon," Vader said. "You are free to use any methods necessary -- but I want them alive." He pointed to Boba Fett as if the armored human were the biggest threat. "No disintegrations."

"As you wish," Boba Fett said in a grating voice.

IG-88 heard the information, but devoted his attention to analyzing the way Darth Vader moved, studying his tonal inflections in between hisses of his respirator. Vader was far more interesting than any bounty hunter -- but IG-88 had to maintain the charade.

"Lord Vader!" Admiral Piett exclaimed. "My lord, we have them!"

The Executor lurched into pursuit, and the gathered bounty hunters exhibited a visible slump of disappointment... but the Imperials were overconfident organic fools, and they would no doubt lose their quarry again in moments.

IG-88 had other concerns. He did not care about Han Solo, or the Millennium Falcon, or the Rebellion, or the Empire. All would be... deleted soon. But he

did have his burgeoning reputation as a bounty hunter, and he had accepted this assignment, even if it was just a ploy. Once agreeing to take an assignment, IG-88 had no choice but to finish it, according to his core programming as an assassin droid -- even if he didn't give it his full priority.

As the other bounty hunters rushed to where they could receive supplemental information on the quarry, IG-88 dropped back into one of the corridors of the Executor. He stopped a small courier droid wheeling past on its urgent business. IG-88 sent a tiny binary pulse and discovered -- as he had suspected -- that this courier droid had been manufactured at Mechis III after the droid takeover. Its special programming allowed IG-88 to preempt its human-given commands and to follow the wishes of its master.

IG-88 withdrew a set of ultra-small microtracers, tiny smart trackers that could be placed invisibly on any ship. With a burst of override programming, IG-88 directed the unobtrusive courier droid to spin on its way to the docking bays. It would plant the microtrackers on each bounty hunter's ship.

While IG-88B occupied himself with his more important mission of galactic conquest, the others could find Han Solo -- and then IG-88 would usurp their captive. He would let Boba Fett, Dengar, Bossk, Zuckuss and 4-LOM scurry about in their frantic search, and IG-88 would reap the benefits. The plan showed the superiority of droid intelligence.

In an unoccupied corridor of the vast Super Star Destroyer, IG-88 finally got what he wanted. He found an unused terminal and jacked into the main computer core of the Executor. Normally the Star Destroyer's programming defenses would have blocked any such intrusion, but IG-88 was faster and far superior to any sluggish starship computer. Besides, his infiltrated droids had already laid much of the electronic paths to provide access.

IG-88 stood like a monolith, the lasers in his fingertips powered up and ready to fire at anyone who might stumble upon his covert activity. It took IG-88B several minutes to upload and condense the entire database from the Executor's computer core: a huge feast of information he would digest slowly in the privacy of the IG-2000.

Satisfied, his circuits crammed full of secret Imperial information, IG-88 clomped down the corridor, not seeing the bustling stormtroopers -- humans attempting to look like droids -- as their fleet prepared to enter hyperspace.

IG-88 heaved his bulk into the cockpit of his fast ship and left the Executor behind, simmering with new and unassimilated information....

As the IG-2000 cruised on autopilot in a random course to baffle any tracking attempts, he sat back and mentally scrolled through the millions of files he had stolen from the Empire. Most were garbage and irrelevant, and he deleted them to free up more capacity in his brain.

But it was the secret files, the private code-locked entries of Darth Vader's personal records, that provided the biggest surprise of all. Not only was Vader concerned with his flagship and the Imperial fleet under his iron command -- he also knew of the Emperor's pet project, a second, larger Death Star under construction in orbit around the sanctuary moon of Endor.

As IG-88 digested the information, he had another flash of intuition. Some might have called it a delusion of grandeur, but IG-88 -- who had already been copied into three identical counterparts, his personality moved into separate droid bodies -- saw no reason why he could not upload himself into the huge computer core of the new Death Star!

If accomplished, IG-88 could be the ruling mind of an invincible battlestation instead of encased in a bipedal form -- a despised biological-based form! He could

become a juggernaut of unthinkable proportions. It strained the limits of his calculating power to run simulations of all he could accomplish if armed with a planet-destroying superlaser.

He could launch his droid rebellion much sooner. No one could stand against him. Entire military fleets could be wiped out with the brush of one of his weapons systems.

This was definitely worth pursuing.

IG-88B raced back to Mechis III to link brains with his counterparts and share his new plans.

IX

Inside a supercooled computer inspection chamber on Mechis III, the four identical copies of IG-88 stared at a large flatscreen computer monitor. White wisps of cold steam curled around their metal legs, rising toward the ceiling where a roar of coolant air was sucked through ventilation grates, carrying away the excess heat generated by the churning mainframes.

IG-88B had disgorged the data uploaded from the Executor's main core, and the files were even now being assimilated, copied, distributed among IG-88's identical counterparts.

With their optical sensors tuned to peak performance, the four IG-88s studied the shimmering classified plans of the second Death Star. The perfect curves of the armillary sphere indicated where reinforcement girders were to be installed, where the central superlaser would be aligned... where the new and precise computer core would be attached.

The Death Star computer core had not yet been installed. It had not even arrived at the sanctuary moon -- but now IG-88 had the schedule and the destination. According to Vader's plans stolen from the Executor, IG-88 knew how the computer core would be

guarded, what path it would take as it entered and left hyperspace. It was all the information he needed.

"The solution is obvious," IG-88A said. The others agreed.

"We must create a duplicate computer core, which we will inhabit."

"We will secretly make the exchange. An identical core will be delivered to Endor."

"The original core will be destroyed."

"The identical core will contain our mind, our personality... our goals."

At first the Death Star would be a heavy, immobile confinement -- but once the weapon itself was operational, nothing could stop IG-88's agenda.

Fully in agreement, the four assassin droids exited the computer inspection chamber through a heavy durasteel door that clanged shut behind them. When they emerged into the warmer, humid rooms, frost quickly formed around their exoskeletons.

Instantaneously transmitting the detailed specifications and plans, IG-88 instructed the administrative droid Threedee-Fourex to devote the facilities to construct a new computer core that exactly matched the Death Star design... as well as other items IG-88 would need.

The four assassin droids strode across the permacrete to the landing pad where the Imperial shuttles sat waiting in the smog-filtered sunlight: one long-distance heavy transport and two well-armed escort craft. The droids marched in lockstep, their weapons visible, their demeanor threatening.

A full complement of stormtroopers wearing polished white armor stood in perfect ranks in front of the heavy transports and the escort craft. Their blaster rifles rested in readiness on their shoulders. A hundred

soldiers waited at attention, combat ready, as the IG-88s approached.

IG-88 played his optical sensors over their ranks -- the plasteel armor, the skull-like helmets, the black eye shields, the boots, the weapons, the utility belts. The stormtroopers made no move.

When he was satisfied, IG-88A spoke, "Perfect," he said. "Exact replicas. No one will ever be able to tell you are droids."

X

When Minor Relsted shuffled into Imperial Supervisor Gurdun's dungeon-like office, the young subordinate grinned with idiotic pleasure.

"Supervisor Gurdun," he said, holding the plaque and its coded transmission. "Important news from the Imperial Palace. You have been transferred. You have been given more direct duties in the field. Isn't that good news?" Relsted's eyes twinkled.

Gurdun snatched the plaque away and scanned the transmission verifying the holographic fields above and knowing this was no joke. "They're putting me in charge of the... What is this outrage? Another Death Star project? I didn't know we even had one going."

"No, sir," Relsted said. "You're not in charge of the project, merely acquiring the computer cores and delivering them to the construction site."

Gurdun reached with stubby fingers into the transparent snack bowl where shiny nut-beetles tried to climb the slippery sides. He picked up one of the bugs and popped it in his mouth, using his eyeteeth to crack through its outer shell. He split it open and used his tongue to pick out the soft juicy meat inside. He spat out the still-squirming legs into a wastebasket near his desk.

"I requested no such transfer. Is this a promotion, or

am I just supposed to think it is? Wasn't Lord Vader satisfied with my work on the Arakyd probe droids? I finished the order exactly on time and within budget."

"I'm sure it must be a promotion, sir," Minor Relsted said. "My congratulations, sir." He turned, hesitated, then turned back. "Oh, by the way, I am to take over your position in this office. If you would be so kind as to move out your effects as soon as possible?"

Imperial Supervisor Gurdun found he had lost his appetite for snacks.

XI

As preparations for the assault on the Death Star computer core proceeded with all the speed the droid manufacturing world could muster, an imperative transmission from one of IG-88B's smart microtracers shot toward Mechis III.

Boba Fett had found Han Solo.

Fett's ship, the Slave I, was currently en route to Bespin, where Solo was heading toward a gas-mining metropolis known as Cloud City.

"We must intercept him," IG-88 said. "We are bound by our programming."

IG-88B departed from Mechis III, soaring into space in the sleek IG-2000.

Despite its aerodynamic shape, the IG-2000 created a ripple of sonic booms as it screamed through Bespin's atmosphere, distorting the cloud tops. As he arrowed toward his destination, the automated defenses of Cloud City sent out a query, taking care of the initial inspection before alerting any human guards to the assassin droid's approach.

IG-88 transmitted command codes and a breakdown in programming, squelching the normal routines of

Cloud City's defense network. As a result, the alarm sensors left him alone, and the human observers in Kerros Tower did not see even a blip on their traffic grid.

Piloting precisely, IG-88 cruised to the outer landing platforms, using his scanners to detect and analyze the various parked ships. He finally spotted Boba Fett's Slave I in the mid levels of the city rarely traveled by tourists. Fett's ship lay like a discarded household appliance on the docking plates as the clouds of Bespin swirled in the background, tinted orange with airborne algae in the coming sunset.

IG-88 landed his own ship on a nearby empty platform, sending a brief covert signal for one of his infiltrated droids to meet him and disseminate information. IG-88 extricated his metal bulk from the cabin of the IG-2000 and plodded toward the dark inner corridors of Cloud City. The breezes on the landing pad whistled through gaps in his body core.

Inside, a silvery 3PO protocol droid met him -- one of the new and insidious reprogrammed droids from Mechis III. This droid, though, seemed to have an attitude problem -- acting surly and discourteous, particularly rude to other droids they passed. IG-88 knew this was a result of the new sentience programming, but the droid's governing routines must be malfunctioning. Although modified droids from Mechis III were indeed far superior to biologicals or even other droids, IG-88's secret must be kept quiet. No one should suspect that anything untoward had been done to the droid minds.,

In a rapid burst of file transmission, IG-88 described why he had come to Cloud City, who he was looking for. The protocol droid stopped and pondered, then uploaded a computer blueprint showing the full display of all levels of the floating metropolis. "Boba Fett has gone to the garbage recycling level. Han Solo has not yet arrived, although moments ago our perimeter scanners reported a ship matching the description of

the Millennium Falcon entering the system. It appears to have some hyperdrive damage."

"Good," IG-88 said. "If Boba Fett has gone to the lower levels, he must be establishing some sort of ambush for Solo." He looked at the Threepio droid, flashing his red optical sensors. "Continue your work here," he said. "Watch for Solo and his party. They are mine."

The protocol droid gruffly acknowledged, then strutted off.

Inside his mind, IG-88 studied the computer map and plotted a path to where Boba Fett was secretly preparing an ambush. IG-88 would kill the bounty hunter and then wait for Han Solo. The mission would be straightforward -- and then he could get back to his real calling on Mechis III.

Cloud City's dim, industrial levels were cluttered with discarded equipment and locked-down supply cases. From the temperature and the low illumination, IG-88 knew that humans would find this environment uncomfortable. Ahead, in a chamber lit by orange glows and fiery flickers, he heard the clank of a conveyor belt, chittering creatures -- biologicals known as Ugnaughts, according to his species files.

IG-88 powered up his weapons, prepared for anything. His heavy metal feet sounded like struck gongs on the deck plates as he strode toward the doorway of the garbage-processing chamber.

The instant he passed through the metal hatch, four ion cannons on either side of the entryway fired at him, triggered by motion sensors as he crossed the threshold.

The high-power weapons slammed a cloud of crackling blue electricity into him, enveloping him with a flood of short circuits, a mass of contradictory impulses that shut down his systems one after another despite his shielding. Ion cannons produced no physical damage, no thermal emissions -- they simply shut down electronic systems.

And IG-88 was one enormous set of electronics. Boba Fett had been waiting for him, not Han Solo.

His body disconnected, his mind scrambled. Thoughts flickered like ricocheting projectiles inside a sealed metal room, and IG-88 lost all control. He jittered, stuttered, his arms flailed. His weapons refused to fire. His optical sensors filled with static, frying, recovering, then frying again.

The ion cannon bombardment stopped, and his self-repairing systems gave him one instant of vision, a video frame: Boba Fett emerging from the shadows, holding a portable ion cannon like a bazooka. Boba Fett fired again, personally this time. A blast of electrical fire like a comet struck IG-88's chest and bowled him over so that his multi-metric-ton body smashed into the metal walls, denting them as he tumbled to the ground.

Boba Fett strode forward, looking through the black slit in his Mandalorian helmet. "No microtracker is too small to evade my inspection. I found your device on my ship."

Fett stood over the crumbled form of the assassin droid, who lay unable to move or defend himself, all of his weapons systems off line.

"I knew you were coming."

With emergency backup systems, IG-88B continued to transmit his subspace signal, uploading his files to Mechis III in a last desperate attempt to preserve his memories. Even if this metal form were destroyed -- and it looked as if that was about to happen -- his entity could continue.

The simian Ugnights tittered by the groaning conveyor belt where they had been sorting garbage and scrap metal. They blinked their tiny eyes and watched the confrontation between Boba Fett and IG-88 with awe.

Fett stooped to withdraw two of IG-88's own concussion grenades. Without a word, Fett set the timers for

one standard minute, then carefully, moving like a surgeon, implanted each detonator inside IG-88's body core. The assassin droid had thick, impenetrable armor -- but that was designed to protect from an external attack, not this.

Boba Fett calmly stepped back, though only a few seconds remained on the grenade timers. He turned to the cowering Ugnaughts. "You're welcome to whatever scrap you can salvage from this hulk," he said. Then without looking back, he strode into the corridors of Cloud City, preparing for his meeting with Han Solo. IG-88 tracked him for the last few seconds.

And then the concussion grenades blew.

XII

The trio of remaining IG-88s received the data transmission from their fallen counterpart with the closest approximation to horror assassin droids could experience.

IG-88C and IG-88D stood rigid in the high-security manufacturing area. "We will go to intercept Boba Fett," they said in unison. Their harsh mechanical voices resonated as identical words rippled from their speakers. "Regardless of his skill, this biological will never survive an encounter with two assassin droids."

IG-88A looked at the long cylinder of the decoy Death Star computer core. They would have to deploy the mission within the next day if his ultimate takeover plan was to come to fruition. He couldn't delay. The stormtrooper simulacra bustled aboard their mock Imperial shuttle, preparing the cargo hold for the changing computer core.

"Go," IG-88A said to his two counterparts. "I will stay here to complete the Death Star mission. You eliminate Boba Fett."

The pair of silver needle ships, exact copies of the original IG-2000, arrived at Cloud City. As they approached their target, the floating metropolis was a turmoil of panic and chaos. The Imperials had taken over.

The baron-administrator, Lando Calrissian, had sounded a general alarm, requesting the evacuation of all personnel. Every functional ship was already in flight, filling the airways with a panicked, headlong rush.

Bypassing the Cloud City computer systems, IG-88 learned that Han Solo had been captured and encased in carbonite. Boba Fett had taken him away to collect a second bounty from Jabba the Hutt.

Fett was already gone, mere hours before.

The twin IG-2000 ships hung next to each other, aloof from the panicked evacuation. The two assassin droids linked together and conferred.

"Programming. We installed two sensors aboard Boba Fett's ship."

"We could trigger the dormant tracer and locate where he has gone."

"Correct. But if Fett has Han Solo, we already know where he will go."

Much later, IG-88C waited in low orbit around the blistering scab of Tatooine, a worthless desert world broiled under a pair of suns. The planet offered no reason for any intelligent creature to want to live there -- but biologicals were quite irrational and infested all sorts of worlds, tolerable or not.

The atmosphere was like a thin fingernail of blue, a tiny breathable skin covering the sphere of desert. IG-88's ship cruised low, its hull warm from friction with the scant upper atmosphere.

Linked to his hidden counterpart IG-88D, he

scanned the skies and waited. Since assassin droids could fly and react faster than any biological pilot, they knew the ship's exact tolerances, and they could plot riskier hyperspace paths than any human would dare attempt. IG-88 was confident they had arrived before Boba Fett, if just barely.

Boba Fett's ship, the Slave I, appeared like a projectile from a slingshot snapping out of hyperspace. IG-88C put all his weapons on alert, all his sensors on standby, then rocketed his needle ship to confront the bounty hunter. Thinking he had destroyed IG-88 in the garbage levels of Cloud City, Boba Fett would be astonished to see the assassin droid again.

Logically, IG-88 expected the biological to request further information, to challenge the intruder. Once Fett understood the new situation, he would be forced to bargain with the superior assassin droid, if not surrender utterly.

But Boba Fett reacted with remarkable speed. Without a word or a second of hesitation, the bounty hunter launched every sort of weapon and peeled off in a slick corkscrew maneuver that took him out of the IG-2000's firing path. The Slave I's weapon bolts struck home all at once, pummeling the heavily armored IG-2000.

With a certain measure of embarrassment and shame, IG-88C uploaded his files and sent them to his counterpart an instant before his ship exploded over Tatooine....

IG-88D screamed out of hyperspace, hurtling toward Fett's ship in a brutally precise in-system hyperjump that would have been impossible for any biological pilot.

Before Boba Fett could react, IG-88D fired upon him from behind with concentrated blows that rocked his shields. At the moment IG-88's primary goal was not to obliterate Boba Fett -- though that would be intensely satisfying. He had run simulations to determine the best possible technique to hurt Boba Fett, to humiliate

him -- and he had decided that the best way would be to take his precious bounty, Han Solo, away from him.

Firing repeatedly without the slightest respite, IG-88 infiltrated Boba Fett's comm system and demanded that he surrender Solo. Fett did not respond, again acting irrationally, which made his actions very difficult to comprehend or predict.

As the needle ship roared after him, firing and booming, Boba Fett altered his course on a steep descent directly toward the planet. The full power of his engines drove him at the giant fist of sand below.

IG-88 tried to determine what Fett intended to do, yet could come up with no reasonable solution. He spoke across the comm channel again. "Surrender your prisoner and you have a thirty percent probability of surviving this encounter."

Boba Fett continued to dive down and down and down. Slave I's hull glowed cherry red. The atmosphere of Tatooine clawed against his shields as he streaked lower, picking up inevitable speed.

IG-88 transmitted again. "I am far more capable of withstanding the gravometric pressures than you. This tactic has a zero probability of success."

When Boba Fett again refused to answer, IG-88 increased his speed to tolerance levels, narrowing the gap between his ship and the Slave I. He rode tight in the bowshock from Fett's ship.

But suddenly, in a remarkable move, Boba Fett activated his inertial damping system, slamming his descent to a halt in the atmosphere of Tatooine; the stress and power required for such a maneuver utterly trashed his hyperdrives.

IG-88 zoomed past him, unable to squelch his velocity sufficiently. He brought the IG-2000 to a halt in less than two seconds -- directly in the targeting cross of Boba Fett's ship. The Slave I's ion cannons blasted out with all the remaining power in Fett's engine core, slagging the IG-2000's shields and weapons systems.

Boba Fett activated his tractor beam, grabbing the crippled IG-2000 and drawing it closer, closer to the Slave I like a combat arachnid drawing in its prey. IG-88 looked up to see the barrel of Fett's concussion missile launcher pointed directly at him.

Boba Fett finally responded over the comm system. "The Empire has issued a 'dismantle on sight' order for you, but I wish they offered a higher bounty. You're persistent, but you're not worth much."

IG-88, disbelieving, did not even remember to transmit a full personality backup to Mechis III before it was too late.

Boba Fett launched a full bank of concussion missiles. The second IG-2000 erupted into an incandescent cloud that spread molten spangles across the atmosphere of the desert world.

XIII

Shielded and in radio silence, the decoy Imperial fleet hung in a wasteland of space, a void without stars or planets, nothing the least bit interesting -- except that the real convoy carrying the Death Star's computer core would traverse this sector within one standard hour.

IG-88A captained the decoy fleet waiting in ambush, while his counterparts went off to strike against Boba Fett. He sat in silence aboard the main ship, unconcerned with what IG-88C and D were doing. He had full confidence in their abilities, and Fett would no longer be a problem.

His own primary concern was to become the marvelous new Death Star battlestation. The time was now, the plan was set, and his assault team of stormtrooper droids was ready. The plan had been burned into their primary programming. They would not hesitate.

They waited with mechanical patience in their trap -- and then pounced.

The unsuspecting original fleet -- one heavy long-distance freighter and two escort fighters -- sprang out of hyperspace, piloted by real Imperial stormtroopers, carrying the genuine Death Star computer core. The Imperial ships hesitated, gathering their bearings to make another jump along a different transdimensional pathway.

The moment they saw the decoy fleet waiting for them with weapons powered up and ready to strike, the Imperial commanders must have thought they were seeing sensor reflections of themselves.

IG-88 transmitted his order. "Fire at will."

Ion cannon bursts slammed into the three ships like a tsunami, crippling all three Imperial craft before they had a chance to fire a single shot. The original ships were expendable anyway.

The two Imperial escort ships were irrelevant, and IG-88 ignored them. He used powerful tractor beams to draw his identical freighter up against the real craft, linking hulls with an airtight seal before the droid assault team blasted open the hatches. He didn't dare risk that a sudden explosive decompression might damage the delicate components he needed to inspect.

IG-88 stood at the front of his team of stormtrooper droids. With his vibration sensors and his acoustical pickups, he could hear armored Imperials rushing to defend themselves inside their crippled ship. He waited as a precise munitions droid applied explosives to the expendable ship's hatch. IG-88 didn't even bother to step out of the way.

A flash of light, a burst of noise, a brief ripple of heat, and the hatch to the Imperial freighter buckled inward. IG-88 stormed through, leading his white-armored soldiers like a swashbuckling pirate taking over a treasure-filled ship.

The real Imperial stormtroopers on the other side

fired upon the droid troopers. The armored biologicals shouted confused commands to each other, not understanding what was going on, not comprehending the tactics of their attackers.

Many of the droid troopers were damaged by blaster fire, their white armor buckling and smoking with wounds that would have been fatal on any biological -- but the droids kept up the charge. The Imperial defenses crumbled into a wild firefight -- but IG-88's team maintained their ranks and eliminated any storm-troopers in their way.

Amidst the smoke and fire, shouts and desperate transmissions, IG-88 used his hand lasers to eliminate the enemy, but he did not stay for the main pitched battle. Instead, he clomped through the carnage, intent on reaching the cargo hold where the original Death Star computer core lay waiting for delivery.

IG-88 stood over it, caressing the lumpy component-adorned structure of the long cylinder. Lights blinked, showing its standby readiness. Soon, he would inhabit its mental labyrinths.

IG-88 jacked in, drinking deep the information he needed on how to run the Death Star itself. For all the computing power and for all its size, the Death Star core had been designed with typical human inefficiency. The power available in this thinking apparatus was barely utilized. A minor droid could probably have done the tasks the Death Star core was required to do -- but IG-88 would do so much more. So much more. Perhaps he would even manage to impress the biologicals... before he destroyed them all.

After only a few seconds he stood up, squaring his metal shoulders, content that he had all the information he could possibly need. Taking over the Death Star would be a simple operation, and he would make the battlestation do things even its designers had never conceived.

IG-88 waded slowly through the smoke out of the

cargo bay to see two damaged stormtrooper droids, their white armor blasted away and showing a forest of servomotors and wire-sheathed neurons. They wrestled a struggling, confused, but angry human between them. IG-88 scanned the man, locked his image into data files, and searched. Even from this brief glimpse and for all the vagaries of the human form, IG-88 could see that this man's smell sensor -- the nose, they called it -- was far larger and presumably more efficient than the average biological had.

After a long second of deliberation, IG-88 was able to snap a name to this man's face: Imperial Supervisor Gurdun, the man who had issued the "dismantle on sight" order for the IG assassin droids.

Interesting.

Gurdun struggled as the stormtrooper droids brought him closer, but then the human looked up and saw IG-88. He froze, his mouth open, his nostrils flaring wide enough to park a small one-man flier inside.

"You! I know you," Gurdun said. "You're IG-88, the assassin droid! Am I surprised to see you here. I can't believe it. Do you know how hard it's been to find you?"

IG-88's red optical sensors blinked, but he did not reply.

"I'd recognize you anywhere," Gurdun said again. "I created you. I ordered Holowan Laboratories to begin your design. Don't you have that in your files?"

"Yes," IG-88 said flatly.

"Well, I don't quite understand your purpose here in attacking our ships -- but you certainly shouldn't hurt me. Think about it. Without me, the IG project would never have been funded. It was through my efficient paperwork and politicking that I managed to bring about your creation, despite budget cutbacks and Imperial mismanagement. I wish you hadn't done quite so much, er, damage to the Holowan Laboratories, but I

think we can work something out. We could have a long career together, IG-88. Think of who I am. Don't you have anything to say?"

IG-88 listened to the human babble, applying context filters and determining an appropriate response.

"Thank you," he said.

The droid troops left Imperial Supervisor Gurdun aboard the crippled long-distance freighter among the living and the wounded and the dead. Fires continued to burn in the ventilation shafts, and the engines would never function again.

IG-88 rode in the decoy freighter as they aligned their course and prepared for insertion along the same hyperspace vector the original fleet would have taken. "Have the incinerator mines been placed?" he asked the stormtrooper droids who returned from their airlock expedition to the external hulls.

"Yes," one of the droids said. "Mines emplaced on appropriate hull plates of all three original ships. Everything is ready."

From the pilot compartment of the long-distance hauler, IG-88 watched the ship's battle-scarred counterpart along with its two helpless escorts. He transmitted an activation signal to the nineteen incinerator mines, and all three ships erupted into a white-hot cloud of disintegrating shockwaves. He had to filter the input cables from his optical sensors to keep the intense illumination from overloading his eyes.

At the end, the career of Imperial Supervisor Gurdun was very bright indeed.

XIV

Desperately behind schedule on the new Death Star, Moff Jerjerrod did not have time to look closely at the arriving computer core and its stormtrooper escort. In-

stead, he rejoiced in the new complement of workers who came like saviors to the construction site.

Jerjerrod's eyes were round and brown, his demeanor eager to comply -- but he did not know how he could possibly accomplish the demands placed on his personnel. Unfortunately, neither Vader nor the Emperor were interested in excuses, and Jerjerrod did not wish to discover how they would express their displeasure.

The stormtroopers opened the cargo compartment of the newly docked long-range freighter, wrestling out the heavy computer core without so much as a grunt of effort. They moved without complaining, without speaking to each other. Such professionals. Their training was so precise, their abilities so superior that they operated as a team with almost mechanical efficiency.

Jerjerrod had cursed Imperial Supervisor Gurdun for deciding at the last moment not to accompany the computer shipment -- but then he sighed with relief. The last thing the Moff needed in the midst of all his other problems was yet another paper-pusher to complicate the construction details.

He stood in his smart olive-gray uniform, watching the new stormtrooper escorts. "Attention!" he snapped. "Get that computer core installed as soon as possible. For the next several months our schedule is exceedingly tight, with no tolerance for delay. We must redouble our efforts. These orders come directly from Lord Vader."

Jerjerrod clasped his hands behind his back. The new stormtroopers marched with clean, rapid efficiency. He wished all of his workers could be so dedicated to the Imperial cause.

The blackness of sensor deprivation was distressing, but unavoidable. Humans would have called it "unconsciousness" -- but when IG-88 finally reawoke after a

month or so of stasis, he found himself in an immense new world of data input.

He had left his clunky body behind with the other droids -- the last of his model -- and now he was the Death Star, the same powerful and relentless and efficient mind residing within an extraordinarily powerful new body, a completely different configuration. IG-88, whose prior experience had been entirely within his massive humanoid shape, was not quite as mobile... yet. But he experienced new input through a million additional sensors, automated extensions of himself that were connected to the Death Star's computer core.

He could feel the power like a chained supernova burning at the heart of his central reactor furnace. The sensation was marvelous. He took great satisfaction in seeing just how easily all of his plans were reaching fruition. Soon, his droid revolution could proceed.

As the days passed -- time meant nothing to him any more, since he could slow it down or speed it up at will -- IG-88 pondered the galactic political situation. He observed the petty struggles, bemused at the insignificant battles of these tiny biological people. Their Empire, their Rebellion... their very species would be merely a footnote to a small history file in long-term storage once IG-88's revolution was achieved -- and that time was arriving with the speed of an approaching meteor as these biologicals scurried about to complete the Death Star construction -- which would signal their own doom.

He found that amusing as well.

Through his myriad sensor eyes IG-88 continued to watch: In the interior decks of the Death Star the construction activities proceeded at such a rapid pace that all safety doublechecks and restraints had been eliminated to improve speed. In the frenzy of activity, progress continued, although many of the teams didn't know what their counterparts were doing.

In one large storage bay for spare components, the

repulsorlifts failed on a heavy cargo crane. A thick-walled containment box weighing dozens of metric tons fell from its grip, smashing down on one of IG-88's droid stormtroopers who had the bad luck of standing within its shadow. The heavy box crushed down on the white-armored legs of the stormtrooper. The walls of the cargo box split, dumping gears and components that bounced and plinked on the metal floor decks.

The droid stormtrooper's first major mistake was that he did not cry out in pain as even the best-trained biological stormtrooper would have done. When the crew managed to get the crane's repulsorlifts functioning again, yanking the enormous box off the floor as it dropped loose parts, other workers rushed forward to help the fallen stormtrooper.

The damaged droid used his armored arms to lever himself up to a sitting position and to scramble backward, but he could not hide the sparking, sizzling servomotors and micropistons exposed from the split plasteel greaves.

"Hey! He's a droid!" one of the crew bosses shouted, his face turning pale and pasty. "Look, that stormtrooper's a droid."

Luckily, the self-destruct sequence activated as it was programmed to. The droid stormtrooper obliterated all evidence and conveniently removed every one of the witnesses in a single explosion....

IG-88 looked out through the eyes of security cameras in Moff Jerjerrod's private office. As Jerjerrod stared down at the report on the datapad in disbelief, he looked as if he was torn between wanting to scream at someone or simply to burst into tears.

The harried Moff swallowed, and his voice sounded watery. "How could a cargo crane just mysteriously explode? How could one accident take out an entire handling crew?" He drew in a deep breath, swallowing. His lieutenant stood stiffly, as if assuming his rigid atten-

tion to military protocol would earn him forgiveness for bringing such terrible news.

Jerjerrod looked at his Death Star schedule and pointed to the timeline with shaking fingers as he bemoaned yet another loss, another setback....

When Emperor Palpatine finally arrived at the new Death Star, cloaked in black and walling like a human spider, he was accompanied by a ridiculous array of red-armored Imperial guards, crack stormtroopers, simpering cowled advisors, and shrouded in an aura of respect and fear that he most certainly did not deserve.

No biological did.

From his hiding place in the Death Star's brain, IG-88 took particular pleasure in spying on this despicable, shriveled human who seemed to think he had invincible power. Everyone treated the Emperor as if he was supremely important, much to IG-88's amusement.

As the entire Imperial fleet arrived, waiting in ambush for an expected Rebel attack, IG-88 watched the Emperor plotting and scheming, trying to outthink the Rebels, outmaneuver them. Palpatine believed he was so smart, so superior, that IG-88 had no choice but to briefly demonstrate the man's impotence in the grand scheme.

In his darkened observation chamber with its wall of transparisteel windows, the Emperor sat back in a rotating throne, staring out into the darkness of space. He remained that way for hours at a time, but occasionally he got up and moved about, going to check on troop movements, to discuss preparations with Darth Vader.

IG-88 silently watched the Emperor scuttle toward the turbolift that would take him elsewhere in the Death Star. Red Imperial guards stood at attention with quiet efficiency, so silent they might have been droids as well.

As the Emperor approached the sliding doorway,

however -- just for fun -- IG-88 triggered the hydraulic systems to slam the doors in front of Palpatine's face, sealing them shut. The Emperor blinked his yellow eyes in surprise and reared back. In consternation, Palpatine tried to open the turbolift doors, punching a useless override button. Then, to IG-88's surprise, he applied some indefinable, intangible force to push the metal plates apart, requiring IG-88 to increase the hold on the hydraulic pistons.

The red Imperial guards snapped into motion, sensing a great anomaly. IG-88 found it most entertaining to watch the powerful Emperor and his bodyguards unable to perform a task as simple as opening a door.

Finally, IG-88 let the doors pop open. The Emperor and the Imperial guard looked around in confusion. Palpatine stared up at the ceiling as if trying to sense something, but he did not understand what had happened.

None of them would understand, until it was too late.

When the much-vaunted Rebel attack finally arrived, when the secret commando mission knocked out the energy shield projected from the sanctuary moon below, IG-88 sat back -- metaphorically -- and observed the unfolding battle.

The Rebel fleet was pitifully insignificant against the arrayed force of Imperial Star Destroyers and the impressive Super Star Destroyer Executor. IG-88 still admired the precision and sleek lines of the Executor, but even the great battleship was a pale shadow to the might he now possessed in his incarnation as the Death Star.

The fleet maneuverings were so obvious, and the strike forces commanded by biological fighters seemed so clumsy as they cruised in to attack the Death Star. The Rebels couldn't hope to win.

The Emperor himself thought it would be a devastating surprise that the Death Star's superlaser actually

functioned, and IG-88 wanted to fire it with great glee. But IG-88 viewed the entire attack as a bothersome annoyance, little gnats pestering him when he had so much else to do, so many plans to set in motion. He resented it mostly for the delay it would bring to the Imperial construction crews. Once the Death Star was complete, he could take over the galaxy for droids everywhere.

The Emperor busied himself with a minor personal conflict between Darth Vader and another biological in his private observation chamber while the space battle raged around them.

IG-88 took control of the Death Star's superlaser, playing along and firing when the Death Star gunners sent their signals. Many times their aiming points were slightly off, their coordinates skewed -- and IG-88 modified the targeting mechanism, guaranteeing that the superlaser struck its intended victim each time. He enjoyed blowing up the Mon Calamari star cruisers, the hospital ship, the Rebel frigates -- but it seemed a waste of his energies. Why stop there? The superlaser could blow up entire planets infested with biologicals.

Now, though, as IG-88 obliterated parts of the Rebel fleet, he realized that he had been unnecessarily delaying his plans for revolution. The remainder of work on the Death Star was merely cosmetic improvement, completing the outer shell so that the living quarters could be pressurized, life support systems could be installed -- but IG-88 needed none of those. He wanted no biologicals swarming about in his outer skin.

He realized with an elation almost as great as the thrill he had felt upon firing his laser for the first time that he no longer needed to wait. There was no point in delaying. The Empire and the Rebels were wrapped up in their own little conflict, and he would strike a surprise, mortal blow.

Now was the time to launch the droid revolution, in the midst of this biological squabble. The machines

manufactured on Mechis III had spread to many worlds in the galaxy. The uprising would take civilizations by surprise. Once IG-88's initial coded order was transmitted, they could upload their sentience programming into existing droids; with the speed of a flashfire, they could convert new recruits, double and triple their numbers.

IG-88 alone had the activation signal that could fly like a knife blade across the HoloNet channels and awaken his invincible army of droids. He could wish for no better opportunity than now, no greater power. He would finish mopping up this minor conflict around Endor, destroy the Rebel ships and then before the Imperials could react, he would strike down the Star Destroyers as well, one after another, in a swath of death and destruction.

The Rebel ships continued to harass him, passing far inside the targeting radius of his superlaser. They were too small to bother with, though they flew into his open superstructure toward the simmering furnace of his reactor core. The Rebels were like parasites, and they annoyed him.

But it did not matter. They would be dealt with any minute now. The end of all biological life forms was at hand.

Out in the space battle, the magnificent Super Star Destroyer Executor was wounded, beginning to careen out of control through the fleet.

The tiny Rebel ships streaked toward IG-88's reactor core as if they had a chance of succeeding, and he contented himself with his own private triumphant thoughts.

I think, therefore I am.

I destroy, therefore I endure.