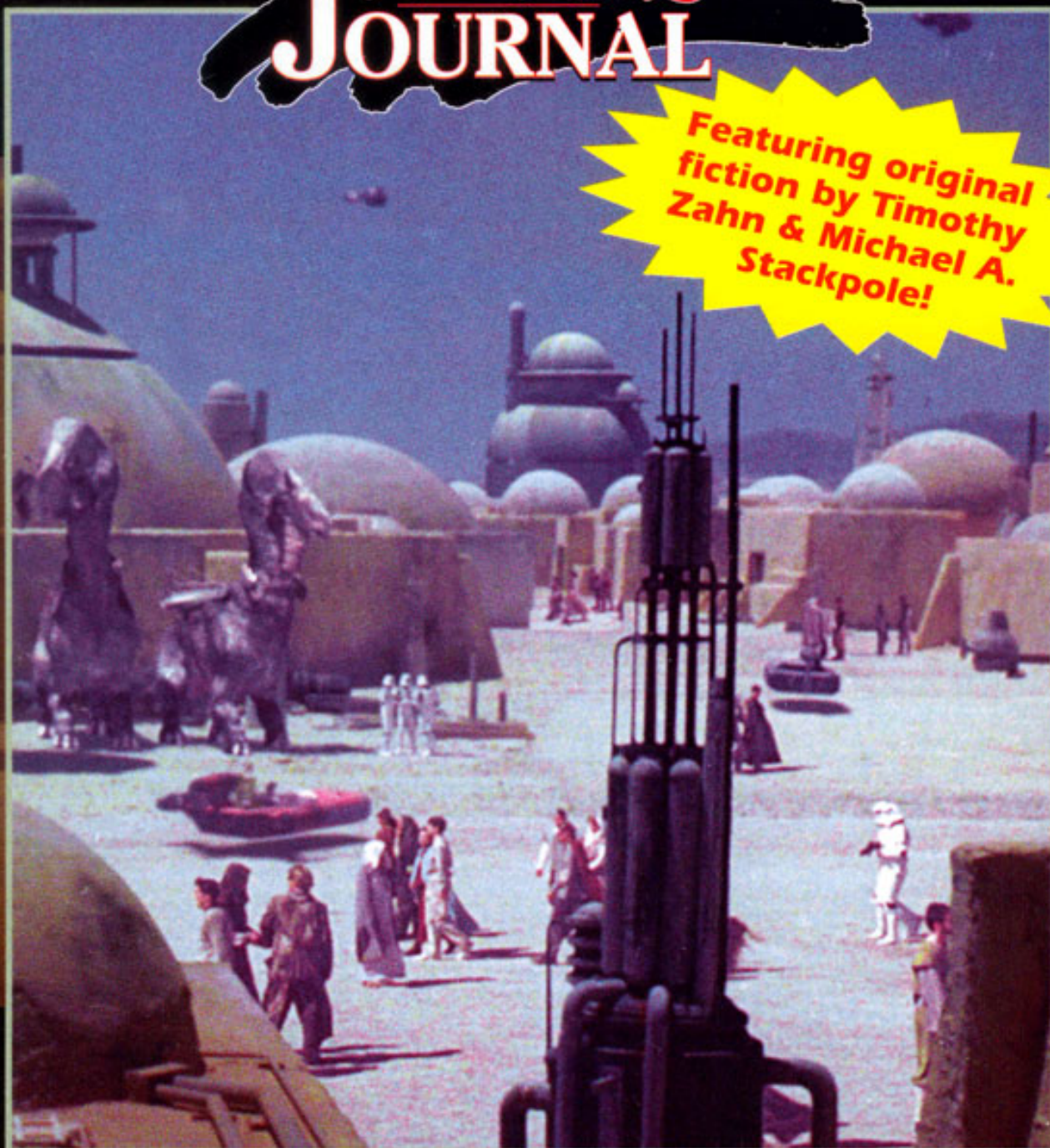


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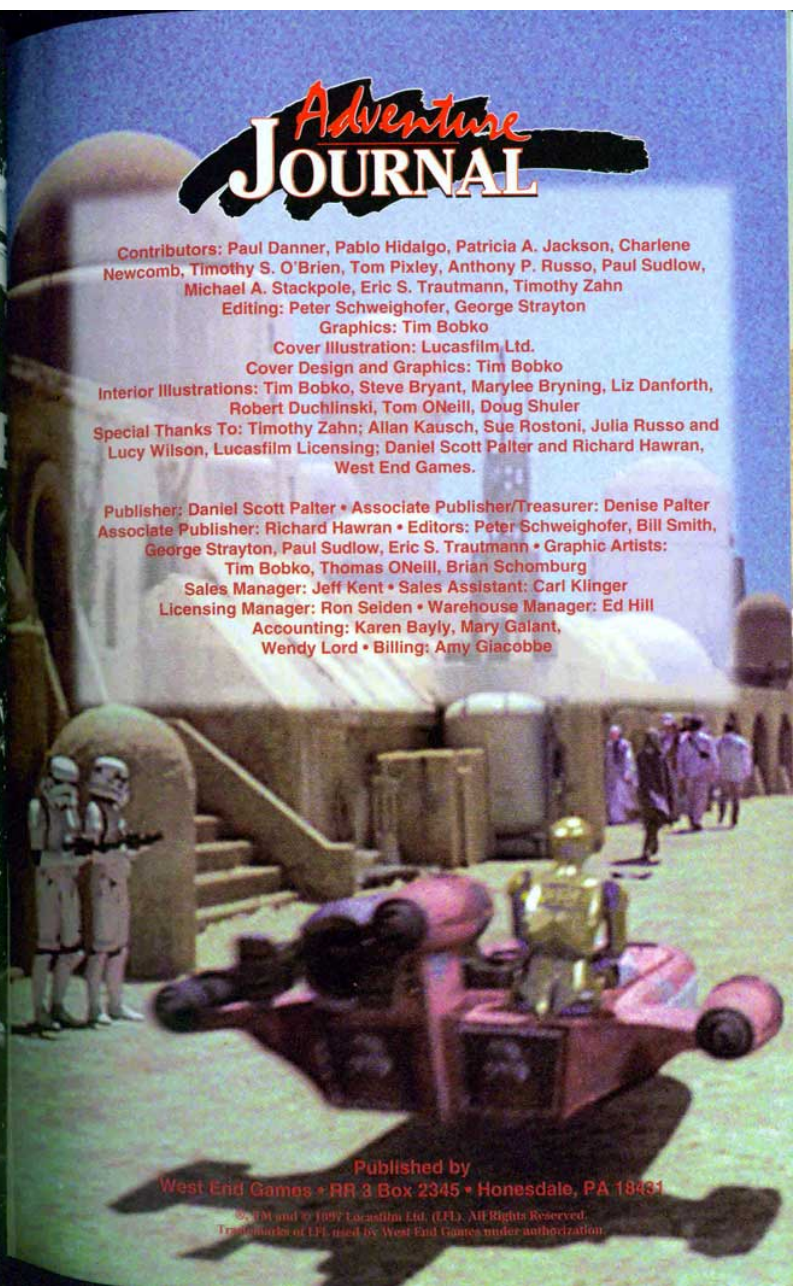
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Adventure JOURNAL

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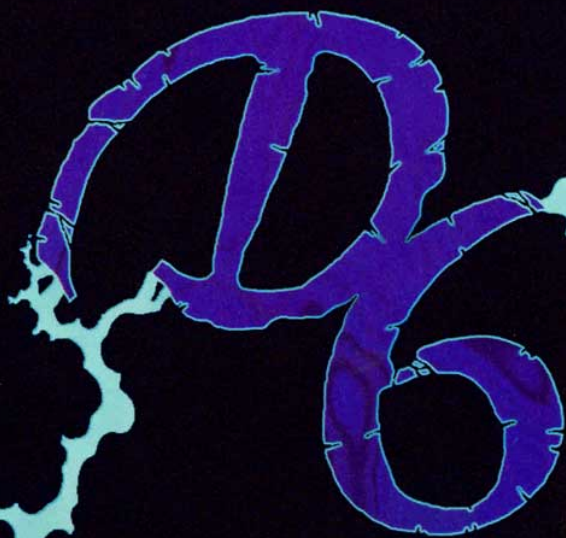
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INFINITE POSSIBILITIES...



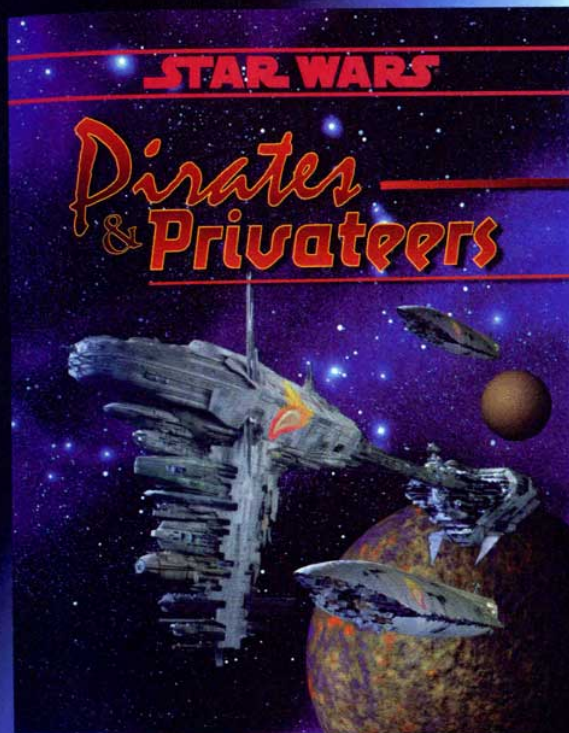
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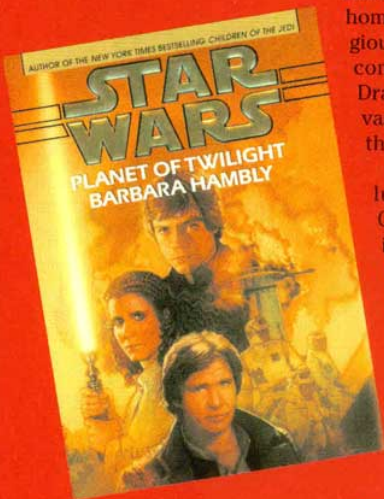
NEW HORIZONS

Darkness Settles on the Planet of Twilight

Bantam Spectra publishing adds another exciting *Star Wars* novel to its popular line with the release of *Planet of Twilight* by veteran fiction author Barbara Hambly (who also penned the *New York Times* best-selling *Children of the Jedi*).

It all begins on a barren backwater world called Renat Chorios—once a dreaded prison colony, now home to the Therans, a fanatic religious cult. To this exiled world has come the ruthless warlord Seti Draconis, who seeks to exploit the vast crystalline deserts that cover the planet's desolate surface.

The first step in his plan is to lure Princess Leia to Renat Chorios for a diplomatic meeting, only to hold her hostage in his isolated fortress. His ultimate goal is to destroy the Therans, take over the planet, and sell its valuable crystals to the remnants of the Empire, who will use the crystals to develop unstoppable deep-space missiles that will turn the tide of war against



NEW HORIZONS

the New Republic. With Leia as his hostage, there is nothing to stop him.

Meanwhile, Luke lands on Renat Chorios in search of his lost love, Callista, only to discover that any use of the Force has unexpectedly deadly consequences. To make matters worse, a plague is decimating the New Republic fleet as it faces attack from overwhelming Imperial forces led by Moff Getelles and his henchman, Admiral Larm.

As Han, Chewie, and Lando set out from Coruscant on a desperate rescue mission, as Leia seeks to escape the evil Draconis, and as Luke searches through a world torn by plague and riots to find Callista, the planet begins to reveal its unspeakable secret: a long dormant sentient life-form kept in check for centuries is now threatening to gain dominance over the New Republic, the Empire, and the entire galaxy!

Planet of Twilight is a dark epic chronicle, a visionary tale of courage, betrayal, and survival in the true *Star Wars* tradition. Packed with action, suspense, and adventure, it is a novel that no fan of this best-selling series will want to miss.

Planet of Twilight will be in bookstores everywhere this April.

The Genesis of a Hero

Before the legends...

Before the triumphs...

A young man's quest begins!

The first book of the *Han Solo Trilogy*, *The Paradise Snare*, arrives in stores this coming autumn. Written by A.C. Crispin, this series explores the life of the most famous smuggler in the galaxy before he met Luke and Leia.

Before *Star Wars: A New Hope*, before the titanic battles that freed the galaxy from the iron grip of the Empire, here is the never-before-told story of the young Han Solo. In Book One of this exciting new trilogy, the famed rogue, con man, smuggler, and thief struggles to survive on a sinister world where the chief export is slavery.

He was a child without a past, a Corellian street urchin, abandoned, foraging for scraps of food, when the cruel Garris Shrike whisked him away to a nomadic band of spacefaring criminals. Now, years later, chafing under Shrike's sadistic tyranny, driven by



NEW HORIZONS

dreams of adventure and glory, Han fights his way free, his goal to become an Imperial Navy pilot. But first he needs hands-on experience flying spacecraft, and for that he takes a job on the planet Ylesia—a steaming world of religious fanaticism, illicit drugs, and alluring sensuality...where dreams are destroyed and escape is impossible.

Star Wars Roleplaying for Beginners

Match wits against an Imperial probe droid. Fight your way out of a besieged Rebel base. Take on an Imperial Star Destroyer with a handful of starfighters and a heavily armed freighter. Liberate an entire planet from the Empire's tyranny.

You can do all this and more with the *Star Wars Introductory Adventure Game*. The game includes everything you need to create your own adventures in the *Star Wars* universe—and it teaches the rules while you play. The *Players' Booklet* shows how to create and use *Star Wars* game characters, and the *Narrator's Booklet* demonstrates how to run exciting *Star Wars* missions.

The introductory adventure game keeps true to the spirit of the roleplaying game, but has simplified rules for ease of understanding and play. The product is targeted toward media fans who want to participate in roleplaying games but have found it difficult to get started.

The deluxe box set includes:

- A *Players' Booklet* that begins teaching the rules as soon as you start reading.
- 14 *Character Templates* you can choose from to customize and play, from smugglers and Wookiees to Jedi and Rebel troopers.
- A *Narrator's Booklet* with information on the *Star Wars* galaxy.
- An *Adventure Book* in which you help free a planet from the iron grip of the Empire.
- 64 *Color Cards* showing characters and technology used in *Star Wars* adventures.
- *Cardstock Stand-up Characters* to help play out the action.
- 4 *Map Sheets* illustrating popular *Star Wars* locations, such as a Rebel base, a starport, a docking bay, and a cantina.
- 6 *Dice*.



NEW HORIZONS

The *Star Wars Introductory Adventure Game* retails for \$19.95 and will be available in bookstores, hobby shops, and game stores across the country this Spring.

Shadows of the Empire Returns

The *New York Times* best-selling novel *Shadows of the Empire* is now available in a paperback edition. The story chronicles the events that took place between the movies *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*.

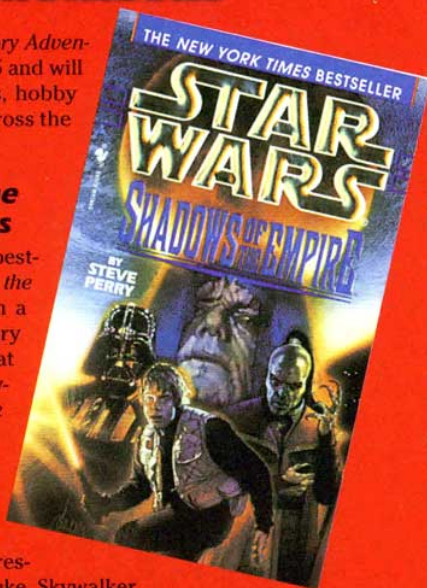
It is a time of crisis. Han Solo, frozen in carbonite, is being taken to the vile gangster Jabba the Hutt. As Princess Leia mounts a rescue mission including Luke Skywalker, Lando Calrissian, and a brilliant young pilot, Darth Vader pits himself against a cunning and ruthless rival. Xizor is the leader of a powerful crime syndicate who seeks to supplant Vader for the favor of their mutual master, the dreaded Emperor. Their target: Luke Skywalker. Suddenly Luke finds himself the potential prize of the two most evil entities in the galaxy—one who wants him alive...and one who wants him dead.

Shadows of the Empire retails for \$5.99 and goes on sale in March 1997.

Star Wars Classics from LucasArts

LucasArts Entertainment Company has announced the release of one of the greatest game compilations in the galaxy, The LucasArts Archives Vol. II: The Star Wars Collection™. As formidable as the Rebel Alliance, the collection includes three classic *Star Wars* titles: *Rebel Assault*™, *Rebel Assault II*™, *The Hidden Empire*™, and TIE Fighter Collector's CD-ROM™ as well as *Dark Forces*™ Sampler Edition.

The package is highlighted by the bonus multimedia CD-ROM,



NEW HORIZONS

Making Magic: A Behind the Scenes Look at the Making of the *Star Wars Trilogy Special Edition*. The disc offers exclusive interviews with George Lucas and a limited sneak preview of the digital enhancements from the *Star Wars Trilogy Special Edition*, in theaters in early 1997.

Also From West End

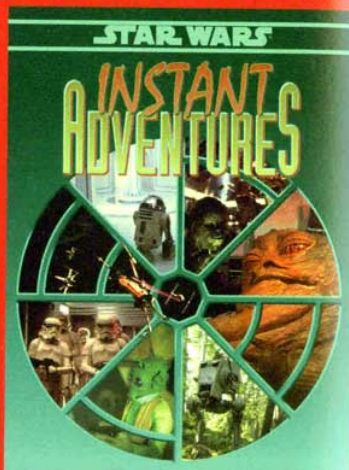
Instant Adventures

Instant Adventures is a collection of scenarios that can be run at a moment's notice, and easily integrated into an ongoing *Star Wars* roleplaying campaign! Launch a daring sneak attack on an Imperial sensor complex to bring down a system-wide blockade, smuggle a wounded Hutt crimelord off-planet, rescue a missing Rebel spy, match wits with cunning pirates, or play a deadly game of hide-and-seek with the dreaded Imperial Storm Commandos on an unexplored world ...

Each Instant Adventure features a "Quick-start" outline that allows game-masters to run these scenarios quickly and easily, as well as scores of player handouts and maps designed to enhance game play. In addition, *Instant Adventures* contains 32 color Adventure Cards that illustrate many of the ships, vehicles, creatures, aliens and characters featured in the scenarios.

Whether you are battling pirates in the cold reaches of the Outer Rim Territories, or engaging Imperial forces on an occupied world, launching a *Star Wars* roleplaying campaign has never been easier!

Instant Adventures retails for \$15.00.



NEW HORIZONS

Pirates and Privateers

Command a ragged band of pirates, lead a daring and disciplined crew of commerce raiders against the forces of the Empire, or launch devastating attacks against New Republic shipping as an Imperial privateer. This 128-page supplement gives players and gamemasters all the information needed to run a privateer campaign, featuring scores of new character templates, equipment, ship modification guidelines, game-master characters and a detailed index to pirate organizations, ships, and shadowports. Explore the lawless fringe of the *Star Wars* universe where only the bold survive!

Pirates and Privateers retails for \$18.00.



No Disintegrations

Attention Bounty Hunters!

Friendships betrayed, loves lost, belongings stolen ...

Those who have been wronged want justice. And they are willing to pay handsomely to get that justice.

That's where you come in. You're a bounty hunter, ready for battle and afraid of no one. You earn your living by tracking down those who desperately want not to be found. Cunning and dangerous, you are not to be trifled with. But are you good enough to stop these wanted criminals?

No Disintegrations is a collection of adventures designed specifically for bounty hunter player characters. The 96-page book retails for \$15.00.

FEATURED ARTIST

ROBERT DUCHLINSKI

The *Official Star Wars Adventure Journal* receives artwork in all formats—pen-and-ink, markers, or paint. Since only sixteen of the *Journal's* 288 pages are full-color, some full-color work must be reproduced in grayscale.

The "Featured Artist" section gives readers a chance to enjoy some of the artwork from previous *Journals* in its original full color, complete with information about the artist and the articles the pieces illustrated.

Robert Duchlinski has created art for several *Star Wars* products, including *Fantastic Technology*, *Heroes and Rogues*, and several issues of *The Official Star Wars Adventure Journal*. The selected pieces featured here first appeared in "Smuggler's Log" from *Journal* issue 11.

Platt Okeefe, veteran smuggler, has seen her share of trouble—and lived to warn others about it.



In his spare time, Robert enjoys illustrating and escaping into the *Star Wars* and TSR realms through various roleplaying games and novels. He is a graduate of the duCret School of Art and Design, and hopes to someday become a special effects artist for Industrial Light and Magic.

Kuuvat, Pok Nar-Ten's chief Klatooinan enforcer, is in charge of overseeing security for all facilities, hiring guards and mercenaries, and contracting bounties on errant and indebted guild members.

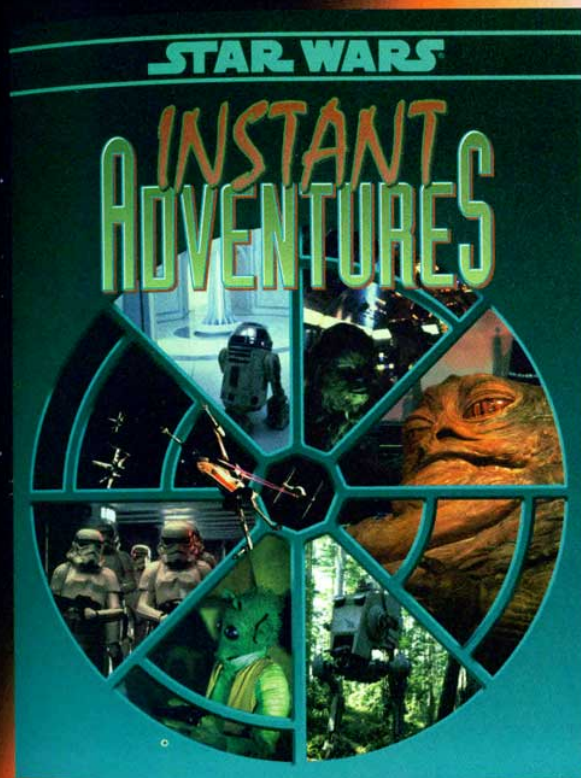
The Advoszse Gjeel Dhantra, Pok Nar-Ten's major-domo, is a very orderly and control-oriented assistant and second-in-command. Pok trusts him like a brother.





Pok Nar-Ten, Nimbanese boss of the Klatooian Trade Guild, is little more than a petty credit-pusher for the Hutts. He bases his operations in Boztrok starport in the Outer Rim Territories, not far from Hutt Space.

Nazrita Villache is Pok Nar-Ten's chief technician, and is responsible for maintaining, repairing, and modifying the various light freighters the Klatooian Trade Guild boss sells to his indentured smugglers.



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SIDETRIIP

PART ONE

by Timothy Zahn

The hazy edge of the planet was just disappearing from beneath the *Hopskip*'s control room viewport, and Haber Trell was trying to nurse a little more power from the ship's as-always finicky engines, when his partner finally reappeared from her tour aft. "Took you long enough," Trell commented as she dropped into the copilot seat beside him. "Any trouble?"

"No more than usual," Maranne Darmic told him, digging a hand underneath the silvered clasp tying her dark-blond hair back out of the way and scratching vigorously at her scalp. "The cargo straps managed to hold through that classic signature liftoff of yours. I'd say we didn't get rid of all the itch mites in the hold, though."

"Never mind the vermin," Trell growled. Next time they had a twenty-grade unbalanced cargo, he promised himself darkly, he'd make *her* do the liftoff. See how smoothly *she* managed it. "How about our passengers?"

Maranne sniffed. "I thought you didn't want to hear about vermin."

"Watch it, kiddo," Trell warned. "They're paying good money for us to smuggle these blasters out to Derra IV."

"And obviously don't trust us ten centimeters with them," Maranne countered. "They wouldn't be babysitting them like this if they did."

Trell shrugged. "Can't say I really blame them for being cautious. Ever since that big defeat or whatever it was out in the Yavin system, the Empire's been spitting fire in fifteen directions at once. I've heard that some of the independents hauling Rebellion stuff decided it was safer to take the advance money, dump the cargo,

Color illustration by Matt Busch

MATT
BUSCH

and burn space for better havens."

"Yeah, well, I don't like hauling for desperate people," Maranne said, shifting the focal point of her scratching to a spot farther down the back of her neck. "They make me nervous."

"If they weren't desperate, they wouldn't be paying so well," Trell pointed out reasonably. "Don't worry, this'll be the last time we have to deal with them."

"I've heard *that* before," Maranne said, sniffing again. The proximity-sensor alert began to warble, and she leaned forward to key for a readout. "Sure, this'll pay for the engine upgrades you want; but then you'll want sensor upgrades, and—"

She broke off. "What?" Trell demanded.

"Star Destroyer," she said grimly, activating the weapons section of her board and keying in the power boosters. "Coming up fast behind us."

"Terrific," Trell growled, checking the nav computer. If they could escape to lightspeed...but no, the ship was still too close to the planet. "What's their vector?"

"Straight toward us," Maranne told him. "I suppose it's too late to dump the cargo and try to look innocent."

"Freighter *Hopskip*, this is Captain Niriz of the Imperial Star Destroyer *Admonitor*," a gruff voice boomed from the speaker. "I'd like a word with you aboard my ship, if I may."

The last word was punctuated by a single gentle shiver running through the deck beneath them as a tractor beam locked on. "Yeah, I'd say it's definitely too late to dump the cargo," Trell sighed. "Let's hope they're just on a fishing expedition."

He keyed for transmission. "This is Haber Trell aboard the *Hopskip*," he said. "We'd be honored to speak with you, Captain."



"Well," Captain Niriz said, his voice echoing across the vast emptiness of the hangar deck as he eyed the four beings standing in front of him. "Most interesting. Our records show the *Hopskip* as having two crew members, not four." His gaze paused on Riiij Winward. "Newly hired, are you?"

"Our previous ship had to leave Tramanos in something of a hurry," Riiij told him, striving to keep his voice casual. The fake ID the Rebellion had provided him was a good one, but if the Imperials

decided to dig past it they would undoubtedly come up with his recent connection with the Mos Eisley police on Tatooine. That wasn't a connection he was anxious for them to find. "We needed a ride to Shibric," he continued, "and since Captain Trell was going that way, he was kind enough to offer us passage."

"For a hefty fee, I imagine," Niriz said, his eyes shifting to the muscular Tunroth standing at Riiij's right. "Rare to see a Tunroth in these parts. You're a certified Hunter, I presume?"

"*Shturlan*," Rathe Palror rumbled, his voice almost subsonic.

"That's a twelfth-class Hunter," Riiij translated, trying to draw Niriz's attention back to him. Palror's distinguished service with Churhee's Riflemen would raise even more eyebrows than Riiij's own record if the Imperials found it.

"Excellent," Niriz said. "A Hunter's talents may prove useful on this mission."

At Riiij's left, Trell cleared his throat. "Mission?" he asked carefully.

"Yes," Niriz gestured, and a lieutenant standing beside him stepped forward and offered Trell a datapad. "I want you to take a cargo to Corellia for me."

"Excuse me?" Trell asked carefully as he took the datapad. "You want *me* to—?"

"I need a civilian freighter for this job," Niriz said. His voice was gruff, but Riiij could hear a distinct undertone of distaste. "I don't have one. You do. I also don't have time to locate someone else to do the job. You're here. You're it."

Riiij craned his neck to look over Trell's shoulder at the datapad, his earlier trepidation about their IDs and cargo giving way to cautious excitement. For a Star Destroyer captain to ask for help of any sort—especially from a scruffy civilian freighter pilot—was practically unheard of. It implied urgency and desperation; and anything that bothered a senior Imperial officer that much was definitely something a good Rebel agent ought to look into. "What do you think?" he prompted.

Trell shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "It'll throw our schedule all to blazes and back."

Riiij ran a series of highly vulgar words through his mind, making sure the frustration didn't show on his face. Trell, unfortunately, was *not* a Rebel agent, good or otherwise, and he clearly wanted nothing to do with any of this. "It wouldn't take all that long," he cajoled carefully. "And all good citizens have a duty to help out"

"No," Trell said firmly, offering the datapad back to the lieutenant. "I'm sorry, Captain, but we just don't have time. Our cargo's due on Shibrice—"

"Your cargo consists of six hundred cases of Pashkin sausages," Niriz interrupted coldly. "I presume you're aware that the governor has recently decreed that all foodstuff exports now require an Imperial license."

Trell's mouth dropped open a couple of millimeters. "That's impossible," he said. "I mean, the inspectors didn't say anything about that."

"Just how recent was this decree?" Maranne asked suspiciously.

Niriz gave her a thin smile. "Approximately ten minutes ago."

Rijz felt his stomach tighten. Urgency and desperation, indeed. "Off-hand, I'd say we've been set up," he murmured to Trell.

Niriz's eyes flicked to Rijz, returned to Trell. "I am, however, prepared to waive that requirement this one time," he continued. "Provided you're prepared in turn to deliver your sausages a little late."

"As opposed to not delivering them at all?" Trell countered.

Niriz shrugged. "Something like that."

Trell looked at Maranne, who shrugged. "It's a two-day round trip to Corellia from here," she said. "Add in delivery time, and we're talking three days, tops. It'll be a scramble, but our schedule can probably absorb that."

"Not that we have much choice in the matter," Trell looked back at Niriz. "I guess we'd be delighted to help you out, Captain. What's the cargo, and when do we leave?"

"The cargo is two hundred small boxes," Niriz said. "That's all you need to know about it. As for departure, you'll leave as soon as your sausages are offloaded and the new cargo put aboard."

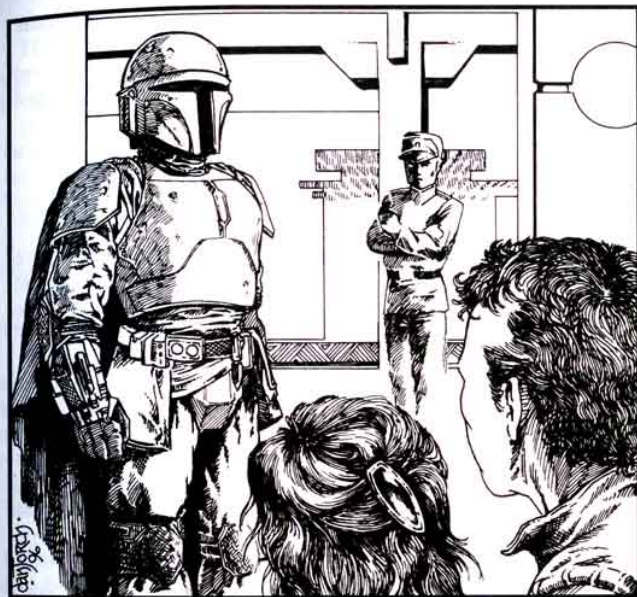
At Rijz's side, Palror rumbled again, and Rijz had to fight to keep his own face expressionless. If some bored Imperial took it into his head to poke around beneath the top three layers of sausages in each box...

"Don't worry, we'll keep them cool," Niriz promised. "There won't be any spoilage."

"I'm sure they'll be safe," Trell said. "Where does this cargo of your's go?"

"Your guide will fill you in on those details," Niriz said, gesturing behind them. Rijz turned to look—

And felt the breath catch in his throat. Stepping around the stern



of the *Hopskip* toward them, his stained Mandalorian armor glittering in the overhead light—

Trell swore under his breath. "Boba Fett."

"It's not Fett," Niriz corrected. "Merely, shall we say, an admirer of his."

"A former admirer," the armored figure corrected, his voice dark and muffled. "The name is Jodo Kast. And I'm better than Fett."

"Not that that means much," Niriz said, his lip twisting. "I've always found that a competent stormtrooper could handle any three bounty hunters without working up a sweat."

"Don't push it, Niriz," Kast warned. "Right now you need me more than I need this job."

"I need you less than you might think," Niriz retorted. "Certainly less than *you* need an Imperial pardon for that mess you left on Borkyne—"

"Gentlemen, please," Trell jumped in hastily. "I'm a businessman, with a schedule to keep. Whatever your differences, I'm sure you can lay them aside until this job is finished."

Niriz was still glowering, but he gave a reluctant nod. "You're

right, Merchant. Fine. You and your crew can rest in the ready room over there until the cargo's been transferred. As for you—"

He leveled a finger at Kast. "I'd like to see you in the bay control office. There are a few things I want to make sure you understand."

Kast nodded gravely. "Of course. Lead the way."



Niriz stepped into the bay control office, the armored figure striding in right behind him. The door slid closed; and at long last Niriz could let the unnatural stiffness drain out of his posture. "I'm afraid I'm not very good at this, sir," he apologized. "I hope I did all right."

"You did just fine, Captain," the other assured him, reaching up to twist his helmet free and pull it off. "Between this armor and your performance all four of them are completely convinced that I'm Jodo Kast."

"I hope so, sir," Niriz said, his stomach tight with concern as he gazed at those glowing red eyes. "Admiral...I have to say one last time that I don't think you should do this. At least not personally."

"Your concern is noted," Grand Admiral Thrawn said, running a gauntleted hand through his blue-black hair. "And appreciated, as well. But this is something I can't delegate to anyone else."

Niriz shook his head. "I wish I could say I understood."

"You will," Thrawn promised. "Assuming this plays out as anticipated, you'll have the entire story when I return."

Niriz smiled, thinking about all the campaigns he and the Grand Admiral had been through together out in the Unknown Regions. "When *hasn't* something you planned gone as anticipated?" he asked dryly.

Thrawn smiled faintly in return. "Any number of times, Captain," he said. "Fortunately, I've usually been able to improvise an alternate approach."

"That you have, sir," Niriz sighed. "I still wish you'd reconsider. We could put one of my stormtroopers in the Mandalorian armor, and you could direct him by comlink from somewhere nearby."

Thrawn shook his head. "Too slow and awkward. Besides, Thyne's fortress will certainly have a full-spectrum surveillance set up. They'd pick up any such transmission and either tap in or jam it."

Niriz took a deep breath. "Yes, sir."

Thrawn smiled again. "Don't worry, Captain, I'll be fine. Don't forget, there's an Imperial garrison nearby. If necessary, I can always call on them for help."

He slid the helmet back over his head and fastened it in place. "I'd better go supervise the cargo transfer—we wouldn't want Merchant Trell's precious sausages to be damaged. I'll see you in a few days."

"Yes, sir," Niriz said. "Good luck, Admiral."



It was called Treasure Ship Row, and it was billed as the most exotic and eclectic trading bazaar anywhere in the Empire. Dozens of booths and shops of every size and description ran its length, with hundreds more nestled up against its edges, weaving in and out of Coronet City proper. Humans and aliens sat at open-air counters or stood beside doorways, hawking their wares to the thousands of beings jostling their way through the narrow streets.

A vibrant, exciting place; but for Trell, a bit intimidating as well. The merchant part of him was intrigued by the range of merchandise available, as well as by the variety of potential customers an enterprising dealer could sell those goods to. But at the same time the part of him that had driven him into the isolation of space in the first place felt distinctly ill at ease in the middle of such crowds.

Maranne, walking beside him, didn't seem to feel any such discomfort. Neither did the two Rebel agents, striding along behind him. As for Kast, in the lead, he doubted any of them could tell what he was feeling. Or cared, for that matter.

"Where exactly are we going?" Maranne asked, taking an extra long step to get in close behind Kast.

"This way," Kast said, veering through the crowd toward the side.

The others followed, and a moment later all five were standing in the narrow walkway between two shuttered booths. "Here?" Trell demanded.

"The booth you want is five ahead on the left," Kast told them. "Curio shop—owner's named Sajsh. You—" he pointed a gloved finger at Trell—"will tell him you have a cargo for Borbor Crisk and ask for delivery instructions."

"What about the rest of us?" Riij asked.

"You'll go out first," Kast said. "Stay out of the conversation, but watch and listen."

Trell looked out into the flow of the crowd, a shiver running down his neck. Something about this didn't feel right, but it was too late to back out now. "Maranne, make sure you're where you can cover me," he told her.

"There will be no shooting," Kast assured him.

"Glad to hear it," Maranne said. "You don't mind if I cover him anyway?"

Kast's invisible eyes seemed to bore into hers through the helmet visor. "As you wish," he said. "All of you: move."

Wordlessly, the others filed out into the crowd, Kast bringing up the rear. Trell gave them a count of fifty to find their positions, then followed.

The curio shop was easy to find: a small, somewhat dilapidated open-air booth with an enclosed back room that had been inexpertly added on long enough ago to look almost as moldering as the booth itself. A lizardine creature of an unfamiliar species was leaning on the counter, watching the crowds passing by. Taking a deep breath, Trell stepped over to him.

The lizard looked up as Trell approached, his alien expression unreadable. "Good day, good sir," he said in adequate Basic. "I am Sajsh, proprietor of this humble establishment. May I be of assistance?"

"I hope so," Trell said. "I have a cargo for someone named Borbor Crisk. I was told you could give me delivery instructions."

A three-forked tongue darted briefly from the scaled mouth. "You have been misinformed," he said. "I know no one by that name."

"Oh?" Trell said, taken aback. "Are you sure?"

The tongue flicked again. "Do you doubt my word?" the alien spat. "Or merely my memory or intelligence?"

"No, no," Trell said hastily. "Not at all. I just...my source seemed so sure this was the place."

Sajsh opened his mouth wide. "Perhaps he was only slightly incorrect. Perhaps he meant the shop to my killhand." He pointed to his right, to an equally dilapidated booth that was currently closed up. "The proprietor will return at the seven-hour. You can return then and ask him."

"I'll do that," Trell promised. "Thank you."

The lizard snapped his jaws together twice. Nodding, Trell turned and pushed his way back into the stream of pedestrians, face hot with embarrassment and annoyance. "Well?" Maranne demanded, sidling up beside him.

"Kast had the wrong place," Trell growled, glancing around. But the bounty hunter was nowhere to be seen. "Where are the others?"

"We're right here," Riij said, coming up through the crowd behind him. "Kast said to head back down the street and he'd meet us."

"Good," Trell said tartly. "I've got a few things to say to our esteemed bounty hunter. Let's go."



Sajsh and the unknown man finished their conversation, and the latter moved away back into the mass of browsers and shoppers. Two booths over, Corran Horn set down the melon he'd been examining and eased into the flow behind him.

The stranger didn't seem to be trying to lose himself in the crowd. Though any such effort would have been quickly negated by the company he linked up with: a hard-eyed, competent-looking woman, a young man about Corran's own age, and a yellow-skinned alien with several short horns protruding from his chin. For a moment the four of them conversed; then, with the contact man leading the way, they continued on down the street.

At the edge of Corran's vision, a heavysset figure stepped to his side. "Trouble?"

"I don't know, Dad," Corran said. "You see that foursome up there? Tooled brown jacket, blondish woman, white-spiked collar, yellow-skinned alien?"

"Yes," Hal Horn nodded. "The alien's a Tunroth, by the way. Fairly rare outside their home system; most of the ones you run into these days work with high-stakes safaris, mercenaries, or bounty hunters."

"Interesting," Corran said. "Possibly significant, too. Brown Jacket just waltzed up to Sajsh's booth and tried to make a delivery to Borbor Crisk."

"Did he, now," Hal said thoughtfully. "Have Crisk and Zekka Thyne patched up their differences while I wasn't looking?"

"If they did, I wasn't looking either," Corran told him. "Either

Brown Jacket and his pals are incredibly stupid, or else something very odd is going on."

"Either way, I doubt Thyne will simply pass on it," Hal said. "Did Brown Jacket happen to mention where they could be contacted?"

"No, but Sajsh has that covered," Corran said. "He said they might want the owner of the booth next to his and suggested they come back about seven."

"Where they'll be asked to have a quiet conversation with a group of Black Sun heavies," Hal stretched his neck to peer over the crowd. "Well, well—the plot thickens. Look who our innocents have hooked up with."

Corran rose up on tiptoes. There was Brown Jacket and his friends; and with them—

"I'll be shrugged," he breathed. "Is that Boba Fett?"

"No, I don't think so," Hal said. "Possibly Jodo Kast, though I'd have to get a closer look at the armor to be sure."

"Well, whoever it is, we've definitely moved into the big time," Corran pointed out. "Mandalorian armor doesn't come cheap."

"When you can find it at all," the elder Horn agreed. "This is getting odder by the minute. I take it you've had some thoughts already?"

"Only one, really," Corran said. The group was moving off again, and he and his father set off to follow. "Thyne wouldn't be stupid enough to kill them out of hand, certainly not until he knows who they are and what their connection is to Crisk. That probably means bringing them to the fortress."

"And you think you might be able to invite yourself along?"

"I know it's risky—"

"'Risky' isn't exactly the word I had in mind," Hal interrupted. "Getting into the fortress is only the first step, you know. You think you'll be able to simply march up to Thyne, slap the restraints on him in the name of Corellian Security, and march him out?"

"We do have the legal authority to do that, you know," Corran reminded him.

"Which means nothing at all inside his stronghold," Hal countered. "You have any idea how many CorSec agents have gone after top Black Sun lieutenants like Thyne and simply vanished?"

Corran grimaced. "I know," he said. "But that's not going to happen this time. And if getting into the fortress is only the first step, it still is the first step."

The elder Horn shook his head. "'Risky' still doesn't begin to

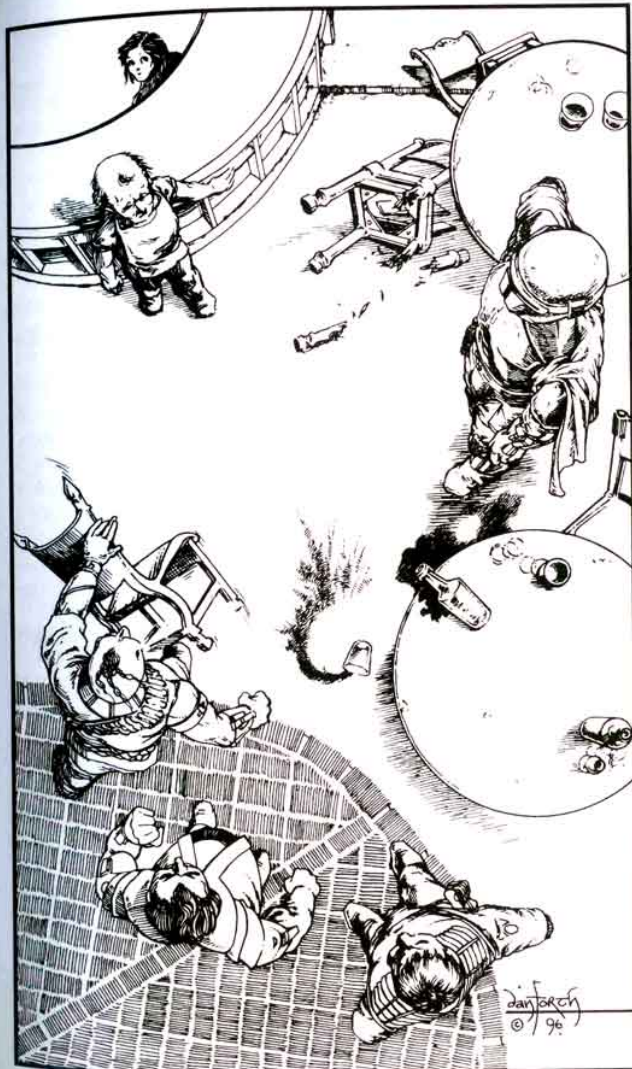


Illustration by Elizabeth Danforth

cover it. For starters, we don't even know what game Brown Jacket and his Mandalorian friend are playing."

"Then it's time we found out," Corran said. "Let's stay close and see if we can find an opportunity to introduce ourselves."



They had gone perhaps two blocks—though where Kast was leading them Trell hadn't the faintest idea—when they heard the shout.

"What was that?" Rijj demanded, looking around.

"There," Palror rumbled, pointing his thick central finger to the left. "Argument starting."

Trell craned his neck. There was an open-air tapcafe that direction, with a long serving bar at the rear and perhaps twenty small tables spread out in the open space in front of it beneath a wide, Karvrish-style woven-leaf canopy. A slightly-built man wearing a proprietor's apron was standing in the middle of the dining area, a half dozen large and rough-looking men wearing mercenary shoulder patches looming in a threatening circle around him. The chairs from a nearby table were scattered back or lying on the ground, indicating a quick and unruly departure from them. "I think the argument's over," he said. "It's gone straight to trouble now."

"Come on," Rijj said, angling that direction. "Let's check it out."

"Leave it alone," Kast ordered. "It's none of our business."

But Rijj and Palror were already heading off through the crowd. "Blast," Trell growled. Stupid idealistic gornt-brained Rebels—"Come on, Maranne."

A line of onlookers had started to form at the edge of the tapcafe by the time he and Maranne broke through the stream of pedestrians. Rijj and Palror were already to the mercenaries, who had opened their circle around the tapcafe proprietor in order to face this new distraction.

And now Trell could see something he hadn't been able to before. Standing beside the proprietor, clinging tightly to his waist in terror, was a young girl. Probably his daughter; certainly no more than seven years old.

Trell hissed a curse between his teeth. It took a particularly vile form of low-life to threaten a child. But that didn't mean he was going to follow Rijj's lead and charge in blindly like a mad Jedi

Knight on Cracian thumperback. "Backup left," he murmured to Maranne. "I'll take right."

"Right," she murmured back. Dropping his hand casually onto the grip of his blaster, Trell started drifting behind the ring of onlookers to the right—

And with a suddenness that startled him, the fight started.

Not with blasters, which had been his main fear, but with hands and feet as the two closest mercenaries lashed out at Rijj and Palror. With three-to-one odds on their side, the mercs must have felt weapons to be unnecessary.

They got a shock. Rijj had clearly had some good training in unarmed combat, and Palror was a lot faster than Trell would have guessed from the alien's bulk. Rijj's counterattack sent his opponent reeling back; Palror's threw his merc slamming back with a horrendous crash into one of the other tables, sending it spinning and scattering its chairs across the floor.

Someone swore viciously. The downed merc scrambled to his feet and rejoined his comrades, their former casual semicircle now reformed into a deadly, no-nonsense combat line facing their attackers. The proprietor had taken advantage of the distraction to hustle his daughter back across to the bar; heaving her up and over to the relative safety behind it, he turned back to watch.

For a long moment the combatants stood motionless facing each other. Trell kept drifting toward his chosen backup position, his eyes on the mercs, his hand tightening on his blaster. Would they draw now, in which case Rijj and Palror were probably dead? Or would sheer pride dictate they beat such insolent opponents bloody with their bare hands?

The watching crowd was obviously wondering the same thing. Trell could feel their tension, their excitement, their bloodlust...

And then, out of the corner of his eye, he spotted movement to his left. The mercs caught it, too, anger-filled eyes shifting that direction—

Their expressions changed, just slightly. Frowning, Trell risked a look of his own.

Jodo Kast had stepped forward out of the ring of onlookers.

For a moment the bounty hunter just stood there, gazing silently at the scene. Then, stepping to one of the tables at the edge of the tapcafe, he pulled out a chair and sat down. Crossing his legs casually beneath the table, he folded his arms across his chest and cocked his head slightly to one side. "Well?" he asked mildly.

And with that one word the decision was made. No mercenary with a speck's-worth of professional pride was going to use weapons against outnumbered opponents who hadn't themselves drawn. Not with a bounty hunter like Jodo Kast watching.

Roaring obscure and probably obscene battle cries, the mercs waded in.

At that first exchange Rijj and Palror had had the element of surprise. This time they didn't. They did their best, certainly—and still better than Trell would have expected given the odds—but in the end they really had no chance. Less than ninety seconds after that battle roar, both Rijj and Palror were on the floor, along with two of the mercs. The remaining four, not all of them looking all that steady on their feet, were grouped around them. One of them looked around, jabbed a finger toward the proprietor cowering at the bar. "Them first," he snarled, breathing heavily. "You next."

"No," Kast said.

The merc spun around to face him, almost losing his balance in the process as a damaged knee tried to buckle under him. "No what?" he demanded.

"I said no," Kast told him. His hands were in his lap now, concealed under the table, but his legs were still casually crossed. "You've had your fun; but I need them alive."

"Yeah?" the merc snarled. "What, you got a bounty to collect on them?"

"You've had your fun," Kast repeated, but this time there was frosty metal glittering in his voice. "Leave it and go. Now."

"You think so, huh?" the merc spat. "And who do you think's gonna stop—?"

And abruptly, right in the middle of his sentence, he dropped his hand to his blaster and yanked it from its holster.

It was an old trick, and one that had probably given the merc the desired edge in many a facedown. Unfortunately for him, it was a trick Trell had seen used countless times before; and even before the other's hand had reached his blaster grip Trell was hauling out his own weapon. At the other side of the ring of bystanders he spotted Maranne also drawing—

The merc had good reflexes, all right. In that split second he froze, his weapon not quite cleared of its holster, staring from beneath thick eyebrows at the four blasters suddenly pointed at him from the circle of people around the tapcafe.

Trell blinked as it suddenly registered. *Four* blasters?

Four. Two people down from Maranne, a bulky middle-aged man also had a blaster trained steadily on the mercs...and out of the corner of his eye, Trell could see the fourth blaster sticking out from his side of the crowd. Held with equal steadiness.

The merc spat. "So that's how you want to play it, huh?"

"We're not playing," Kast said icily. "As I said: leave it and go. If you don't—"

Trell never saw the warning twitch he was watching for. But Kast obviously did. Even as the merc started to haul his blaster the rest of the way free of its holster there was the brilliant flash of a blaster bolt from the direction of the bounty hunter's table, and a roar of rage from the merc as his holster and the blaster muzzle behind it shattered.

"—I promise you will regret it," Kast finished calmly. "This is your final chance."

The merc looked like he was about two seconds short of a complete berserk rage. But even furious and with a burned gun hand, he was in control enough to know when the odds were stacked too high against him. "I'll be watching for you, bounty hunter," he breathed, straightening up from his combat crouch. "We'll finish this some other time."

Kast bowed his head slightly. "Whenever you're tired of life, mercenary."

The merc gave a hand signal. The others helped their two casualties to their feet—one groggily starting to come to, the other still in need of basic portage—and the group straggled their way through the onlookers and out into the crowd.

Kast waited until they were out of sight. Then, pushing back his chair, he stood up, the blaster he'd used on the merc's weapon already secreted back in whatever hidden holster it had been drawn from. "The show's over," he announced, looking around at the bystanders. "Stay and buy a drink, or get moving."

The proprietor was already beside Rijj and Palror, helping the former to a sitting position, when Trell and Maranne reached them. "You all right?" Maranne asked, offering Palror a hand.

The Tunroth waved it away. "I am not hurt," he said, rolling to his feet and flexing an elbow experimentally. "I was merely temporarily disabled."

"You're lucky the condition wasn't permanent," Trell reminded him. "You should have left it alone like Kast told you to."

"Yeah," Rijj said, holding his stomach as he got to his feet with

the proprietor's assistance. "Thanks, Kast. Though I wouldn't have minded if you'd stepped in a little earlier. Say, before they started pounding on us?"

"Six mercenaries wouldn't have backed down in front of three blasters," Kast told him. "I needed you to take some of them out first."

He half turned. "If I'd known it would be five blasters instead of three, I might have moved sooner."

Trell turned to look. The two men who'd drawn with them were standing there watching. "Thanks," he said. "I wouldn't have counted on getting that kind of help in a place like this."

"No problem," the older man shrugged. "The Brommstaad Mercenaries have always had a tendency to consider themselves above the bounds of normal civilized behavior. And I've never liked it when children get threatened."

"Besides which," the younger man added, "we were starting to get thirsty anyway."

"Drinks?" the proprietor asked eagerly. "Of course; drinks for all of you. And meals, too, if you are hungry—the finest I have to offer."

"We'll take the long table in the back," Kast said. "And some privacy."

"Yes, good sir, immediately," the proprietor said. Giving them a quick bow, he scurried off toward the table Kast had indicated.

"My name's Hal, by the way," the older man said. "This is my partner Corran."

Trell exchanged nods with them. "Pleased to meet you. I'm Trell; this is Maranne, Rijj, Palror, and—"

"Call me Kast," Kast cut him off. "Son or nephew?"

Hal blinked. "What?"

"Is Corran your son or nephew?" Kast amplified. "There's a family resemblance about the eyes."

"People have mentioned that before," Corran spoke up. "Actually, it's just coincidence. As far as we know, we're not related."

Kast nodded once, slowly. "Ah."

"The table seems ready," Hal said, pointing that direction. "Shall we go sit down?"



"Oh, sure," Hal said, taking a sip from his second drink. "Everyone around here has heard of Borbor Crisk. Fairly small-time

criminal, though, as criminals go—strictly local to the Corellian system. Of course, if you're looking for impressive intersystem criminals, we've got some of those, too."

"We're not interested in impressiveness," Trell pointed out. "Criminal or otherwise. We've got a cargo to deliver to this Crisk character, and then we're out of here."

"Yes, you mentioned that," Corran agreed, eyeing the other and trying to read him. It was hard to believe these people were really the simple errand boys they appeared, especially after the incident with the mercenaries. But if this was some kind of deeply clever plan, he was blamed if he could figure it out.

At least, not from the outside. It was about time he made his pitch to get a little closer to the middle. "The thing is this," he went on, looking around the table. "Two things, actually. Number one: considering who Crisk is, your cargo is probably illegal and certainly valuable. That means that you not only have to worry about Corellian Security coming down on you, but also other criminals who might try to take it off your hands. And number two—" he hesitated, just slightly—"the reason Hal and I came to Corellia in the first place was hoping to find jobs with Crisk's organization."

"You're kidding," Rijj said. "Doing what?"

"Anything, really," Hal said. "Our last job went really sour, and we need to recoup our losses."

"That's why we were following you, see," Corran said, trying for the proper balance of assertiveness and embarrassment. "I overheard Trell talking about Crisk, and thought—well—"

"We thought maybe we could go with you when you went back to see him tonight," Hal took the plunge.

Trell and Maranne exchanged glances. "Well—"

"We don't actually *know* we're seeing him tonight," Rijj pointed out. "That other booth owner may not know anything more about Crisk than Sajsh did."

"That's a good point," Trell agreed, throwing an odd look at Kast. "This could be nothing but a blind alley."

"Well, in that case, you'll need help finding him," Hal said with a wonderfully genuine-sounding eagerness. "Corran and I are locals—we have all sorts of contacts around the area. We can help you find him."

"One of you can go," Kast said.

Corran looked at the bounty hunter, blinking in mild surprise. It was the first time he'd spoken since they'd sat down at the table.

"Ah—good," he said. "Just one of us?"

"Just him," Kast said, nodding toward Hal. "Trell and the Tunroth will go with him. I'll be behind as rearguard."

"What about Rijj and me?" Maranne asked.

"You two and Corran will go back to the ship," Kast told her. "You'll transfer the cargo onto the ship's landspeeder so it'll be ready for delivery."

Trell and Maranne eyed each other again, and Corran could see neither was particularly happy with the arrangement. It was equally clear, though, that neither was all that eager to argue the point with the bounty hunter. "All right," Trell said with a grimace. "Fine. What happens if no one at that other booth knows where Crisk is either?"

"That won't be a problem," Kast said. "Trust me."



"Interesting person, Jodo Kast," Hal commented as the three of them headed back toward Sajsh's booth. "Have you worked with him long?"

"This is the first time," Trell told him, looking around uneasily. There were far fewer shoppers at this hour than there had been earlier, and despite his innate dislike of crowds he found himself feeling unpleasantly exposed right now. "Actually, we're not working with him so much as we are working for him. Palror, can you see where he's gotten to?"

"No, don't turn around," Hal said quickly. "We might be under observation, and we don't want to tip them off that we've got a rearguard."

Trell threw him a sideways look. There was something in his voice right then that emphatically did not belong in a down-luck drifter. A tone of authority, spoken by a person who was used to having his orders obeyed...

Palror rumbled. "Trouble," he said.

Trell craned his neck. He could see Sajsh's booth ahead now, closed up for the night.

The booth beside it, the booth they were headed for, was also closed.

"Great," he growled, stopping. "Still no one there."

"No, don't stop," a soft voice came from behind him.

Trell felt his heart seize up. "What?"

"You heard the man," a different voice said, this one coming from behind Hal. "Keep walking."



Illustration by Elizabeth Danform

With an effort, Trell got his feet moving again. "Are you with Borbor Crisk?"

There was a snort. "Hardly," the first voice said with obvious contempt. "Keep it casual, and don't try to be clever. We'd prefer to deliver you in fully working condition."

Trell swallowed hard. "Where are we going?"

"For now, behind Sajsh's booth," the other said. "After that...you'll see."

"I'm sure," Trell murmured, heart pounding in his ears. Still, there was one thing the kidnappers didn't know. Jodo Kast, one of the finest bounty hunters in the galaxy, was somewhere behind them. Any minute now he would jump out from wherever he was hiding, blasters blazing with micron accuracy, and flip the tables completely on them. Any minute now, and they'd hear the roar of blasters. Any minute now...

He was still waiting for that minute as the kidnappers herded the three of them aboard a speeder truck, sealed the doors, and drove off into the gathering dusk.

End of Part One

SIDETRIIP

PART TWO

By Michael A. Stackpole

Corran Horn's feeling that something was wrong got a big boost from his first glimpse of the *Hopskip*. The freighter looked as if someone had taken a stock Corellian YT-1300, split the disk along a line running from bow to stern, flopped one half on top of the other, then patched it together with whatever scrap metal was conveniently at hand. Corran had seen uglier ships, but none that were supposed to be operational.

He waited for Riij to close the gateway to the hangar bay before he made a comment. "I guess smuggling doesn't pay what it once used to?"

Maranne's hard eyes flashed angrily. "We're traders, not smugglers."

Corran raised his hands. "Call it what you want. With Imp rules and regs out there, what starts as a trading trip could end up as a smuggling run."

Surprise played through Maranne's dark blue eyes, then she turned away and scratched at the back of her neck. "I'll get the landspeeder." Her surprise at his comment made her statement come a bit too fast, and Corran thought perhaps he caught a hint of fear in her words.

Definitely more here than meets the eye. The second he saw the ship, Corran abandoned any suspicion that these people were hard-edged smugglers coming to deliver supplies to Borbor Crisk. The things Crisk needed to wage his little war with Zekka Thyne and Black Sun for supremacy in the Corellian underworld weren't the sorts of things that would be entrusted to the crew of the *Hopskip*. Actually, for Crisk to depose Thyne would require a *Star Destroyer*.



Side Trip Part Two

Illustration by Elizabeth Danforth

which this ship isn't, and a legion of stormtroopers, which isn't hidden here.

Corran saw Maranne disappear through a hatch in the freighter, so he turned his attention to Riiij. "Shipping with her can't be too rough. She's pretty easy on the eyes. Known her long?"

The slender man shook his head, then ran a hand across his short, spiky white hair. "Just along for the ride. If I do some work, I get some pay by the time we reach our destination." Riiij smiled carefully. "You been working with your partner long?"

"Off and on," Corran shrugged. Riiij's quick questioning of Corran about his background played to most people's tendency to want to talk about themselves. *It's a technique you learn to exploit when fishing for information from suspects. Either Riiij has had training, is very private, or both.* "Known him for a long time, but started running together recently. Bonded through bad times, you know? Like you and the Tunroth."

"You recognize him as a Tunroth?"

"Hal and me, we might be locals, but that doesn't mean we've not been around." Corran took a step back as Maranne lowered the rear loading ramp on the *Hopskip*. "He got a life debt toward you or something?"

"Life debt is a Wookiee thing," Riiij frowned, then started up the ramp to the freighter's hold. "Rathe and I are just traveling on the same ship. No connection beyond that."

"Got it." Corran kept an easy smile on his face while cataloguing the information Riiij had just supplied him. Corran knew life debts were a matter of Wookiee honor, but he only knew of them because of the Imperial warrants and advisories about Han Solo and the Wookiee working with him. *Most folks don't know Wookiees exist or, at best, know Imps use them for slave labor. Folks who know more about Wookiees are usually Rebel sympathizers.*

He followed Riiij up the ramp and started looking around for clues to what the *Hopskip*'s crew was doing in Coronet City. As a member of the Corellian Security Force, Corran had access to most information about the Rebellion and its connections to Corellia. *At least I have it when that worthless Imp Intelligence liaison officer isn't around.* While it was true that two of the Alliance's heroes were from Corellia, the Emperor's tightening of his grip on Corellia and the placement of forces on the world had kept the Rebel presence down. Corran knew there were Rebel cells in residence, and he'd gladly have run any of them in, but he didn't see them being so bold or so desperate to try to hook up with Crisk.

Corran slid past the battered nose of the old landspeeder—like the ship, it looked as if it had been cobbled together from parts. It only had two seats, like a fancy speeder, but had a flat bed grafted on to the back. Except where dents let silvery metal show through, an even, dirt-brown coat of primer covered the vehicle. *Not fast, not strong, but beats hauling this stuff on my back.*

The bank of boxes that Maranne and Riiij were freeing from cargo-net tie-downs immediately attracted his attention. They were uniform in size and non-descript, but that struck Corran as odd. All of them had exteriors formed out of green duraplast that was a couple shades darker than his eyes, yet none of the rectangular boxes bore the streaking and scarring common on duraplast boxes. None had holographic tags, scuff marks or other signs of use, yet all had been bound with duraplast cables and fixed with a holographic seal.

As he lifted the first one from the top of the pile he felt nothing shift inside the boxes, nor was there a need for him to locate the box's balance point. He shook his head. "Where did you guys get *sleight boxes*?"

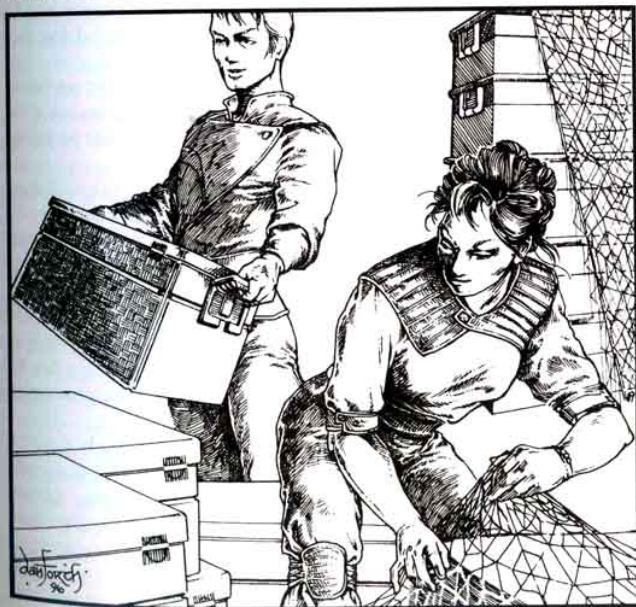


Illustration by Elizabeth Duntorn

Maranne and Riiij both stopped as Corran set his box down on the landspeeder's bed. The woman frowned. "What's a *sleight* box?"

"If you don't know what a *sleight* box is, maybe you aren't smugglers." Corran tapped a finger on the top of his box. "It looks ordinary, but it has a low-power repulsorlift coil matrix and power-supply built into the casing. It neutralizes the weight of whatever is inside. These boxes could be full of thermal detonators or air, and we'd never know. Smugglers developed them to trick customs officials, but most customs-droids know what to scan for now."

Maranne set her box down next to his. "Interesting story. Seems you've done more smuggling than we have."

"Maybe, or maybe I just know more about smuggling than you do." Corran gave her a sly smile. "For example, I know no one smuggles a cargo that's made up of unknown items. What's in these things?"

The woman shook her head, her dark blond queue lashing her from shoulder to shoulder. "Don't know. Don't want to know."

"I find that hard to believe." Corran frowned at her. "I don't know what kind of game you're running here, but these *sleight* boxes won't fool CorSec's droids. If this is stuff being hauled for the Rebels, they'll find it and you'll be in serious trouble."

Riiij slid his box onto the flat bed. "If we were Rebels and we knew what was in these boxes *and* it was meant for the Rebels, we'd be a lot more worried about the Empire than we would their puppets here on Corellia."

"You think CorSec's people are Imperial puppets?" Corran flicked that suggestion away with a wave of his hand. "CorSec's concerned with the integrity of the Corellian system, nothing more. If they tolerate Rebels here, the Imperial presence increases. Who wants that?"

Riiij's brown eyes flashed dangerously. "What you're telling me is that CorSec's people are willing to repress the enemies of a vicious regime so they don't get Vader's boot across their own necks. If I was a Rebel, I'd find it very difficult to tell the difference between CorSec agents and the Imps."

Corran forced himself to go over and pick up another box so he wouldn't immediately snap back at Riiij. The smuggler's arguments had been heard often—and loudly—on Corellia. Corran, whose father and grandfather had both preceded him into CorSec, had long believed that CorSec could do the most good by keeping the Imps out of its solar system security problems. If Corellia could take care of itself and set itself up as a neutral party in this civil war, the

citizens of Corellia would benefit.

While that position made perfect sense, and was defensible, it was also a position made at the top of a very slick slope. CorSec's directors had already forced the local divisions to accept Imperial Intelligence Liaison officers to monitor and coordinate operations with Imperial Garrisons. Kirtan Loor, the liaison officer his division had been saddled with, had proved thoroughly arrogant and barely functional. He and Corran did not get along at all.

Corran hefted another box. "I think, from CorSec's view, they have a hard time telling the Rebels apart from honest criminals like me. I don't, but that's because I've got the right perspective. The Rebs aren't honest criminals at all."

Maranne smiled. "'Honest' criminals?"

"Yeah, honest. I know that what I'm doing violates the law, but I do it because that's what I do. I take the risks, I make some money, or I get sent to Kessel. It's all very straight forward." Corran placed his box on top of the first one he'd set down. "The Rebels, they do everything I would do, but they say they are entitled to do it because the law is wrong and the Empire is wrong. They're really just making excuses for their actions so they can feel they're noble when they're really no better than I am."

"What an interesting perspective."

Corran spun at the sound of the faintly echoed voice. Jodo Kast stood in the cargo hatchway, blocking most of the view of the docking bay. Corran ducked and dodged his head to try and see past the bounty hunter, but with no success. "Where's Hal?"

"I would expect, right now, he is very nearly at Zekka Thyne's fortress."

"What?" Riiij's shout of surprise filled the cargo hold. "You were there to protect them. What happened?"

Kast stepped into the cargo hold, then leaned rather casually against the bay's internal bulkhead. "Thyne's people were waiting for Trell and the other two. There were seven of them—including the Broomstaad Mercenaries. I waited until they'd headed off east, then I returned here."

Corran slammed a fist down on top of a *sleight* box. "East is where Thyne has his little palace."

Kast nodded. "Hence my assumption about their destination."

"And you did nothing to stop them?" Corran jabbed a finger in Kast's direction. "You're some hot bounty hunter in this Mandalorian armor who can shoot the blaster from a man's hand while sitting down, and you didn't stop them?"

"There were seven of them and only one of me. I already did the math for you on that match-up—I might have gotten them, but they would have killed your people."

Rijj shook his head. "Rathe could have taken his share of them,"

Maranne nodded. "Trell would have been good for at least one."

"And Hal could have popped a couple..."

"A couple wouldn't have done it."

"...Or more, if he'd been given a chance." Corran looked from Rijj and Maranne to the bounty hunter. "Are all three of you so naive you don't know what's going to happen to our people? Thyne's going to ask them about their connection to Crisk and, if they know as little as you do, he's going to have to work real hard to get answers he trusts. I'm not too wild about him going at Hal like that."

Kast shrugged his shoulders. "You can always find yourself another partner."

"If you think I'm going to abandon Hal, I'm going to have to shuck you out of that armor and beat some sense into you."

Kast's head came up as he moved away from the wall, silently emphasizing just how much bigger than Corran he truly was. "Hardly the reaction I'd expect from two criminal associates. Out of proportion, really. You're acting as if there is a closer bond between you."

Corran gave Kast as cold a glare as he could. He did resemble his father a bit, around the eyes and through the face, but otherwise he was a compromise between his mother and father. She'd been tiny and had the bluest eyes Corran could ever remember having seen. His green eyes were a midpoint between her eyes and his father's hazel eyes, as his brown hair was a match between her blond and his father's once black hair. Even his height formed a bridge between that of his mother and father.

"It wouldn't matter if Hal was my clone—he's my *partner*, which means I'm responsible for him." Corran jabbed a thumb back against his breastbone. "I actually understand what that sort of responsibility means, Kast, and what it means is that I'm not going to leave Hal to Thyne's untender mercies."

Kast folded his arms across his armored chest. "You'd dare take on a Black Sun crime lord?"

Maranne paled. "Thyne is Black Sun?"

"Claw-picked by Prince Xizor, if the rumors are true." Corran leaned on one of the green boxes. "He's crazy-cruel and wholly nasty, but he does operate with a profit motive in mind. This cargo

may have been for Crisk, but we could offer it to Thyne and ransom our people."

"I don't think so." Kast produced a datacard from a pouch on his belt and flipped it over to Maranne. "That card has the location and time for a new meeting with Crisk. Deliver the cargo there, then come back here and prepare to take off."

Maranne caught the card. "We're not going anywhere if Haber isn't here."

"I know." Kast gave her a quick nod. "It's my intention to head out to Thyne's fortress and secure the release of your friends."

Corran barked out a sharp laugh. "You balk at taking on seven guttersharks, but you'll free our friends from Thyne's fortress all by yourself? Better check that math, Kast."

"The odds are substantial, but I anticipate success."

"Yeah, well, this is Corellia, and Corellians have no use for odds. I think I'd trust in your success if I was along to enhance it."

"I work alone."

"Ha!" Corran jerked his head toward Rijj and Maranne. "You work with them, you can work with me." Corran shook his fists out. "Save us both some trouble and just say yes now."

Kast hesitated and silence stole over the cargo bay. The mercenary studied Corran and even though he could not see Kast's eyes, he could feel the man's hard stare raking him up and down. Corran forced himself to look at the helmet's black slit, inviting a challenge and ready to react to Kast's next move.

The bounty hunter's arms slowly unfolded. "I will go find us a landspeeder."

"Good." Corran realized, as he replied, that he'd been holding his breath. *Hal's going to go crazy when he hears what I did. Facing down a bounty hunter like Kast. It had to be done, but it could have been done better. I'd never run away from a fight with a guy like that, but there's no virtue in picking one, either.*

Darkness swallowed Kast's form, then Corran turned and looked at the other two. "You're in way over your heads, aren't you?"

Rijj shrugged. "I'm not sure what's going on, but I don't like Rathe being captured by a Black Sun crime lord."

"Well, Borbor Crisk isn't much better. We're caught in the arena between two Cyborrean battledogs. Neither of these guys plays well with others, as you've seen."

Maranne brandished the datacard. "What are we going to do? We're supposed to meet with Crisk and give him this stuff."

"The first thing we do is find out what this stuff is." Corran looked at the seals on the boxes already loaded on the landspeeder's bed. "Good, here's one that's junked. See if you can find another."

Rij started looking at new boxes while Corran fished in his pocket for a small hydrosponder. "This ought to do the trick."

Maranne came over and frowned. "What do you mean the box is junked?"

"Not the box, the seal-tab used to bind the duraplast strips." Corran pointed to the round tab that connected the crisscrossing straps. "See how the hologram imbedded in it doesn't fully line up. Look at it from the angle here. The corona on the suns here don't match up."

"I found another one," Rij announced.

"Good, bring it over." Corran hooked the edge of the spanner under the lip of the seal. "When they don't set up right you can pop them apart with a little shove and a twist." He lifted up, then twisted his wrist.

The seal popped apart, freeing the strips that secured the box. "Get both parts and we can reseal this thing once we've peeked at what's inside."

Maranne bent to recover both halves of the seal while Corran attacked the other one. It came apart easily, then he reversed the spanner and used a flat-bladed attachment to pry the box's lid up. "By the Emperor's black heart!"

Even before the lid came up fully Corran caught the sharp sour scent of spice. The box held seven single-kilogram bricks that had been wrapped up in heavy cello-plast. They'd been dipped in a waxy coating to seal them, but the job had been done hastily. One of the packets had split open and spilled a low-grade spice compound inside the box.

"What is that?"

Corran looked at Maranne. "You're joking, right?"

"Like I said, I'm a trader, not a smuggler."

"This is spice. It's a really lousy grade of glitterstim—the real stuff is crystalline, long fine fibers, not a powder like this. Dose up with this and you get really happy, at least really happy until you need more and the craving flows through your veins like plasma. Not a pretty thing."

Rij curled a lip distastefully. "You know from experience?"

"Just hearsay, and watching a guy try to sell a lung to get more glit."

"Sell a lung?" Maranne shivered.

Corran shrugged. "Wasn't his. Belonged to some passerby. Like I said, not good stuff."

Rij pried the lid off the second *sleight* box. "Sithspawn!" He reached a hand in and withdrew a crystal spike the thickness of his thumb and a good hand-span in length. Purple filled the stone's core, running from light at either end to dark in the middle. As Rij held the stone up the light it trapped filled it with orange, yellow and red lightning bolts. All three of them fell silent in response to the brilliant display.

Corran stared at the stone, then shook his head. "Is that a Durindfire gem?"

"I think so." Rij's voice-box bounced up and down as he swallowed hard. "My father bought a ring with a Durindfire for my mother on their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Wasn't until the thirtieth that he had the debt paid off, and that was just a *little* stone."

"Not too many of those stones make it off Tatooine, and very seldom unworked like that finger there." Maranne took it from Rij and weighed it in her hands. "This would be enough to buy us a new ship."

Rij turned. "Let's find out what else is in these other boxes."

"No, stop." Corran held his hands up. "We don't have time enough to check them out. Put the stone back, we'll reseal these two boxes and set them in the landspeeder's front seat."

Maranne reluctantly returned the stone to its box. "What do you have in mind?"

"Look, we're going to need some insurance here if we're going to get off Corellia in one piece. We can reseal these boxes and no one will ever know they've been tampered with. You'll take those two boxes to Crisk and let him know you have, what, 198 more for him. He won't make a move against you until he has them."

Rij frowned. "He can come here and take them from us."

"Yeah, but they won't be here. We load the rest onto the speeder and take them to a storage facility." Corran frowned as if thinking hard about something. "Okay, I have it. There's a Dewback Storage Warehouse on the main road back into the center of Coronet City. You can rent a storage shed there and dump the other boxes. You go to your meeting and let Crisk know you'll give him the location of the other boxes when you're certain your friends are safe. Kast and I will go off to see Thyne and if we're not back in due time, you

use Crisk to try to effect a rescue."

Maranne slowly shook her head. "I don't like the sound of this."

"Look, we've got a veritable fortune in those boxes. If Crisk doesn't want to help you, set up a meeting with Thyne and ransom us."

"How do we get in touch with Thyne?"

Corran smiled. "You did that back at your first stop on Treasure Ship row, remember?"

"Right."

"Okay, let's get loading," Corran resealed the first box and then the second. "I know you don't like the way this is going, Maranne, but you're the one who said she's a trader. If things go badly, you're going to have to trade for our freedom and, speaking for myself, I hope you strike a super bargain in the process."



Colonel Maximilian Veers glanced down at the chair offered to him, but refrained from sitting. "Thank you for your kindness, Agent Loor, but I do not anticipate being here very long. You have looked at the message I had sent over to you."

The long, slender man sat forward in his chair, a motion that nearly tossed him sprawling up over the top of his desk. Loor caught himself with his hands, then brushed the lank of dark hair that had fallen over his face back into place. Veers felt certain the man wore his hair the way he did to accentuate his resemblance to the late Grand Moff Tarkin. *I served under Tarkin. Anyone who would think this Loor is at all similar to Tarkin should realize the similarity goes no deeper than the skin.*

"Something wrong with the springs on your chair, Agent Loor?"

The liaison officer snarled. "I have saboteurs who delight in finding ways to annoy me, and adjusting the chair is their latest form of expression."

He reached over and hit a button on his desktop datapad. "And yes, Colonel Veers, I studied the message you sent over, as requested. I can't comment on its accuracy beyond saying it is true that Zekka Thyne maintains a little fortress east of Coronet City."

"I already know that, Loor."

Loor's head came up. "You do? I wasn't aware that Thyne's headquarters would have been something you studied, Colonel

Veers. I was unaware the Imperial Armed Forces had been given cause to consider Black Sun facilities potential targets."

Veers' nostrils flared. The only thing he hated more than having to deal with arrogant intelligence agents was turning a blind eye to the activities of the Black Sun. He assumed the Emperor's tolerance for the criminal cartel was based on reason, but Veers thought that tolerance was truly a detriment to the Empire. Allowing *any* outlaws undermined the rule of authority. If people could see Black Sun as somehow more malevolent than the Rebellion, then they could justify joining the Rebellion all that more easily.

"It is incumbent upon me, Agent Loor, to view any stronghold that is filled with armed individuals as a potential target. In this case I am told that Thyne is meeting with elements of the Rebel underground."

"Yes, but I am uncomfortable with your source. Who is it?"

"You saw the verification code. It is valid." Veers frowned heavily. "There is no reason to distrust the information. It is accurate and I plan to act on it."

"So you mean you don't know who your source is?"

"I don't need to know."

With a superior smile slithering over his face, Loor eased himself back in his chair. Veers hoped it would overbalance and spill him to the floor. "If you believe in this intelligence source, why come to me?"

Veers restrained himself from reaching out and slapping Loor. "I came to you, Agent Loor because you are the Imperial Liaison Officer and you liaise with the Corellian Security Force in this administrative sector. I want to know if they have any operatives working in or around Thyne."

"Are you looking to use their extraction as a pretense for your attack, or were you worried I would lodge a protest over collateral damage?"

Veers narrowed his eyes. "There is no reason for good people to die."

Loor shrugged lazily. "If they do die, they die heroes. If you get me Zekka Thyne, you can be a hero, too."

"I believe, Agent Loor, I can find my own way to be a hero." Veers spun on his heel and stalked from the office. *With Imperials like you, Loor, I often wonder why the Rebellion has not yet succeeded in overthrowing the Empire. If things are left in the hands of people like you, can the Empire possibly survive?*



* Corran took one look at the SoroSuub X-34 Landspeeder Kast was piloting and sighed. "Buy or borrow?"

The bounty hunter looked up at him from behind the wheel. "Does it matter?"

"If I'm going to get arrested for traveling in a stolen landspeeder I'd kind of been hoping it would be something newer and sportier, like an XP-38."

"You can always walk, Corran."

"Good point." With his left hand on the windscreen, Corran hopped up and into the passenger seat. "Punch it."

Kast spun the landspeeder's wheel, fed power to the repulsorlift coils and eased the throttle forward. "How did the loading go?"

"Loading? It went fine." Corran shifted around in the cramped seat. "They should be ready to make their rendezvous."

"Good."

Corran heard the correct emphasis and inflection given to the word, but somehow he thought Kast was being something less than genuine in his response. Corran tried to put his finger on it but couldn't, and that bothered him. In the past he'd had an almost sixth sense about hardcases like Kast, but he didn't seem to be able to read the armored mercenary. *The fact that my father has been captured by a man who will fillet him is destroying my concentration.*

Kast piloted the landspeeder in toward the center of town. The bright lights and raucous sounds of Coronet City and Treasure Ship Row all started to press in on Corran. As a member of CorSec he saw Dirdock—CorSec slang for Treasure Ship Row—as a dangerous place. While the fringes might not be that bad—and plenty of respectful folks dabbled in minor transgressions at some of the flashier places—there were locations there where even Darth Vader would fear to tread. Most of those establishments were controlled by Black Sun.

Corran's grandfather had lamented the changes in the criminal class since the rise of the Empire. Rostek Horn had been in CorSec back in the days of Moff Fliry Vorrur, back when flouting the law had been an art. In those days, Corran had been told, criminals only made war on criminals. The abduction of Hal and Trell never would have been tolerated back then—civilians would have to get in-

involved with criminal activities a lot more deeply before they were considered fair game.

Then Prince Xizor and his Black Sun organization had come to the fore. Xizor had betrayed Vorrur to the Emperor, in one step eliminating Vorrur and gaining favor with the Emperor. Xizor had used Corellia as training ground for some of his lieutenants. The most recent and most brutal of them was Zekka Thyne.

Corran glanced out of the landspeeder as the Dewback storage facility flashed past. As he turned to look back in the direction they were traveling, he caught Kast watching him. "Something the matter?"

"You seemed to find something interesting out there."

"Yeah, I did." *Think, Corran, think of something good.* "It was the street art on the walls."

"Art? You think the defacement of buildings is art?"

Corran shrugged. "It's not the work of Venthan Chassu but it beats peeling Star Destroyer-white for holding my interest."

Kast studied Corran for a second or two. "How does someone like you know the work of Venthan Chassu?"

"I could lie to you and tell you that my mother used to take me to museums, but you'd see through that." Corran forced himself to stare straight forward as he abandoned the truth and started fashioning a lie from a wild tale a thief he'd once collared had started spinning for him. "I knew a guy who said he had a client who would buy anything in the fine arts from Corellia. He said he'd already lifted and sold a handful of paintings, some sculpture and a couple of holographic dioramas. The client seemed impressed, but wanted more. He was spending credits like they were made of free-floating hydrogen atoms, so this guy said he wanted to plan a heist to hit the Coronet City Museum of Fine Art. He wanted me in on the crew, so I cased the place."

Kast nodded slowly. "Who was the client?"

"Don't know. My man talked to a broker, then he got tractored by CorSec and caught a shuttle to Akrit'tar. He died there."

"So what did you think of Chassu's work?"

Corran frowned. *Why would a bounty hunter care about art and care what I thought about art?* "It was interesting. The Selonian nude studies were what I liked the best—but not because they were nudes. Selonians have fur, so can they ever really be nude? And if it were nude Selonians I wanted," Corran held his hands up above the windscreen, "I could find plenty of them here in Treasure Ship Row."

"Why did you like them?"

"Chassu caught the two essential elements of Selonians: their sensual, sinewy forms and, because their faces were always obscured, their desire for privacy." Corran shrugged. "Some of his other work was fine."

"What did you think of *Palpatine Triumphant*?"

"The throne being built of bones gave me nightmares." Corran shivered, knowing the nightmares had not come from the skulls and shattered bones, but the homicidally gleeful expression of joy on the Emperor's face. "As a final masterpiece it does the job, but I would have liked to see him return to Selonian studies."

"His loss was a pity." Kast's helmet turned toward him. "There would appear to be more to you than meets the eye."

"Oh?"

"Indeed. The last time Chassu's Selonian nudes were on display at the Fine Arts museum was ten years ago."

Corran covered his surprise with a smile. "Not exactly. New Year's Day, two years ago, they were displayed for a private reception for Museum patrons. Four hours, ten thousand credits per person." Corran tapped Kast on the shoulder of his armor. "You would have loved it, but you'd have had to get a new paint job on the armor first."

"And you were there."

"I was." *So was Hal. My mother had volunteered with the museum for so long that when it came to hiring additional security for the reception, the administration brought us on board.* "I'll let you know when they throw another of those get-togethers, if you want."

"Please. I'll have to see if I can obtain an invitation to it."

Corran laughed. "If you can do *that*, perhaps you *can* get us an invitation to visit Zekka Thyne. How are you planning to get us in there?"

Kast's voice echoed from within his helmet. "I thought I would appeal to Thyne's sense of justice."

"You'd have an easier time finding the *Katana* fleet." Corran shook his head. "Zekka Thyne is a human-alien mongrel with big blue blots all over his pink-white flesh. His eyes are blood red except for black diamond pupils that are outlined in gold. He's got sharp ears, sharper teeth and the sharpest sense of retribution you've ever run into this side of a Wookiee bearing a grudge. I heard he shot a spice courier because the courier told Thyne she'd borrowed credits from a payoff, but had already repaid the momentary loan, with interest."

"What would Thyne have done had the woman not told him?"

"Killed her more slowly. He's a real artist with a vibroblade." Corran frowned heavily. "What Patches lacks in brains he makes up for in feral viciousness. What would you charge to kill him?"

Kast's head came up just a centimeter or two. "Are you asking me to murder him?"

Corran hesitated for a second. "No, I guess I'm not. I was just wondering. I thought maybe if I did it I could consider the amount you'd get paid as some sort of charitable deduction on my taxes. If I paid any, that is."

"I would not be averse to seeing Thyne eliminated, but that is outside the purview of my immediate task." Kast looked over at him. "I believe, however, I can get us in to see him. I think the diplomatic approach would be best."

"I agree. I prefer diplomacy." Corran tapped the blaster holstered beneath his left armpit. "I'm also ready in case we have to be undiplomatic."

"Which means?"

"Which means I go low, you go high."

Kast nodded solemnly. "That shall be our backup plan, then."

The bounty hunter piloted the landspeeder with ease through the darkened hills outside Coronet City. Thyne's estate had once belonged to a shipping magnate who was arrested and sent to Kessel for smuggling spice. Thyne had obtained the deed at auction, after which rumors started through the Corellian underworld suggesting Thyne had provided the evidence that got the magnate convicted. Corran always suspected that bit of subterfuge had actually been planned and executed by Prince Xizor, since Thyne had not since shown himself to be that clever.

As they crested the last hill and came down into the broad valley in which the estate had been built, Corran pointed at the main building. "It doesn't look like much, but those rolling hills serve as great revetments and channel an assault force in toward areas where he has mines in place. Up in the towers he's supposed to have E-webs capable of sweeping any soldiers off the grounds. Thyne is even supposed to have a bolthole ready to let him get safely away if trouble starts, which isn't likely. Double-thick walls, double-paned transparisteel windows, complete electronic sensing systems and forty to fifty blaster-boys make this a pretty tough nut to crack. I've heard CorSec has an open warrant to search the place, but without the Imp garrison to back them up, no one is stupid enough to try to deliver it."

"You weren't joking about the sensors." Kast directed the landspeeder toward two men coming out of a side entrance, catching them in the glow of the ridelamps, then turned the speeder to the left and let it settle to the ground. "I'll go speak with them. You be ready in case things go badly."

"You'll give me a sign?" Corran watched the bounty hunter unfold himself from the driver seat and mentally catalogued the weapons he could see. "Dumb question. If they fall I'll come running."

He watched Kast approach the two men. The bounty hunter held his hands open and out away from his sides, but not up in any sign that could be taken as surrender. *He wants them to know he doesn't intend to kill them, but that he's capable of doing just that given sufficient provocation.* The trio met and Corran could hear the buzz of voices, but could make out no words. One of Thyne's men spoke into a comlink, then Kast raised his left hand and beckoned Corran forward with a casual flutter of fingers.

Corran left the landspeeder and approached the three men, aping Kast's open-handed posture while doing so. One of Thyne's men came toward him, clearly intent on taking his blaster, but Corran frowned at him. *What, you think I'm stupid enough to try to shoot my way in and out of here?*

The blaster-boy hesitated, then sunk his hands into his pockets.

The other Black Sun hireling pointed at Corran. "Go ahead, take his blaster."

"You think he's stupid enough to try to shoot his way in and out of here?" The first gunman shook his head. "Let's take them to the boss. We don't want to keep him waiting."

"True. Follow us."

Their guides conducted them to the main entrance and into a foyer that Corran thought might have once rivaled that of the Coronet City Museum of Fine Art for splendor. Rose granite and black marble had been inset into the floor in a complex and chaotic pattern. A stone staircase spiraled up to the second and third floors, and drew the eyes upward to the holographic representation of the night sky above them. Small alcoves in the walls housed statuary and huge goldenrod wall panels provided ample space for the display of a vast array of paintings and original holographic works of art.

It's amazing how something that could have been so beautiful can so easily be made so...vulgar. It seemed as if Thyne's definition of art was intimately wrapped up with the concepts of nudity, excess



Illustration by Elisabeth Danforth

and a color scheme that relied heavily on pinks, purples and an irritatingly vibrant shade of green. Some of the statuary—what little of it actually could have found a home in the Museum of Fine Arts—had been garishly *corrected* by application of this color scheme, with excess paint having spilled down the walls. The paintings showed Corran a view of models he thought more appropriate for xenobiological textbooks and the holographs seemed the visual equivalent of a high-pitched scream.

"How much were you going to offer me to kill him?" Kast whispered.

"Not enough."

They followed their guides through the foyer and a huge set of double doors into Thyne's office. Here the clash of artworks had a new element added to it: a war between style of furnishings. Thyne's desk had been carved from deep brown *uvellu* tree wood and was in itself a work of art. Surrounding it were other pressed-form duraplast and fiberplast chairs and tables—the sort of things that could be left out in a glen because weather would not hurt them. A few stainless steel tables topped with transparisteel sheets

completed the decor and a riot of lamps—no two matching—provided illumination for it all.

Corran looked over at Hal and caught a brave nod from him despite the twin lines of blood dripping down from his nose. Haber Trell looked in worse shape, with a rapidly swelling eye and an inert vibroblade stuck into the seat of his chair between his thighs. The Tunroth's yellow flesh had greyed up a bit, and a dollop of bluish blood trickled from one nostril, but Rathe otherwise looked alert.

Zekka Thyne smiled at Kast and Corran found the expression nothing short of obscene. "Ah, Jodo Kast, finally we meet. Normally I do not retain an individual I have not met, but your reputation precedes you. I decided the credits were well spent." Thyne's scarlet gaze sharpened. "Don't disappoint me."

"I have no intention of doing so." With a swift, smooth motion, Kast drew a blaster in his right hand and jammed the muzzle against Corran's left temple. "Haber Trell and the Tunroth are assassins who were hired by Borbor Crisk to eliminate you. Their partners are even now arranging for Crisk to fill a couple hundred *sleight* boxes with the price for your head."

"That's not true!" Haber Trell snarled angrily. "He's lying."

Thyne silenced him with a backhanded slap. "So who are these other two?"

Kast grunted what almost seemed to be a laugh. "They hired these two locals to help them get around and as camouflage. With these two in tow, who would think they are galaxy-class assassins?"

Corran started to raise a hand to massage his head, but Kast kept the gun pressed hard against his skull. Corran wasn't certain which hurt more: his head or his pride at having been fooled by Kast. *He played me very well, just like he played the rest of us. Better I was in my father's place because Kast never would have fooled him.*

Corran glanced sidelong at Kast, then nodded toward Thyne. "You know, you really can't trust the word of a bounty hunter."

"True, but I am more willing to trust him than some assassin's local fetch-and-carry."

Kast reached over and relieved Corran of his blaster, then lowered his own gun. "My story is fairly easy to check out. You should dispatch some of your people to the Mynock's Haven. It is the cantina where Trell's partners are meeting within the hour with Crisk to finalize the payoff details. You'll find the *sleight* boxes at the Dewback storage yard near the spaceport. You can send other of your people there and wait for Crisk and his men to come and fill the boxes."

Corran rubbed at his temple. "You figured that out from my look at the place? You're good."

"That's why people retain me." Kast looked over at Thyne. "I take it you have detention cells here?"

"Wine cellar is empty. You can put them in alcoves down there."

"Good. I shall do that while you prepare the ambush for Crisk."

Kast motioned with his blaster for Corran to head toward the door.

"Once your people report back, you'll know who you can trust."

"Yes." Thyne hissed the word. "And those who are lying will pay the ultimate price for daring to deceive me."

End of Part Two

Check out the exciting two-part conclusion to "Side Trip" in the May issue of *The Official Star Wars Adventure Journal*!

Roleplaying Game Statistics

■ Haber Trell

Type: Smuggler

DEXTERITY 3D

Blaster 6D, brawling parry 5D, dodge 5D, melee parry 5D

KNOWLEDGE 3D

Alien species 4D, bureaucracy 5D, business 5D, business: shipping 6D, business: smuggling 6D+1, languages 4D, law enforcement 5D, planetary systems 7D, value 5D

MECHANICAL 4D

Astrogation 6D, repulsorlift operation 6D, space transports 6D+2, starship gunnery 4D+2, starship shields 7D

PERCEPTION 3D

Bargain 5D, con 5D, forgery 6D, persuasion 5D, sneak 5D

STRENGTH 2D+1

Brawling 4D+1

TECHNICAL 2D+2

First aid 3D+2, repulsorlift repair 4D+2, space transports repair 4D+2

Character Points: 11

Move: 10

Equipment: Blaster pistol (4D), comlink, datapad

Capsule: Haber Trell is the captain of the *Hopskip*, an independent light freighter re-tooled to engage in minor smuggling activities. Trell, a middle-aged human from Carida, has been a "footloose wanderer" for most of his adult life, moving from system to system and taking whatever jobs — legal or illicit — that would help finance the next leg of his rather aimless travels.



Illustration by Elizabeth Danforth

■ Hal Horn

Type: CorSec Officer

DEXTERITY 3D

Archaic guns 3D+2, blaster: blaster pistol 6D+2, brawling parry 4D, dodge 5D+2, firearms 5D, melee combat 3D+2

KNOWLEDGE 3D

Alien species 5D, bureaucracy 4D, bureaucracy: CorSec 7D+2, bureaucracy: the Empire 5D, business 4D, business: smuggling 6D, cultures 4D+2, intimidation 4D, intimidation: interrogation 6D, languages 3D+2, law enforcement 4D, law enforcement: CorSec 8D, planetary systems 4D, planetary systems: Corellian system 8D, streetwise 7D+2, willpower 6D+2

MECHANICAL 2D+2

Astrogation 5D, beast riding 4D+2, repulsorlift operation 5D, sensors 6D, space transports 5D, starfighter piloting 3D+2, starship gunnery 4D+2, starship shields 4D+2

PERCEPTION 4D

Bargain 4D+2, command 5D, con 5D, forgery 5D, gambling 5D, hide 5D, investigation 6D, investigation: Corellian system 8D, persuasion 6D, search 7D, sneak 5D

STRENGTH 3D+1

Brawling 5D+1, swimming 4D+1

TECHNICAL 2D

Computer programming/repair 5D, first aid 4D, security 5D

Character Points: 16

Move: 10

Equipment: Blaster pistol (4D), CorSec identification

Capsule: Hal Horn — like his father before him — has been a longtime member of the Corellian Security apparatus. A native of the Corellian system, Horn is widely recognized in CorSec circles for his effective counter-smuggling operations.



Illustration by Elizabeth Danforth

■ Rathe Palror

Type: Tunroth Hunter

DEXTERITY 4D

Archaic guns: Yctor black-powder pistol 6D, bows: Tunroth *klirun* bow 6D, blaster 4D+2, blaster: blaster pistol 7D, blaster: blaster rifle 7D+2, brawling parry 6D, dodge 6D, grenade 5D, melee combat 6D+2, melee parry 7D+2

KNOWLEDGE 2D+2

Planetary systems 5D, survival 5D

MECHANICAL 2D+2

PERCEPTION 3D

Hide 5D, search 6D, sneak 6D

STRENGTH 3D+2

Brawling 6D+1, lifting 6D, stamina 6D+2

TECHNICAL 2D

Demolitions 4D

Special Abilities:

Quarry Sense: Tunroth Hunters have an innate sense that enables them to determine which path or direction prey has taken. A Tunroth Hunter gains a +1D bonus to *search* for targets that he or she is at least passingly familiar with.

Character Points: 15

Move: 10

Equipment: Yctor Arms black-powder pistol (3D, 3/10/25, two rounds to reload), *klirun* bow (5D, 10 arrows), blaster pistol (4D), comlink

Capsule: Rathe Palror was a sharpshooter for Churhee's Riflemen, a pro-Imperial mercenary group that operated throughout the Outer Rim Territories. During a recent operation, the Riflemen were nearly wiped out while working for Imperials on the planet Y'Trella; this incident also led to the death of the Riflemen's commanding officer and founder, Vlaydm Churhee. Ever since the debacle on Y'Trella, Rathe has been actively assisting Rijj Winward, a member of the Rebel Alliance. Precisely how the unlikely pair met and became associates is unknown, and neither Winward nor Palror is willing to discuss the matter.



Illustration by Elizabeth Danforth

■ Rijj Winward

Type: Rebel Procurement Specialist

DEXTERITY 3D+2

Blaster 5D+2, dodge 5D+2, melee combat 4D+2, melee parry 4D+2

KNOWLEDGE 3D+1

Alien species 5D+1, bureaucracy 6D+1, business 5D+1, cultures 5D, languages 5D, law enforcement 5D, planetary systems 5D, streetwise 5D, value 5D

MECHANICAL 2D+1

Beast riding 3D+1, repulsorlift operation 5D+1, sensors 5D, space transports 4D+2

PERCEPTION 3D+2

Bargain 7D, con 5D+2, forgery 5D, hide 4D+2, persuasion 4D+2, sneak 4D+2

STRENGTH 3D

Brawling 4D+

TECHNICAL 2D

Blaster repair 4D, computer programming/repair 5D, first aid 4D+2, security



Illustration by Elizabeth Danforth

5D

Character Points: 2

Move: 10

Equipment: Blaster pistol (4D), fake ID

Capsule: Rijj Winward joined the Rebel Alliance roughly one year prior to the Battle of Yavin. Winward — born in Calius Saj Leeloo on the planet Berchest — grew up under Imperial rule. After his brother was pressed into Imperial service, Winward stowed away on a ship departing the planet, in hopes of escaping the Empire.

The vessel, an independent freighter that was covertly running guns to the Rebel Alliance, rendezvoused with the Alliance fleet before the young stowaway was discovered. The freighter's captain, upon hearing Winward's story, turned Winward over to the Alliance, which promptly welcomed him with open arms. Over time, Winward discovered he had an aptitude for locating needed parts and supplies — a benefit of growing up in the middle of a modest trading center — and rapidly became a "procurement specialist" for the Alliance.

■ Maranne Darmic

Type: Smuggler

DEXTERITY 3D+1

Blaster 5D+1, brawling parry 4D+2, dodge 5D+1

KNOWLEDGE 2D+1

Alien species 4D+1, languages 4D+1, planetary systems 6D, streetwise 4D+1, value 6D

MECHANICAL 3D+2

Astrogation 4D+2, communications 6D, repulsorlift operation 5D+2, sensors 6D, space transports 4D+2, starship gunnery 4D+2, starship shields 5D+2

PERCEPTION 3D

Bargain 4D, con 4D, gambling 5D, search 5D, sneak 5D

STRENGTH 3D

Brawling 3D+2, stamina 3D+2, swimming 3D+2

TECHNICAL 2D+2

Computer programming/repair 4D+2, first aid 4D+2, repulsorlift repair 6D, security 5D+2, space transports repair 6D

Character Points: 7

Move: 10

Equipment: Blaster pistol (4D), hold-out blaster (3D), comlink, datapad, toolkit

Capsule: Maranne Darmic is a young woman who was born on Coruscant. Her father, Dreja Darmic, worked as a mechanic in one of Imperial Center's many commercial spaceports; as a result, Maranne developed a great love of starships and space travel.

After her father was arrested (ostensibly for "tax evasion," though



Illustration by Elizabeth Dandorff

many spoke of Dreja's sympathy for the Rebel Alliance), there was little to tie Maranne to Coruscant. Roughly two years prior to the Battle of Yavin, Maranne shipped out on the first available freighter, a freighter captained by Haber Trell.

Over time, Maranne has become a shrewd businesswoman, though she is still very naive when it comes to smuggling; despite her sharp mind and fierce determination, she still has a great deal to learn.

■ Corran Horn

Type: Young CorSec Officer

DEXTERITY 3D

Blaster 4D+2, brawling parry 4D+2, dodge 4D+2, melee combat 3D+2

KNOWLEDGE 2D

Bureaucracy 3D, bureaucracy: Imperial 6D, law enforcement: Corellian Security Force 5D+2, planetary systems 5D+2, streetwise 6D+2, value 5D, willpower 4D+2

MECHANICAL 4D

Astrogation 4D+1, communications 4D+2, sensors 4D+2, starfighter piloting 4D+2, starship gunnery 5D, starship shields 5D

PERCEPTION 3D

Command 4D, con 5D, forgery 4D, persuasion 4D+2, search 4D, sneak 6D

STRENGTH 3D

Brawling 5D, climbing/jumping 4D+2, stamina 5D

TECHNICAL 3D

Computer programming/repair 4D, droid programming 4D+2, droid repair 5D, first aid 4D, security 6D, starfighter repair

This character is Force-sensitive

Force Points: 2

Character Points: 6

Move: 10

Equipment: Blaster pistol (4D), CorSec identification

Capsule: Corran Horn is a young, idealistic agent of the Corellian Security Force, who — like his father — has an extreme distaste for those who violate the law. While not as experienced as Hal Horn, Corran is an extremely capable law enforcement officer.

■ Zekka Thyne

Type: Black Sun Operative

DEXTERITY 3D

Archaic guns 4D, blaster 6D, brawling parry 6D, dodge 5D, grenade 4D, melee combat 4D, melee parry 4D, thrown weapons 5D

KNOWLEDGE 2D

Alien species 3D, bureaucracy 4D, business 5D, intimidation 6D, intimidation: bullying 6D+2, law enforcement 5D, planetary systems 6D, streetwise 6D+2, value 6D, willpower 5D



Illustration by Elizabeth Dandorff

MECHANICAL 2D+2

Astrogation 4D+2, repulsorlift operation 5D+2, sensors 3D+2, space transports 5D, starship gunnery 5D, starship shields 4D+2, swoop operation 6D

PERCEPTION 4D

Bargain 4D+2, command 5D, con 5D, forgery 5D, gambling 6D, hide 6D, search 4D+2, sneak 6D

STRENGTH 4D

Brawling 6D+2, climbing/jumping 6D+2, lifting 6D+2, stamina 6D

TECHNICAL 2D+1

Demolitions 4D+1, first aid 4D, security 6D

Character Points: 10

Move: 10

Equipment: Heavy blaster pistol (5D+2), hold-out blaster (3D+2), vibroknife (STR+2D)

Capsule: Zekka Thyne was little more than a youthful human-alien drifter when he was recruited into the infamous swoop gang, The Skulls. After building a reputation as a brutal, capable and violent criminal (quite a feat, given the vicious nature of The Skulls), Thyne drifted to the Corellian system, once again developing notoriety as a relentless and dangerous thug in the employ of local loan sharks.

Currently, Thyne acts as an operative for the criminal organization, Black Sun, in the Corellian system. While there is little evidence to support the theory that Thyne was personally selected for his current "assignment," by Prince Xizor, many members of CorSec are convinced that the brutal criminal has earned favor in the upper echelons of Black Sun.



Illustration by Elizabeth Danforth

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by Patricia A. Jackson
and Charlene Newcomb

Alex cried out as the excruciating pain shot across her arm and shoulder. She felt the scorched fabric beneath her fingertips and, staring at her jacket, she saw the jagged slash that cut through to her skin. Sweat pouring from her face, Alex looked up at the imposing figure standing at the top of the hill.

"Who are you?"

Maniacal laughter echoed against the impenetrable darkness of the mountainside.

"Why are you doing this?"

Alex screamed.

"Miss Winger?"

A gruff, filtered voice jolted Alex Winger from her daydream. Heart pounding, she wiped the cool sweat from her forehead and pushed a loose strand of hair from her eyes.

"Miss Winger. You can pass now."

Alex stared up into the face of an Imperial stormtrooper. Beneath her, she felt the gentle vibrations of her landspeeder's repulsorlift engines as they idled silently at the security checkpoint. "Sorry," she said, taking back her ID. As the stormtrooper waved her through, the nightmarish vision remained an intrusion on her senses.

Closing her eyes, she drew in a deep breath, then released it.



Illustration by Tim Booko

Calm down, she told herself. Brief glimpses of the peculiar scene replayed themselves in her mind. They were vivid, poignant images accompanied by feelings of dread and helplessness.

As in the vision, pain swept through her body. Alex could hear the muffled pulse of the lightsaber as it grazed her skin. Her hands tightened on the steering column. White-knuckled and trembling, she felt another presence reaching out to her from that dark apparition. Someone she cared for cried out in agony.

Gunning the landspeeder's engines, Alex struggled to shake the haunting apparition. Blaster fire echoed in the distance; and from the corner of her eye, she caught the movements of armed troops on the rooftops of the buildings that lined Ariana's main avenue. Since word of an impending New Republic invasion had filtered through the capital city, the situation on Garos IV had changed drastically in the last few days. Traffic jammed the streets—empty cargo skiffs headed north into the city, while scout troopers escorted skiffs, crammed with equipment and Imperial officers, south toward the spaceport.

Alex ignored the chaotic scenes, her mind searching the vision for clues. Rising from her memory, the apparition materialized in her mind. He was a faceless renegade consumed by dark shadows that threatened to engulf her. At his feet, on the windswept hillside, Alex could see a body. And beyond them, there was a tremendous thundering that shook the ground. What could it mean?

Alex tightly grasped the controls of the speeder and stopped it across from Imperial Headquarters. She studied the old granitite building. Its flying arches and graceful lines were a tribute to Garosian ingenuity. Gray pillars lined the front entrances. Nearly four stories tall, the imposing, immobile stone sentinels held the weight of the structure and the ideals of the men and women who worked inside. Her eyes finally came to rest on the fourth-floor corner office—Imperial Governor Tork Winger's suite.

She took a deep breath, staring at the movement of shadows in the glass of her father's private office. She thought about the gentle man who had adopted her when she was six. Though she loved him dearly, explaining her intentions to remain in Ariana was not something she looked forward to. Alex had run through the conversation a dozen times in her head, but the outcome was uncertain.

Winger did not know about her activities with the resistance movement on Garos or her more recent involvement with the New Republic. How could she tell him the truth—that his daughter was

a traitor to the Empire he served? It would be only a matter of time before word filtered out about the players involved in the movement to free Garos from Imperial authority. And the name Alexandra Winger would be near the top of that list.

Alex bowed her head, willing her heart to slow its frantic pace. Smoothing the neckline of her sapphire gown, she stepped away from the speeder and closed the door. The heavy train pulled at her back and shoulders, but she shrugged at the slight weight and started up the corridor.

The florescent lighting grids inside were a welcomed blessing. Within the warm glow, there were no shadows to taunt her or to cry out in agony. By force of habit, Alex moved through the vacant mezzanine to the lift platform. Arriving at the restricted level of her father's suite, she stepped down from the platform. The stormtroopers at the end of the passage hardly acknowledged her arrival, recognizing her from frequent visits to her father's office. As she reached for the door, she noticed it was slightly ajar; and the sounds of voices escaped to her ears.

"Is it true he's a Jedi Knight?" Lieutenant Dair Haslip asked.

Alex recognized the Imperial officer's voice and paused nervously, waiting—as he did—for an answer. Unconsciously, she ran her hand back and forth across her arm where the lightsaber in her vision had slashed her.

"Indeed he is," Winger replied, "which is precisely why he was sent to conduct the evacuation. His training was overseen by the Emperor at one point, I believe. Before all that," Alex heard her father cough abruptly, clearing his throat, "before all that nasty business with the Rebel Alliance at Endor. His being an actor is a boon really. I thought an impromptu performance might raise some spirits. He thoroughly agreed."

"Isn't there someone more trustworthy than Brandl who could accomplish this?"

"None so close. Don't forget, Lord Brandl was obviously able to please the Emperor—if he hadn't, he wouldn't be alive."

Brandl. It was a name from the past that made Alex's blood run cold. It was the name of a dark Jedi, who by order of the Emperor, carried out the mission that resulted in the destruction of her homeworld and the deaths of her grandparents fifteen years ago. In hearing the name, her senses filled with vivid details of the Imperial ships and troops that led the destruction. Her body ached from intense memories of the hot, blast-scored rubble and transparisteel

that nearly entombed her. Jaalib Brandl. Could this be the same man?

Alex peered into her father's office, slowly pressing the door open. Tork Winger stood by the window, hands clasped behind his back, staring outside into the darkening skies. "Are you sure you won't join us, Lieutenant? Alexandra will be so disappointed."

"I'll make it up to her and you, sir," Dair Haslip replied. "I've never been much of a theater-goer. I'll leave Lord Brandl and his entourage to you."

"Lord Brandl?" Alex questioned, masking her dread behind a smile.

"Good evening, Alex," Dair said.

"Who's this Brandl?" she repeated, as she moved across the room to join her father by the window.

"An actor," Dair said with biting sarcasm.

Alex looked up sharply and met his intent eyes. Swallowing the lump in her throat, she read the concern in his face and acknowledged it with a subtle nod.

"He's not just an actor, Alexandra. Jaalib Brandl is the gentleman charged with overseeing the orderly evacuation of Ariana." Glaring adamantly at Dair, Winger soothed the harsh glance with a smile. "And his credentials are impeccable...both in commanding troops and commanding an audience." He gently took her hand and squeezed it, kissing her knuckles. "You look lovely this evening, Alexandra."

"Thank you." Alex blushed, her cheeks warming with the compliment. "But I really don't understand this, Father. It seems absurd to be attending this performance when we're about to be invaded by the New Republic."

"Lord Brandl has everything in control, Alexandra. Besides, this dramatic presentation may help soothe the nerves of our comrades." Winger glanced over his shoulder and back outside at the activity in the streets. "Good for morale, you know."

Alex looked toward Dair, catching the expression of disgust that crossed his face. Like her, he had nothing but contempt for the Galactic Empire and its authority. The uniform he wore was strictly a cover. It allowed him to infiltrate the Imperial military command on Garos for the purpose of undermining and dismantling it.

"Dair, are you sure you won't keep us company?" Winger pleaded.

"Sorry, Governor Winger." Dair stared down at Alex and shrugged. "I promised some friends I'd meet them at Chado's Pub. This

evacuation is scattering us to different posts, so we wanted to get together for a good-bye drink."

"Then we shall leave you to it, Lieutenant. Come along, my dear. I see our escort has arrived." Winger offered Alex his arm as the intercom buzzed to signal the arrival. The governor nodded to Dair. "Tell them we're on our way downstairs."



A fine mist descended from the ceiling tiles above the stage of the Tihaz Theatre as a low fog drifted in from the curtain wings. The deceptive rhythm of spring rain echoed from the inner recesses and rooftop of the elaborate set of a nobleman's cottage. It was night time in the drama; and in the background, the nocturnal cries of a wounded animal sounded in the distance. The agonizing cry was the director's subtle cue.

Sitting on a stool at the edge of an antiquated game table, the actor exploded into a blur of motion. In a rage, he swept his arms over the Jj'abot table, knocking all but three pawns to the stage floor. Alex stifled a gasp, bracing herself against a reaction as the congregation about her lurched and bulked in their seats. There was a powerful disturbance in the Force as Jaalib Brandl used it to manipulate his mesmerized audience.

Alex saw it as a malignant conjuration of his talents and ability. She took a deep breath. A knot formed in the pit of her stomach at the outpouring of darkness emanating from the stage presence. She swallowed pensively as she glanced into the faces around her. Her father's subordinates and peers were aglow in the strength of the performance, smiling and attentive to the unfolding drama.

Alex resented their insensitivity. Annoyed by it, she concentrated on the dark, brooding figure sitting just beyond the shadows of the prop front. Dressed in a full-length black robe, Brandl's erect body had the arrogant air of inherent aristocracy. Although his long, black hair was swept to the sides, away from his face, the faded stage lighting made it difficult to estimate his age. Was he the man who had led the Imperials to her homeworld? She could not be certain.

As the noise of clattering game pieces faded, the door of the cottage opened and the female lead stood in the portal, bathed in a halo of background light. "Dear, gentle Dontavian," the actress

whispered. Alex rolled her eyes, recognizing the over-rehearsed accent in her voice. "Won't you come in from the cold?"

"Would you have me forsake my grave?" Brandl replied.

"Forsake your grave, Dontavian?"

"Yes, forsake my grave, as I have forsaken my father and forsaken my king!" Brandl spoke in low, even tones that caused a chill to run the length of Alex's spine. There was a sinister undertone to it that had only been hinted at throughout the tragedy. Here in the final acts, the menace was all too real. Having betrayed the love of his father for his loyalty to the king and then in turn, betrayed his king for the love of his father, the warrior and knight Dontavian was alone to face the consequences of his dual betrayal.

"I am a man without country, without family, without allegiance. I am worse than any man dead in his grave." Brandl turned to regard his distraught co-star. "I could only wish for the peace of the grave. For I am nothing! Not a son, not a knight, nothing." He rose from the stool, snatching the sculpted image of a black knight from the Jj'abot board. Alex wondered at the use of the peculiar prop, its symbolic significance. A black knight for a dark Jedi, how appropriate.

"Dontavian!" The actress fell at his feet, grasping at his dark robes. "Dontavian, my husband, what will become of you?" she gasped, zealously overacting the part. She buried her face in the hem of his robes, pretending to weep at their plight. "Where will you go?"

"I shall become as the shadows," Brandl declared. He stared into the audience, as if attempting to meet each audience member's eyes. "And I shall go, where only the darkness reigns..."

On this final cue, the curtain fell across the stage. The hand-picked audience of Imperial officers and citizens applauded in earnest, commending the performance. "Stunning, simply stunning!" one of the command officers commented, rising from his seat to join the unanimous standing ovation. Begrudgingly, Alex rose from her seat and praised the performance with as much sincerity as she could muster, shielding her uncertainty beneath a thin smile.

"Who would have thought a Jedi capable of such a moving performance," her father said incredulously. Leaning against the back of his seat, he stared at the swaying curtains as Jaalib Brandl came through them to make his final bows. "I think it's about time we met this young man. Shall we, Alexandra?" He stood up, offering Alex his arm.



Illustration by Tim Bobko

Alex was grateful for the weight of her gown as it slowed her eager reaction to meeting Lord Brandl face to face. Officers and prominent citizens parted before them, nodding respectfully as they passed between the rows. While her father escorted her down the narrow aisle between Garos's dignitaries, Alex fixed her eyes on the dark Jedi. Standing only half a meter from the crowd surrounding the ominous figure, she studied the cool depths of his blue eyes. Impossible, she thought, concentrating on the handsome face. He was only a few years older than she. He would have been a child at the time of her grandparents' murder.

An Imperial officer, a lieutenant, stood in Brandl's shadow scanning the crowd. Alex did not recognize the shock of white-blond hair or the unreadable expression of the stranger's face. His manner was one of complete calm, but vigilant, as if expecting some assault against the Jedi. He turned, as if sensing Alex's direct glare. Never taking his eyes from her, the officer tapped Brandl on the shoulder.

With a tangible intensity that moved in his gaze, Brandl turned to them. His eyes brightened immediately with recognition. "Gov-

ernor Winger." He bowed with deference. "It is a great honor to meet you."

"I think the honor should be mine," Winger replied with sincerity, offering his hand to the Jedi in friendship. Turning to Alex, the governor pulled her close to him and held Alex with warm affection. "Lord Brandl, this is the brightest star in my skies. My daughter, Alexandra."

Several centimeters taller than Alex, Brandl stepped toward her, enveloping her in the length of his shadow. Alex fought against a sudden tremor that swept the length of her back as the nightmarish vision came, unbidden, to her memory. Brandl took her hand gently and bowed again, never taking his eyes from hers. "My pleasure, Miss Winger." Noting the graceful curves of her face and the almond shape of her eyes, bright, blue, passionate eyes, he smiled graciously. "A man could only be envious of such a resplendent star, Governor."

Winger's grin deepened with the compliment. "You come highly qualified, Lord Brandl. I'm eager to turn over the evacuation to your capable hands and your staff." The governor nodded to the officer at Brandl's side.

The Jedi rolled his eyes in despair. "Have I forgotten my manners? Speaking of qualified, this is Lieutenant Werth, Bane Werth, my assistant. He will be overseeing those areas that I cannot attend to personally."

"Governor," Werth whispered. "Miss Winger."

"You must be exhausted after such a stirring performance," Winger said as the crowd of Imperial notables gathered about them. "Allow me to offer my home as a sanctuary to you and your aide, Lord Brandl."

"Governor Winger, a word with you," an Imperial commander called from the back of the group. "That unfinished business with the resistance, Governor."

Alex watched her father's face darken with the mention of the resistance movement. "Alexandra." He turned to her, whispering. "Please take Lord Brandl and Lieutenant Werth back to the mansion for some well-deserved hospitality. I have some other business to see to. I'll join you shortly."

"Stay with the governor," Brandl instructed Werth. There was an urgency in his voice that would not be overruled. "I insist, Governor," he said before Winger could protest.

"It really is a good idea, father," Alex agreed, carefully watching

the Jedi's reaction. "My landspeeder is just outside the Headquarters' building, Lord Brandl. Won't you follow me?"

Brandl grinned ominously. "A fleet of Star Destroyers couldn't hold me away." He offered his arm to her with an air of challenge.

Alex bit her tongue and accepted his arm. She led them from the theater, down the short walk, and to her landspeeder.

"Alex!"

Hearing her name, she turned toward the chaotic shadows just inside Chado's Pub. The Imperial tavern overflowed with uniformed and civilian patrons. Despite this, she instantly recognized Dair Haslip waving at her from the corner booth. She returned the wave, feeling Brandl's inquisitive eyes upon her.

Alex turned to open the landspeeder door. She paused, staring at Brandl, who was intently staring beyond her into the pub. "Chado's Pub," she offered. "It's a very popular place, as you can see. Even in the midst of our crisis."

"Is he a friend of yours?"

"Mine and my father's."

There was a peculiar ambiance about Brandl, as if he were ascertaining the truth in her words. Then without warning, he broke into a pleasant smile. "Shall we go?"

Alex glanced over her shoulder toward the pub, wondering what dark interest Brandl had taken in the establishment. Sitting down behind the steering bar, she started the speeder's engines and backtracked through Ariana, following the main road south to the governor's mansion, her home.



An elaborate mosaic of stars was spread across the night skies above Garos IV. Too numerous to count, the vacillating lights created an inspiring backdrop for the twin moons hovering in elliptical orbit about the planet. As the intensity of moonlight fanned out across the countryside, a gentle breeze stirred the trees on the grounds of the governor's mansion. The celestial orbs illuminated the treacherous coastline below the estate and laid a trail of white light across the waters of the Locura Ocean.

Alex watched a flock of crupas as they flew from the rooftop, across the faces of Garos's twin moons, and into the night. Listening to the roar of the sea crashing against the cliffs, she closed her eyes

and reveled in the serenity of her home.

"Thank you for the guided tour, Alexandra," Brandl said. He set his wine glass down on the aged stone patio railing. Leaning against the smooth surface, his eyes followed the moonlight down through the rocky Garosian hillside and into the shadows of the cliffs beyond. "Pity you have to leave all this."

Wondering if Brandl was taunting her, Alex straightened her shoulders and proudly raised her chin. "I do love this place." As she studied his features in the darkness, the apparition once again emerged from the depths of her mind. She forced herself to bury the visions deep within her subconscious. "Shall we walk down by the cliff's edge? The view from there is absolutely gorgeous."

"Aren't the paths treacherous at night?"

"Not with the moons shining so brightly. And not with an experienced guide to lead you." Alex grinned, carefully bundling the train of her gown under her arm.

Brandl was quick to help her fasten the lace bustle, freeing her legs to move over the uneven footing. "After you," he gallantly declared, allowing her to take the lead.

Skirting the rocky edges, Alex led the way down a well-worn path. She feigned a slip on the loose surface and felt Brandl's hands at her shoulders, steadying her with practiced assurance. As he helped her down from the moss-covered rock, he said, "You never did tell me your thoughts on this evening's performance."

It was a fair question, Alex thought. "All right. Dontavian's father?"

Brandl turned to her, intrigued by the unspoken question. "What of him?"

"He was blind, wasn't he?"

"Indeed, he was."

"Then why did he and his servant disguise themselves as Tusken raiders to avoid being captured. A blind Tusken? Isn't that a bit farcical?"

"I don't think you understand the symbolism behind—"

An animal howled mournfully in the distance, its cry echoing around the mountainside and between the close confines of the trees.

Brandl turned instinctively to the sound, fixing his gaze on the shadows moving beneath the forest canopy. "What was that?"

"A wild boetay. They roam the countryside in small packs."

"Are they dangerous?"

"They can be quite vicious, especially if you disturb their young. But they tend to avoid contact with humans."

"Have you ever seen one?" Brandl rushed down the path ahead of her, intently searching the woods for some sign of the creature.

"Only from a distance," Alex replied, bewildered by his sudden excitement.

For a moment, Brandl seemed to become a small child, inquisitive and fearless in the face of certain danger. He closed his eyes, his face darkening until it assumed an otherworldly expression of absolute tranquillity. Alex watched in fascination, sensing the presence of the Force as the Jedi concentrated the life-force energy about him. Through his talents, it became a tangible essence—an extension of his mind, reaching out in summons to the presence beyond them in the shadows.

There was a low shuffling in the underbrush that grew steadily louder, breaking the Jedi's concentration. Before Alex could react to the noise, a boetay puppy came bounding from the shadows. Barely three weeks old, the animal's hide was a dark fawn, broken at regular intervals by black stripes that ran the length of its neck, back, and quarters. With uncharacteristic playfulness, the pup loped through the dried underbrush, its stunted legs hindered by the deep compost of gnarled branches and fallen leaves. Without hesitation, it trotted up to Brandl and balled itself in his hands as he picked it up, cradling the puppy in his arms. "A boetay?" He tried to hand the creature to Alex.

"Didn't you hear me right? That little one's mother has got to be close by. If she even suspects that you—"

"Look behind you, Alex." There was a sinister tone to Brandl's voice. His statement was a command, not a request. "Look."

Glaring at him, Alex slowly obeyed, glancing cautiously over her shoulder. She stifled a scream as the shadow of the adult boetay crossed her line of vision. It was a scant half-meter away. The animal panted passively at the sight of her, ignoring the scent of fear emanating from the human girl. With uncommon complacency, the boetay sank down on its haunches and then laid down at her feet, as if waiting until the pleasantries of the unexpected introduction were over.

"You see," Brandl whispered, leaning over her shoulder. "There's nothing to be afraid of, Alex. Here," he stroked the puppy one last time and then tucked the creature into Alex's arms.

Alex could not resist the temptation to stroke the boetay's head,

feeling the soft fur beneath her fingers. The puppy nibbled gently at her hand, charming her into a playful game of pinch and nip. She swallowed pensively, bending at the waist as she lowered the puppy to its mother. In a bold stroke, she reached out to the adult boetay. "Don't be afraid," she heard Brandl whisper behind her. Petting the creature's face with her fingers, she drew back in awe. She watched, as if staring through the illusionary side of a mirror, as the boetay retrieved its pup in its massive jaws and loped away, back to the shadowy sanctuary of the woods.

Alex exhaled, trembling visibly as the emotion of the moment swept through her. Turning to Brandl, she met his smiling face with incredulous wonder. "How...how did you—"

The static crackle of a comlink interrupted her. "Lord Brandl, contact-code red. Respond."

Quickly pulling the comlink to his lips, Brandl's face hardened in the glow of the moonlight. "Report!"

"There's been an explosion across from Imperial Headquarters. Structural compromise. Collateral damage. The works." Lieutenant Werth's voice transmitted his calm across the signal, lending a semblance of control to an otherwise chaotic circumstance.

"My father!" Alex shouted.

"The Governor?"

"He wasn't anywhere near the blast. We were in the headquarters building. You better get down here. It's quite a scene. Werth out."

There was a familiarity in Werth's tone that raised Alex's suspicions. But concern for her father outweighed any misgivings she had about the Jedi and his military aide. As Brandl took her by the arm, she hurried up the winding trail to the patio. There were no words between them as they ran to the landspeeder, which was parked under the mansion's front portico.

Brandl slid over the closed door and into the passenger seat, as Alex threw herself behind the steering bar, ignoring the tight pull of her gown. Throwing the speeder into gear, she jammed the accelerator and guided the craft back onto the main road leading to Ariana.

Nearly a kilometer away from the city, the deafening sounds of security sirens could be heard above the speeder's laboring engines. Alex swerved through the abandoned checkpoint and braked sharply as Lieutenant Werth walked out of the commotion of emergency medical vehicles and rescue equipment to meet them.

Glancing at Alex, Werth pursed his lips as if reconsidering what he was going to say. But as Brandl's sharp gaze fell over him, the officer straightened, ignoring Alex as if she were not there.

"It was a thermal detonator." Behind him, the rescue crews struggled to pull another body from the rubble of Chado's Pub. The entire front of the building had collapsed in the blast. Smoke and flames still rose from the expired explosion as a pair of droids sprayed the area with flame-retardant foam. Blown some eighty meters from the blast radius, glass and debris littered the thoroughfare and the steps of the Imperial Headquarters building across the street.

"Where is Governor Winger?" Brandl asked, motioning for a detachment of stormtroopers to join him at the site.

"We were in his office at the time of the explosion. He should be on his way now to inspect the damage himself," Werth replied. The Imperial turned to Alex, sensing her unspoken question. "He's a bit shaken, but fine."

Alex frantically scanned the crowd, looking for any sign of her friends as two emergency vehicles pulled away from the scene. Hearing the report on her father, she turned to Brandl and saw the relief that swept across his face. "Lieutenant Werth, do you know who was hurt? Who have they taken to the medical center?"

"No names as yet, Miss Winger. I'm sure the extraction team will—"

"Alex!"

Alex recognized the voice immediately. "Dair! Thank the stars you're all right." She ran up to the Imperial and wrapped her arms around him. "How did you get out of there alive?"

Dusted with glass particles from the explosion, Dair brushed at the sleeves of his uniform. "I left about a minute before the blast. Nilo and I were standing in front of HQ when the whole thing went up." He stared at the rubble of the pub and shook his head incredulously.

"I want the entire area sealed off! Now! No questions!" Brandl raged. "Sergeant, I want the city boundaries blockaded immediately. No one in. No one out. Every transport is to be searched, top to bottom. You have your orders! Move out!"

While Brandl was preoccupied, Alex turned to Dair, shielding her face in the dimness. "The underground?"

Carefully checking to see who was watching, Dair exhaled with effort, avoiding her eyes. He shook his head in a subtle acknowledg-

ment to her question about their shared friends in the resistance movement. Chado's Pub was more than just a popular meeting place for Imperials and citizen patrons. It was a successful front for the Garosian resistance, from which the movement derived much of its intelligence information and tactical reports.

Alex stared at the twenty or so body bags lining the buckled sidewalk beside the destroyed pub. "Who would have authorized this, Dair?"

"I don't have those answers, Alex," he whispered, watching as a detachment of stormtroopers escorted Governor Winger to the site of the blast. "Just watch your back. Lord Brandl may not be all he appears to be."

"What?"

"Lieutenant Haslip," Werth called. "A word with you please."

Alex felt another chill as that familiar, sinister undertone appeared in Werth's voice. She lingered at Dair's shoulders, releasing him only after a brief, silent dialogue between their eyes. "Just watch your back, Alex," he whispered again.

She watched him for a moment, straining to hear the conversation above the sound of crackling flames and nearby comlinks. "No," she heard Dair saying, "I don't remember seeing any suspicious characters. The pub was packed with regulars, a typical evening..."

"Damnable Rebels!" Governor Winger snarled. Seeing his daughter, he cried out, "Alexandra!" As he quickened his pace toward Alex, the eleven stormtroopers about him hastened their strides to keep pace. The governor swept her into his arms. "Are you all right, my dear?"

"Fine, now that I can see you for myself." She brushed a stray hair from his face, staying close to his warmth. "I was with Lord Brandl." As she spoke his name, Alex turned to see the Jedi crossing the street toward them. His shoulders were broad and tense with rage as the full burden of his authority bore down upon him.

"I don't care whose transport it is," he snarled at the subordinate scurrying at his heels. "Nothing comes before the Governor's safety or his daughter's. Is that clear? I want that skiff ready within the hour." Halting suddenly, he whirled on the officer. "Your failure will be met with the swiftest justice...my justice. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Lord Brandl." Turning from the Jedi, the officer motioned some men to assist him. Nearby, Alex saw Lieutenant Werth watching, a smirk of satisfaction etched across his face. Noticing that she

was staring at him, he quickly turned back to the business of questioning Dair.

"Was it the resistance, Lord Brandl?" Winger questioned eagerly.

Brandl's face was dark with emotion, hidden intentions moving across his eyes as he raised his gaze from the scorched ground to meet the governor's eyes. "No doubt in my mind."

Liar! Alex shouted within her mind. She could sense the lie, clear and above her own knowledge about Chado's Pub and its connections to Garos's underground freedom fighters.

"Given the nature of this random attack, so close to Imperial Headquarters, I must insist that you and your daughter accompany me to a safehouse, Governor Winger. My superiors briefed me about this Garosian resistance movement. I never assumed they'd attempt such a bold tactic against us."

Winger shook his head to protest. "I don't think that's necessary—"

"Governor, this isn't some fringe group of radicals we're talking about here." Brandl straightened his towering frame, staring down at Winger. "These people are well-armed, and very likely connected with the New Republic. They will stop at nothing to achieve their goals. Your safety and the safety of your daughter are in my hands. Now please, allow me to do my duty to you," he nodded to Alex. "and to her." The Jedi waved a dismissive hand before him to ward off Alex's objections. "It will only be for a few hours until our transport is readied. You have my word on it."

"Very well, Lord Brandl," Winger relented. "At least allows us the chance to gather some things from the mansion before going."

"Of course," Brandl bowed in response. "Lieutenant Werth. You will accompany us to the mansion."

Werth nodded in acknowledgment. "You're free to go," he whispered to Dair, allowing him to move away from the scene. Alex looked up as Dair crossed the street. There was a look of serious concern in his face, concern for her, concern for her father. But there was little Alex could do and she knew that, staring at the rigid tenacity in her father's face. He had decided. Now Lord Brandl was in control.



Transformed into a temporary refuge, the abandoned Imperial listening post was built deep into the mountainous countryside southeast of Ariana. Nearly three-stories tall, the bunker was well-hidden in the remote forests of Garos IV. Stripped of intelligence equipment and support personnel, the purported safehouse offered few amenities. Alex glared from one corner of the room to the next. The small garrison reminded her of a prison cell or interrogation center. The only furniture was a fairly uncomfortable-looking sofa and a conference table with four chairs that she recognized as standard issue—obviously confiscated from Imperial Headquarters.

The only window in the room opened onto an observation deck from where she could see one of the five Imperial scout troopers sent to protect them. From the extended platform and deck, the inner walls of the underground garrison sloped down into the mountain and outward to form the interior walls of a small hangar bay. There was little light, as the base was still under minimal power. The fragmented carvings of illumination reflected in the trooper's armor were from an outside source, a nearby lamp or moonlight filtering through the bay doors.

Pacing around the confines of the small room, Alex felt like a caged animal. The unseen prison which held her boasted no doors, no bars, no chains to bind her—which served only to heighten her agitation. The barrier was her loyalty and devotion to her father. He stood by the observation glass and watched her with growing impatience. Rubbing his hand across his brow, Winger scowled at her in an uncharacteristic show of emotion. "Would you please stop that, Alexandra," he insisted. "What has gotten into you? I don't think I've ever seen you so distraught."

Alex balled her hands into clenched fists, hearing the knuckles pop under the tension. "I just feel so—" she shook her head, searching for the words to describe her predicament. "So out of touch with what's happening here." She stopped pacing and grabbed the edges of the table in frustration. "I feel like a prisoner!"

"It's only for a short while. Lord Brandl assured me it would be no more than an hour or two at best. And after that bombing in the city, we're safer here, under his care, until we move off-world."

I'm not leaving Garos! She took a deep breath to calm herself. There was no way she was leaving Garos. If it meant admitting her allegiance to the New Republic, somehow she hoped her father would understand. "Father, we don't know that the resistance planted those detonators at the pub."

"Who else would be responsible, Alexandra? Who else would have access to military-grade explosives?"

Peering out from the observation platform and into the darkened hangar below, Alex wondered where Brandl was and what he knew about the explosion. "The resistance wouldn't do it, Father. I know they wouldn't do it. There was no purpose for it." She turned to her father, noticing the deep lines in his face. The stress of dealing with the resistance movement and the impending invasion had aged him over the last few days.

Winger stared at her. "What do you mean?"

"The Garosian resistance does not kill innocents. Not even Imperial innocents. They only target supply convoys, armory stations, military targets—" Alex swallowed the lump in the back of her throat and turned away from him. "I know," she whispered, "I led many of those missions myself."

"You're one of them?"

Alex nodded, chewing nervously at her lower lip. "For over five years now."

"Five years?" Winger shook his head in faltering disbelief. A pained expression flushed through his eyes as they drew a rim of tears. "My own daughter?"

Walking up to him, Alex met his agonizing gaze. She took his hands into hers, bringing them close to her heart. "I love you, Father. Please don't ever doubt that. You were always good to me, gave me your love, your respect. No daughter could ever ask for more."

"Then why..." His voice trailed off as the defiant glare of an Imperial official hardened across his face. He took his hands from her, appalled by her confession. "I loved you as if you were my own flesh and blood. Alexandra, I trusted you! Five years...years," he said, a trace of anger in his voice. "I trusted you! Stars above! What am I supposed to think now?"

Before Alex could respond, Winger silenced her with a dismissive gesture. The anguish in his heart was so evident that it translated into the stiff posture of his shoulders and neck. "I remember, when you were a little girl, you always said you wanted to fly a starfighter. Of course, I thought you meant a TIE fighter." His eyes narrowed suspiciously, as if he now questioned the reality of those memories. "All those years you talked of attending the Academy."

"All I ever wanted was to fight against the Empire's injustices, Father."

"The Empire I serve."

"The Empire that forced you to serve." Alex threw up her hands, sitting down at the conference table. "The Empire that killed my grandparents and thousands of other innocent people on my homeworld."

"I was told that the Rebels destroyed Janara III, murdered their own people to keep their secrets safe from us."

"The Empire lied to you, Father. They lie to everyone!"

Bowing his head in sorrow, Winger struggled to come to grips with the realization. "When you came to Garos, you brought Sali and me more happiness than we had ever known." He shook his head, still struggling with his daughter's revelation.

"Father, the Imperials lied to you!" Alex said, her voice sounding harsh in her ears. "You never questioned them because you didn't want to know the truth."

"Perhaps I couldn't face the truth. I wasn't ready. Not then, not now. Not for this." Winger took a deep, shuddering breath. "I've worked most of my life to bring peace to Garos. Civil war was tearing this world apart, literally."

"And you achieved it," Alex sighed. "Through Imperial might." She stared into the observation shield, attempting to lose her emotions in the reflection of the glass. A movement below in the hangar caught her eye as a shadow moved across the bay floor. Momentarily, the scout trooper jumped to attention and saluted.

"I'm not leaving Garos, Father." Alex stood up and stepped out onto the observation platform above the docking bay. As she scanned the darkness, she saw a shadowy form lurking in the docking bay. Tripped by a motion sensor, a solitary utility light illuminated the slim form of Jaalib Brandl. He stared up at her and then turned to exit through the hangar door.

She turned back to her father. "You've always done what you felt was right for Garos. I can only hope that you will understand." She met his eyes with firm resolve, feeling his pain. "Maybe you'll decide that it's not too late to change sides." She walked across the room and opened the door.

"Where are you going?" Winger probed.

Alex felt a smile as the concern in his voice resurfaced above the anger at her betrayal. "I think we both could use some time to think about this. I'm going to get some fresh air."

She slipped outside into the warmth of the Garosian night. Descending the blast-cut stairwell, she hurried to the ground level

of the bunker. There were two scout troopers on duty at the entrance to the hangar bay doors. Before she could question them, she sensed Brandl's presence. Turning instinctively toward the only trail leading into the bunker and its hangar bay, Alex saw Brandl on the far side of the compound. A dark figure bathed in shadows, he was astride a speeder bike, his cape billowing in the breeze. He seemed to be waiting for her. Revving the bike's engines, he took off down the narrow, winding road.

"Where's he going?" Alex asked one of the scout troopers.

"We discovered some unusual sensor readings, Miss Winger," the squad leader replied. "Lord Brandl wanted to investigate them personally."

Why not send a pair of troopers to check the disturbance? What could be so sensitive that Brandl would opt to venture out into the forest himself? A nagging suspicion tugged at the back of her mind as the darkness enticed her to follow. There was a seldom-used resistance camp nearby. What if her friends in the freedom movement had tracked them here? Had their presence been detected?

Alex sprinted toward the remaining speeder bike. "Miss Winger!" she heard the scout trooper call. "Miss Winger, Lord Brandl left direct orders not to allow you to—" His voice was drowned out in the roaring thunder of the bike's repulsor engines as Alex hit the accelerator and took off after Brandl.

The twin moons created the dim illusion of late dusk. Their combined light filtered down through the thick forest canopy, casting elongated shadows across the hazardous mountain trail. Alex carefully guided the speeder bike, navigating hairpin turns with ease. Two kilometers from the safehouse, she slowed her bike and quickly scanned the darkness. Catching Brandl as he disappeared around a curve, she listened intently to the roar of the bike's engines. The whine slowly diminished, but not because of distance. He was slowing down, perhaps turning off the road to scout out the hillside.

The familiar whine of his vehicle continued to echo through the trees, but it was no longer moving. Brandl had stopped nearby and was revving the engines. *What is he up to?* she wondered.

She unconsciously ran her hand along the length of her arm. A chill raced up her spine as the burning sensation and the stench of charred flesh assailed her senses. *Watch your back, Dair's words suddenly came back to her. Lord Brandl may not be all he appears to be.*

There was something frightening about Brandl, frightening and yet fascinating. Since his arrival, there had been some peculiar happenings. The bombing at Chado's Pub was certainly not the work of Garos's freedom fighters. Recalling the incident, Brandl's face loomed in her memory. His expression was unreadable, as disconcerting as his interest in the pub when they had walked past it earlier that evening.

Studying the deep gloom of the forest, Alex felt her heart quicken. The shadows lengthened about her, defying the glare of Garos's twin moons. There was a profound silence that settled over the forest interior as if all the life in the immediate area was suddenly drained from the landscape.

She steered the speeder bike off the trail and headed into the trees toward the summit of a low plateau. Brandl stood at the edge of the precipice. His back was to the moonlit horizon as he faced her, watching her approach with interest. The wind rose abruptly, blowing through the shoulder-length darkness of his hair. The Force was with him, rumbling with a din of absolute hostility.

It was not the gentle vibration that Alex recalled from experience or her encounter with Skywalker. This was a malignant manifestation—and Brandl stood at the root of it. Unwittingly reaching out with her limited senses, she recoiled in agony as the formidable presence of the

dark side lashed at her. The icy pin-pricking of its phantom teeth gnawed at her skin.

My vision, Alex thought with dread. Her fingers slipped down to the side of the speeder bike, locating the blaster pistol at its fasteners. Keeping the weapon to the side in the shadows, she dismounted from the vehicle and started up the gentle slope to the summit. "It was you who arranged



Illustration by Tim Bobko

for the explosion at Chado's Pub, wasn't it?"

Dark laughter was the response. "It was me."

"You're here to eliminate the resistance. To what end? The New Republic is on its way. The Empire has no chance of recovering this world."

"Oh, my intentions are not so grand as that," Brandl whispered.

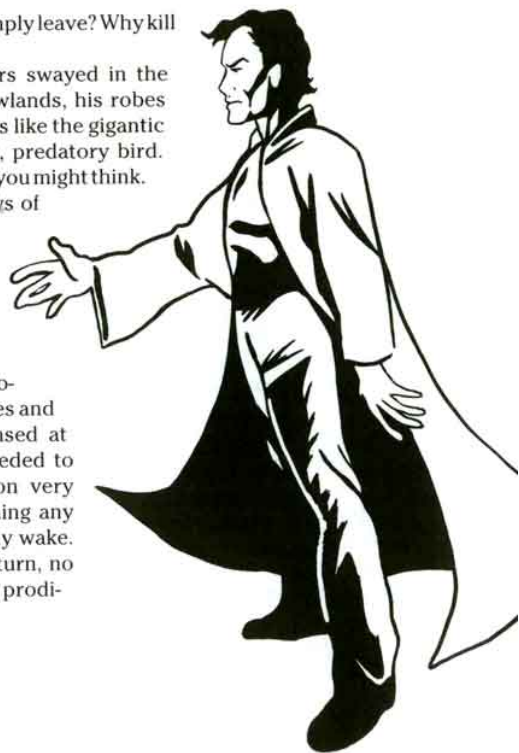
"Then what are your intentions?" Alex snapped. "In killing those Rebel freedom fighters, you killed Imperials. Innocent Imperials. Isn't there some rule against that?"

"I told you, Alexandra. I'm not here to hinder your Rebel movement or impede the New Republic. These are the least of my worries. I'm here to send a message to my own masters in the Empire." There was a spoiled, boyish quality about his voice. "I no longer want any part of them, their games, or their war."

"Then why not simply leave? Why kill innocent people?"

Brandl's shoulders swayed in the updraft from the lowlands, his robes billowing to the sides like the gigantic wings of some dark, predatory bird. "It's not as simple as you might think. The Empire has ways of

re-educating those uninspired minds who would desert them. Particularly those of us with...valuable talents." He walked toward her a few strides and stopped as she tensed at his approach. "I needed to make my separation very clear to them, burning any and all bridges in my wake. There can be no return, no acceptance of this prodigal son."



"You're hoping to make a break with the Empire by destroying their enemies?"

"Oh, no." A malevolent smile creased his thin lips as his dark eyes focused on her and held her defiant gaze. "My plan to cement the breach between myself and my superiors begins and ends with the assassination of an Imperial Governor and his only daughter." The roguish grin deepened, becoming malevolent in the shadows. "Irony, isn't it? That I should come to Garos with the charge of protecting the governor and his family, while harboring every intention of killing you and your father."

Alex felt the color drain from her face. She winced in pain as her chest tightened. "You brought me here to kill me?"

"No, I brought you here to spare your life." Brandl laughed easily. "I never imagined you could be so intriguing a young woman, Alexandra Winger. Never in my wildest dreams."

"And my father?"

"Oh, he's not nearly as intriguing as you are." He glanced over his shoulder in the direction of the camp. "And in a few moments, he'll be quite dead."

As the Jedi's intentions sank in, Alex screamed through clenched teeth and brought up the blaster. Before she could depress the trigger, the weapon was ripped from her grasp. It flew through the night air, landing in the underbrush well beyond her reach. As Brandl laughed the forest came to life and swallowed the weapon whole into its depths.

Weaponless and in a rage, Alex sprang at Brandl, swinging wide with a punch. As the Jedi agilely dodged her, the abrupt hiss of a lightsaber broke the silence. The blade cut a wide swath in the darkness as it arced through the still air and slashed through Alex's jacket down to the skin. She cried out in pain, cradling her wounded arm.

"I don't know why you're so upset," Brandl taunted. "With Winger dead, you'll be free. Free to join your friends in the resistance."

Alex stared wide-eyed at him, feeling the heat rise in her cheeks.

He laughed at her startled reaction. "Did you think I didn't know? About you and your involvement with the resistance movement? It's the one reason you're still alive."

The presence of the dark side was so potent in him that it stifled Alex. "How could you possibly know?"

Brandl laughed again outright, his face assuming a boyish charm

that easily concealed the darkness of his being. "Your thoughts and emotions are so easily read, Alexandra. I'm surprised Skywalker lets you walk around broadcasting." His eyes widened, mocking the astonishment in her eyes. "Yes, I do know about the great Master Skywalker and your peculiar affection for him."

Enraged by his insinuation, Alex hurried to her feet. "You don't know anything! About me or the resistance!"

"Oh, but I do know," he whispered with rehearsed sincerity. "I know about the lost little girl, scared and alone, buried beneath the burning rubble of her home— orphaned and stranded on some distant, smothered world." Brandl's laughter echoed against the trees. "It reads like some commonplace tragedy I once wrote when I was a child." His apathy was chilling. "It's no wonder they found you."

"They?" Alex asked, narrowing her eyes.

"My father, Lord Adalric Cessius Brandl and the Imperial armada that destroyed Janara III. My father was one of the Emperor's High Inquisitors—the Jedi executioners who were more ruthless observers of His Imperial Will. He must have been looking for you and others like you." Brandl sat down on a nearby stump. "A thousand or more lives to find one little girl and a handful of Jedi hopefuls."

He sniffed disdainfully, catching his breath as he chuckled. "He would surely laugh were he here with us now. He would. I know he would—"

The abrupt thunder of an explosion cut him off. Behind them, a blinding, white light flashed, momentarily displacing the night as flames and molten debris shot almost 100 meters into the air.

Brandl turned away from the blast and stared at Alex, studying her expression. With a sinister grin still etched across his handsome face, he whispered, "And here, some fifteen years later, history repeats itself."

"Father!" Wincing as the painful gash in her arm pinched and pulled at the tender skin, Alex bolted toward the speeder bikes. She was mounted and spinning the steering bar as the repulsor engines ignited, propelling her back onto the forest path. She followed the dying embers of the blast and a trail of acrid smoke that poured from the site. Nearly a quarter of a kilometer from the bunker, trees were down, uprooted and flattened in the explosion. Alex gunned the speeder bike over the threshold of the blast radius. The underbrush was little more than cinders, kicked up in the wake of her passage.

Outside the listening post, the bodies of the scout troopers had been blown thirty meters from the base of the staircase. The scent of singed armor was sickening as Alex stopped the speeder bike and jumped off. She ran to what had been the entrance to the bunker.

The entire face of the mountain had collapsed in upon itself. With the fierce destructive force of the blast, it was impossible to imagine that anyone could have survived it. Brandl's motives for moving them here to this isolated place in the forest was a stroke of genius. They were completely cut off, isolated, and without support personnel. Nothing and no one would have prevented him from killing them and making good his escape.

Except for the crackle of a few remaining flames, silence pervaded the ruined area. Alex fought back tears, trembling as a sense of hopelessness overcame her. Her eyes darted from one destroyed section to the next, determined to either find a way to her father or provide him with a way out. Though she knew her efforts would eventually prove fruitless, she continued to scan the still-smoldering ruins. She couldn't allow herself to concede her father's death.

Then from the side she heard a soft scraping. Focusing her concentration, she listened as the sound intensified. It was coming from beneath the smoking rubble near the hangar bay. Channeling her senses toward the scratching, she perceived a faint glimmer of life buried beneath the rocks and mortar. "Father?" Her voice cracked as the presence sharpened and she recognized it. Lunging at the rubble, Alex began heaving rocks to the side and digging through the debris. She ignored the painful lacerations spreading across her hands and fingers, desperate to reach Winger, who was buried just beneath the collapsed wall of the entrance. Within moments, she uncovered one of his hands.

"Alexandra?" she heard the muffled anguish in his voice.

Renewing her efforts, she ignored her straining muscles and continued to free him from beneath the collapsed bunker wall. "Father, can you move?" she whispered, uncovering his torso, his arms, and then freeing his legs. Winger remained motionless and unresponsive.

Behind them, she heard the distinct whine of repulsor engines as Brandl returned to the ruined bunker. There was a gloated, sated expression in his face as he surveyed his handiwork.

Alex pulled her father against her, using her slight weight to drag him from his smoking tomb. As they moved out of the crater, there

was a secondary explosion deep within the bunker. The blast caused a shifting of the surface debris as the bunker sank deeper into the mountain cavity, quickly burying Winger's feet in the ruins.

As the deafening tremor subsided, Alex stumbled beneath her father and dropped to her knees. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Brandl watching. "Help me," she said.

"That's not part of my plan," he replied with an arrogant smile. "In this scene, the heroine's father must die."

"You cold-hearted—" Alex grit her teeth and pulled, finally freeing her father's body from the rubble. He was alive, barely. But without proper medical attention, Brandl's plans would be complete.

Beyond the blast wreckage stood a small storage barracks. It remained intact, despite the blast, half-hidden in an alcove of large boulders. Supporting her father's weight against her, Alex struggled to move him into the darkened shelter. She laid him in a temporary cot that must have been used by sentries between shifts. Activating the power source, she swore as the illumination grid flickered with sporadic dim snatches of light. Its backup generators, unattended in the absence of support personnel, were run down and inadequate. Within moments of turning it on, the unit shut off, allowing the darkness to return.

Seeing a glowrod in the far corner, Alex took it from the wall apparatus and activated it. Along with the glowrod, she took a first aid kit from a pile of discarded equipment boxes. Unconscious beneath her, Tork Winger was oblivious to her attempts to salvage what remained of his life. His labored breathing grew more shallow by the minute as he began to succumb to his injuries.

"No!" Alex whispered, squeezing Winger's hands. "Father, you have to fight. Fight!" As Brandl's triumphant figure darkened the shelter doorway, she turned to him. "He's dying."

"As the script requires."

Alex stared at Brandl, measuring the defiance in his eyes. "Jaalib, please. You've already won. I'll tell the Empire how you betrayed them. How you nearly killed the governor. I'll tell the New Republic. You'll get your wish. Please." She felt the sting of tears. "Please help me."

Her pleas did not go unrewarded. Alex saw the hardened veneer of satisfaction crumble from his face, replaced by a thin mask of remorse. "You're not strong enough," he replied.

"Then I'll use the dark side of the Force if I have to!"

"Are you so eager to set your feet on that road, Alexandra?"

"Just tell me what to do."

"Do you know what you are asking?" Seeing the glaze of tears and the defiance in her eyes made the Jedi pause. "No, I don't think you do."

"You needn't worry your conscience about the consequences."

"Betrayal is the worst crime a Jedi can commit. Betrayal of a loved one, a friend, a mentor. Betrayal of self is an even greater crime." Brandl straightened his long frame, staring down at her from what Alex perceived as an impossible height. "The path to the dark side is different for all of us. I can't tell you how to get there. What leads you will be entirely different from the circumstances that led me. But one thing is certain...you've been there before. The path is an old and familiar one." Avoiding her eyes, he whispered, "Anger and fear will be your guides."

Betrayal. Alex stared at the dark Jedi, unsettled by his words. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath that rattled audibly in her lungs. She concentrated on her father's face, feeling the pain of his injuries as vividly as the cauterizing bite of the lightsaber. Without warning, her pain intensified. Internal hemorrhaging, broken bones, crushed organs. Alex collapsed to the dirt floor with a resounding thud. Writhing in agony, she sought comfort, a release. Her skills with the Force were limited and undirected. Her attempt to control and define that power only sharpened the pain and prolonged the suffering, infuriating her.

Eyes wide in terror, she focused on the shadows in the far corner of the room. They beckoned to her, but she resisted the temptation, suddenly unsure of what was transpiring—unsure of herself. Fear of failure heightened her torment, sealing off any chances of channeling the Force as Skywalker had taught her.

Do not resist. The shadows remained, inviting her into the darkness. Alex dropped her defenses and surrendered to it, allowing the dark side to work through her.

There was a sudden surge of energy as every cell in her body became impregnated with sentience and sensation. Bewilderment and fear gave way to wonder as her senses awakened to the seemingly endless force surrounding Garos. Cradled in that vast source of power, she believed she could drain the life of any creature, realign that energy, and direct it at will. She reveled in the sensation, allowing herself to become one with the complicated web of life. As her mind raced, she felt the untold secrets of the



universe come within her grasp. She fought to keep her mind focused in the here and now, resisting the temptation to charge forward toward those unknown realms.

Laying her hands on her father's chest, she willed the energy into him. But as she stood in wonderment of her newly found ability, it began to slip away from her. Without the anger or fear, there was nothing left to prey on except her own fragile life-force.

She panicked as the dark side's influence drained her energy. It was a small price to pay for the life of her father; but now she was dying. As the corrupt surge continued to feed on her, the power to save herself evaded her.

The shadows converged on her and Alex sensed a presence. Among the ravenous phantoms, Brandl stood before her, his hand reaching toward her. She took strength from it, never hesitating to take it as the breath was forced from her lungs. She moved closer to the dark vision, but it was not Brandl's face she saw peering back at her from the veil of darkness.

Recognizing her own face in the black cowl, she tried to pull away. But the apparition held tightly onto her wrist with its fleshless

hand. The other hand was moving toward her throat.

Alex recoiled in horror as she felt the scaling bones at her neck. As she struggled to free herself, the hand tightened, restricting the flow of air to her lungs. "Do not resist," it said to her. "Do not resist." Alex relaxed, and for a brief moment the tightness in her neck eased. But as she renewed her struggles, her muscles constricted on her again, cutting off the flow of air to her lungs.

Thrashing wildly as she tried to inhale, she lashed out against the apparition. Her hands clutched at her throat as she shook her consciousness free of the phantasm, only to find herself writhing on the storage shelter's dirt floor. Shivering beneath a light glaze of sweat, she sat up abruptly and stared at her father's face. His breathing was still shallow, but steady. As the sinister power of the dark side faded into her, she watched as his strength increased and his breathing came easier in the slow, even rhythm of peaceful sleep.

And where is your strength, Alex?

She closed her eyes and shuddered at the echo of her demented inner voice. She felt violated, tricked. Quickly rising to her feet, she retreated from the shadows, trying to hide in the dim halo of the glowrod.

"Beware the brilliance of the light side," Brandl whispered, "for while it illuminates and warms, it casts a cold, blinding glare on those too humble to look beyond it to the shadows." The Jedi stepped toward her, offering his hand. "Dear, gentle Alexandra," he sighed sadly, "won't you come in from the cold?"

Trembling in the light, Alex stared at him. "What have I done?"

"The dark side has its price. You've had but a small taste of it." Caressing her face, he embraced her in an attempt to ward off the chill.

Though she heard his voice, she couldn't register the deep, shifting tones of it. She felt him, his warmth, but her senses were failing. The walls of the shelter and the fixtures began to blur and she felt her knees buckle beneath her weight. Brandl caught her before her body could hit the ground. Unable to resist, Alex laid her head against the Jedi and once again, she succumbed to the darkness.



Alex awoke to the mournful howl of a boe'tay. From across a distance, the desperate cry reverberated inside her head, compounding the pressure behind her eyes. Head aching, she opened her eyes and struggled to sit up. As her vision sharpened, she concentrated on the peculiar shadow sitting across from her. A few minutes later, Bane Werth's untroubled face appeared in the warm afterwash of a glowrod.

Dressed in a Corellian flight jacket and pants, he seemed more at ease in the garb of a smuggler than an Imperial uniform. His hair was damp and he brushed a lock of it from his face, staring at her with such tangible regret that Alex could feel his emotions, unveiled and distinct.

"Where's my father?" she asked, gripping the edge of the cot.

Werth rose from his chair and walked a few steps to the shelter entrance. "She's awake!" he shouted. Hesitating at the door, he glanced back at her with that peculiar remorse intensifying as he looked on her. Then without further comment, he pushed through the narrow opening to the outside.

As he left, Alex could hear the steady rhythm of the rain falling outside. Concerned about her father, she swung her legs over the edge of the cot and slowly rose to her feet. Governor Winger was lying in a temporary bunk mattress where she had left him. Kneeling beside him, Alex checked his vital signs and smiled as her efforts registered an improvement in his condition. Despite her light touch, her father awoke to the gentle sensation of her fingers.

Opening his swollen eyes, Winger smiled, seeing her above him. "Alexandra," he whispered, panting with the effort. He trembled visibly as he raised his arm to caress her face. His smile deepened as he confirmed what his clouded senses reported. She was alive and well. Then quietly, he slipped back into a peaceful sleep.

With each passing moment, Alex could feel the strength returning to him. And in sensing that energy, she felt Brandl's power at work, cradling her father's life essence. Sitting down on the ground beside Winger, she turned to the apparition standing in the shelter doorway behind her. "Will you always be there, over my shoulders, watching me from the shadows?"

"When next you stare into the darkness, will it make you feel any safer knowing that I was there?" Brandl remained in the doorway, making no effort to come farther into the light. "If this is your request, good lady, as your most gentle knight, I will always be where you most need me." Alex heard the muffled voice of his

sincerity. "The New Republic forces have arrived," he said. "I took the liberty of alerting them of your status. They should be here in a few minutes."

"The invasion?" Alex asked, wondering at the tide of the battle.

"The New Republic is winning, even as we speak. You and your fellow resistance members are to be congratulated. Garos IV is free." Raising his chin with cool arrogance, Brandl stared down at her. "I can arrange for your father's safe return to the Empire. He would be well guarded—"

"Well guarded!" Alex spat. "By you?" She shook her head with firm determination. "My father's allegiance is to Garos, Lord Brandl. Not to the Empire or the New Republic. I'll make whatever arrangements are necessary to honor his wishes."

"They're here." Werth's voice drifted in from the darkness. "It's time to go."

Avoiding Brandl's piercing gaze, Alex sat up on her knees. She pulled the blankets against her father's neck, holding his hand as he slept. Wishing the Jedi to stay, she whispered, "I don't know if I should thank or curse you."

"You'll decide which in time." The Jedi tossed a dark object across the shelter to her.

Alex saw the strange figurine fall into the blankets. Retrieving the sculpted Jj'abot piece, she regarded the black knight, reminded of the play. "What will become of you?" she spoke the remembered lines. "Where will you go?"

"I shall become as the shadows, my lady," he replied. "And I shall go where only the darkness reigns." Brandl smiled, bowing his head to her. It was a thin, melancholy expression that touched Alex with its sincerity. "Good-bye, Alex."

At the sound of incoming search crews, Brandl stepped outside into the night, as if on cue, where he vanished into the shadows. Alex listened to the hollow cadence of the rain against the rooftop. Tightening her grip on her father's hand and on the pawn, she laid her head against the warmth of the blanket and waited until the light of New Republic ships and ground forces diffused the darkness.

Roleplaying Game Statistics

Tork Winger

Type: Diplomat
DEXTERITY 2D+1

Blaster 5D

KNOWLEDGE 3D+2

Alien species 7D+1, bureaucracy 8D+2, cultures 8D, languages 7D+2, planetary systems 8D, survival 5D, value 5D

MECHANICAL 3D

Astrogation 5D, repulsorlift operation 5D, space transports 5D+2

PERCEPTION 4D

Bargain 9D, command 9D+1, con 8D

STRENGTH 2D+2

TECHNICAL 2D+1

Force Points: 1

Character Points: 4

Move: 10

Equipment: Datapad

Capsule: Tork Winger is an extremely distinguished gentleman, the model diplomat. He was one of the first Garosians to enter the service of the Old Republic almost 40 years ago. After serving five years in the army, Winger returned to Garos, and thanks to his family's position, he moved up quickly through the diplomatic ranks.

Winger discovered very early in his career that he had a natural talent in the world of diplomacy. He is respected by his peers and by his enemies as well. The leading authority on the conflict between native Garosians and colonists from the neighboring planet Sundari, he has been involved in negotiations between the warring factions for years. Both sides have found him to be a just man, capable of sorting through all the intrigue that seems to dominate politics.

But Winger is torn apart by his inability to reach a true and lasting peace on Garos IV. He is hopeful that the Empire's involvement in local politics will expedite the peace process.



Illustration by Mike Vizard

■ Alex Winger

Type: Underground freedom fighter

DEXTERITY 3D+1

Blaster 7D, dodge 5D, grenade 4D, heavy weapons 5D, melee 5D+2, melee parry 5D+1

KNOWLEDGE 3D+1

Alien species 5D, bureaucracy 6D, cultures 5D, languages 3D+2, planetary systems 4D+1, streetwise 4D+2, survival 5D+1, value 5D

MECHANICAL 3D+1

Astrogation 4D+2, beast riding 4D, repulsorlift operation 6D

PERCEPTION 3D

Bargain 5D, command 6D, con 5D+1, hide 5D+2, search 5D+1, sneak 5D+2

STRENGTH 3D

Brawling 4D, climbing/jumping 5D, lifting 3D+1, stamina 6D+1

TECHNICAL 3D

Computer programming/repair 5D+2, demolition 5D, droid programming 5D+1, repulsorlift repair 4D+2, security 4D+1

Special Abilities:

Force Skills: Sense 1D

Sense: Life detection

This character is Force-sensitive.

Force Points: 6

Character Points: 12

Move: 10

Equipment: Blaster pistol (4D), blaster rifle (5D), comlink, macrobinoculars

Capsule: Alex Winger is a 20-year-old freedom fighter and daughter (by adoption) of Imperial Governor Tork Winger of Garos IV. She is poised and graceful when the situation demands it, but privately is all tomboy. Those who know her well agree that Alex is bright, quick-witted, and loyal — someone they can always count on.

She has worked with Garos' underground for four years, and is wholeheartedly committed to every aspect of their struggle against the Empire. She willingly risks her own life in these troubled times.

Alex is a Force-sensitive individual. She experiences visions, some of which have come true. At times, she has been able to sense danger, but she has not learned how to call on this power at will.

Ultimately, Alex and her friends in the underground realize they will need the help of the New Republic to remove the Imperial threat from Garos IV. But every little dent they can make, every weapon they can steal or supply line they can disrupt only furthers their resolve to continue the fight for freedom and justice.



Illustration by Mike Vitaro

■ Jaalib Brandl

Type: Young Actor

DEXTERITY 3D

Blaster 3D+2, dodge 5D+2, lightsaber 5D, melee combat 5D, melee parry 5D, running 4D+1

KNOWLEDGE 2D

Alien species 5D, languages 5D+2, survival 4D, willpower 5D

MECHANICAL 2D

Astrogation 2D+2, beast riding 3D, repulsorlift operation 3D, space transports 4D, starship shields 3D,

PERCEPTION 4D

Persuasion 6D+1, search 5D, sneak 5D

STRENGTH 2D

Brawling 3D, climbing/jumping 3D+2, stamina 3D+2

TECHNICAL 2D

First aid 3D

Special Abilities:

Force Skills: Control 3D, Sense 3D, Alter 1D+1

Sense: Receptive telepathy, sense Force

Control and Sense: Lightsaber combat, projective telepathy

This character is Force-Sensitive.

Force Points: 2

Character Points: 6

Move: 10

Equipment: Blaster pistol (4D), 300 credits

Capsule: Despite his age, Jaalib Brandl has exhibited an uncharacteristic genius for tragic theater. Following in the footsteps of his father, Lord Adalric Brandl, himself a renowned actor and tragic figure, Jaalib began an early career in stage performance under the tutelage of Otias Atori. After the fall of the Trulalis Stage Company, Jaalib was highly sought after as the lead actor on the Iscerian stage. Despite Jaalib's youth, directors and performers were awed by the depth of experience and strength that Jaalib could pour repeatedly into every role. And while bested by only the talents of his father, the young actor is considered to be one of the finest tragic figures to grace the stage. After a stirring reproduction of "For the Want of an Empire," the young actor vanished without a trace.



Illustration by Chris Gossett

IMPERIAL GARRISONS

By Timothy S. O'Brien

Major Qol watched as the lecture room filled. The students, an eclectic mix of human and alien Alliance officers, looked grim. They were fresh from a break after the morning's lectures on TIE fighters and Imperial armored vehicles, and were no doubt wondering how a small upstart Rebellion could hope to militarily overcome the Empire, even with the flaws and cracks in Imperial military theory they were being briefed on.

It does look hopeless, Qol thought. The students were cut off from incoming news for the duration of the conference, and hadn't heard about Hoth. Qol wished he could offer them hope.

But hope wasn't his subject today.

"Gentlebeings. I am Major Viran Qol of Alliance Special Forces. I am told I'm one of High Command's leading experts on Imperial fortification engineering. The subject of my lecture today is the theory and application of Imperial garrisons—their background, uses, and weaknesses.

"This is an overview. Please note your questions and save them for the end of the lecture. In the future, feel free to forward queries to my office at High Command. If you plug your datapads into the terminals, you can access the schematics and statistics I'll be referring to."

Transcript of Major Qol's lecture at Alliance Officer's Candidate School (location classified):

Standard Battalion Garrison Theory

The idea of a fortified structure intended to defend military assets and to project governmental power is both common and ancient throughout the galaxy. On most worlds that have experienced war, evidence of fortresses of some kind goes back to their

earliest histories. On a few worlds, these defenses became very involved and complex, networks of castles or webs of walls or trenches. Some of the most impressive engineering feats in galactic history are, unfortunately, bastions of war.

The Old Republic was no exception. Although peace reigned during extended periods of history, the Republic suffered occasional wars and local conflicts, most notably the Clone Wars, and maintained fortified bases, as did its enemies. Fortification remained a living military practice from the most remote Republican period.

With the rise of the Empire and its doctrine of military modularity, the concept of mass-produced standard garrisons quickly became common practice, and the grip of the Empire came to be defined and structured by Imperial garrisons.

That is a bold statement, I realize. The symbols of the Empire are generally considered to be stormtroopers, Star Destroyers, TIE fighters, AT-ATs, and of course, the Death Star. Perhaps it's my engineering background, but I consider the squat, symmetrical, brooding fortresses that control the strategic assets of the Empire an entirely fitting symbol for its unyielding omnipresence.

There are three major Imperial fortifications: the Imperial garrison, the Imperial orbiting defense station, and the mobile battle station. Fortunately, the battle station concept has not been widely produced, due to a few well-exploited problems in design.

(The audience chuckles.)

Imperial garrisons are deployed for several reasons:

To protect the Empire. This has different meaning to Imperial High Command than it does to the Alliance. Garrisons are primarily military bases intended to defend strategic assets and positions from any who would act against the Empire and its citizens, such as Rebels, pirates, foreign sovereign governments, and its own citizenry. One of the primary protective functions a garrison serves is to keep a local population under the Imperial thumb, especially on sector capital worlds, major industrial planets, and in logistically important systems. Garrisons house the military might that many planetary governors and puppet states need to control their worlds. They are usually situated near local spaceports and/or population centers, and provide sufficient firepower to repel a landing force and to cover arriving Imperial forces.

Second, to provide Imperial services to a system. Many garrisons also serve as the headquarters for Imperial governmental

offices. On non-secure worlds, the local garrison or garrisons can house the governor's office, COMPNOR, diplomatic offices, Imperial Intelligence, and the bureaucracy, as well as an Imperial Army corps headquarters. Garrisons also typically hold prisoners who are accused of Imperial Code violations¹, including political prisoners. On secure worlds, most of these offices are separate from the planetary garrisons.

And third, to occupy hostile worlds. In the aftermath of an Imperial "suppression," or planetary invasion, one or more garrisons are typically deployed by a Star Destroyer to serve as the headquarters of the Imperial occupation force and serve as a beachhead for future troop deployment. A rebelling world has a much better chance of throwing Imperial invasion back if no garrison is in place. A garrisoned world has the ability to suppress local rebellion and resist overt Alliance military liberation.

Models

Imperial garrisons are standardized and mass-produced. However, several design variations provide options appropriate for a given situation.

The standard garrison model is the primary subject of our concern. This is the model used on most worlds, and I'll be referring to it for most of the rest of the lecture.

The oceanic garrison is fitted with high-power repulsor units that keep it afloat on worlds covered almost entirely by liquid. This model is very much like the standard garrison, except for a sub-sea access bay, the seatrooper contingent, and the aquatic vehicles, including armored "Swimmer" transports.

The hostile-environment garrison includes an extra life-support sub-level, with airlocks on all access points sealed against the poisonous environment.

Orbiting garrisons are a rarity. Essentially, they are hostile-environment garrisons constructed in orbital space for the purpose of providing Army units with an orbiting fire base and secure headquarters. Usually these garrisons are actually two garrisons modules attached base-to-base, thereby providing full fire coverage. In the few cases of such orbiting garrisons, the ground troops have been ferried to the surface as needed.²

Deployment of such orbiting garrisons touched off a firestorm of controversy between the Army and Navy. The Army considered any garrison to be an Army base, since it is in theory a corps

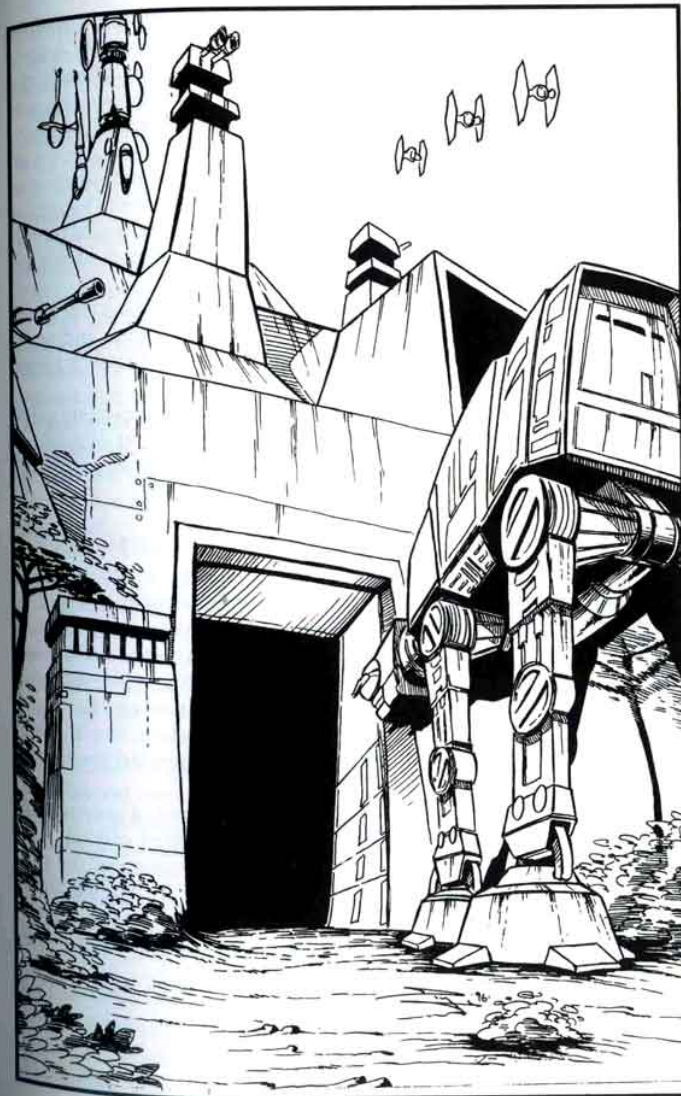


Illustration by Doug Shuler

headquarters, while the Navy considers any military base located in space to be a Naval installation.³ Currently, the few orbital garrisons in service are split commands: one under an admiral, the other under a major general. Though this situation causes a host of organizational problems, the compromise does generally work.⁴

The Army side of the orbiting garrison has a standard personnel complement. The Navy side has a roughly equivalent number of Navy troopers and technicians, a variety of spacecraft (including tugships—the orbiting garrison has no engines, and relies on the tugships for locomotion), and either three squadrons or a full wing of TIE fighters.

Garrison complexes—several garrisons deployed in close proximity and attached via underground tunnels, bunkers, and walkways—are rarely constructed. Only those worlds of vital strategic importance require such elaborate structures.

Garrison complexes have been constructed with up to six garrisons, generally attached in a ring formation. This sort of garrison complex is occasionally used as an Army, Systems Army, or Sector Army headquarters, and commanded by a general.

Perimeter, Defenses, and Design

The perimeter ring of a garrison includes its “death fence,” a highly charged 10-meter-high mesh carrying enough current to disable an armored speeder and easily kill any sentient that touches it. The death fence is crossed via several gates, twin 15-meter-tall towers that house powerful force field generators. A forcefield is projected across the gap and turned off to allow passage. Each gate is protected by a pair of heavy repeating blasters, one in each tower. A typical garrison has two to four gates, attended by security troops.

Just inside the death fence is a secondary ring of observation towers, one every 100 meters, linked by a fortified catwalk. The observation towers control the death fence sections, not the gate towers. Stormtrooper patrols prowl the catwalk at all times, aided by floodlights, motion sensors, and security droids. On the ground, specially trained Army troopers patrol with guard animals (often the repulsor-sensitive Garrals).

The middle ground, the section between the perimeter and the base proper, is a killing field protected by mines and modified probot patrols, and AT-ST scout walkers. This area is a flat checkerboard plain of sand, gravel, and duracrete⁵, offering no cover to attacking troops.

This zone falls within range of the garrison's deflectors. The deflectors can be lowered to within two meters of the surface, frustrating the fire of attacking armor. For ground assaults to be effective, either the defense screens must be occupied with aerial or orbital strikes, or the armored vehicles must gain the interior of this ring before being destroyed by fire from the garrison's gunnery.⁶ Not surprisingly, armor commanders prefer the former option.

Just inside this killing field some garrisons have a trench ring, allowing defending troops to set up heavy weapons and counterattack positions.

The garrison walls are usually constructed of a mix of local materials and standard duracrete. The garrison shell is up to 10 meters thick, sloped for beam reflection, and able to survive repeated direct hits from capital ship weapons, due to its layered armor and particle shielding.

The main garrison armaments consist of six heavy twin laser turrets and three heavy twin turbolaser turrets. The lasers are used for defense against ground and air attack, while the turbolasers are intended to defend against starfighters and capital ships. The turbolaser turrets can pivot to any front, and can fire all three guns in coordination against an orbiting target.⁷

Additionally, the garrison has three powerful tractor beams able to seize and detain even strong spacecraft. Secondary armaments consist of heavy repeating blasters found at the vehicle bay gate and landing platform.

Garrison Layout

The interior has eight main levels and four or more sub-levels:

Sub-level one houses fusion generators that power various systems including weaponry, tractor beams, and defense screens. Sub-level two contains environment maintenance equipment, control stations, refuse units, and waste disposal. Sub-level three is used for storage, while sub-level four acts as the droid-operated industrial complex, allowing a garrison to manufacture equipment and spare parts from local material as needed. In some cases, an additional sub-level is included to accommodate a larger military force.

The main levels are the day-to-day areas. Usually, the first five have an identical layout, although some adjustment is often made to suit the commanding officer. Each of the first five levels has a

security office adjacent to a detention block as well as barracks for stormtroopers, security troopers, technical, or operational specialists. Mess areas and sanitation facilities are attached to each barracks sub-section.

Level Six is the command level. It contains sensor monitor control, the communications array (including the main comm, sub-space transceiver, hypertransceiver, and, at important garrisons, a HoloNet pod), weapons and shield control, base central control, officer's quarters, COMPNOR, and the CO's office.

Levels Seven and Eight are TIE storage, maintenance, and launch decks. All launch chutes are protected by strong force fields to prevent unauthorized landings.

The vehicle bay is one of the two ways into the garrison. All military vehicles are stored and maintained in this area, from speeder bikes to AT-ATs. A miscellaneous vehicle parking bay separates the vehicle bay from the main entrance, deep in the heart of the garrison, next to Level One security. This entrance is guarded at all times.

There are also two secondary entrances from the vehicle bay, one to the garrison technical shops and the other to a storage gallery, both of which are code-locked. The bay itself is accessed through a heavy blast door flanked by a pair of guard towers with heavy repeating blasters.

The other entrance is the landing platform, which connects to Level Three security. The landing platform itself is vulnerable to attack, but the connecting ramp is rigged to explode on command, and Level Three security is well defended with light defense shields and a repeating blaster emplacement.

Personnel⁸

A garrison is in essence a fortified house for its occupants. It exists solely to safeguard its personnel from attack. Imperial Army regulations require all garrison personnel to be proficient with a blaster, even civilian workers. While many of these people are simply familiar with weapons and therefore pose only a limited threat, the policy does illustrate the Army's dedication to holding its garrisons.

Most garrisons are considered corps HQs and issued corresponding personnel and troops. While this leaves the Army top-heavy, it simplifies the task of local coordination. Sector Command need not keep up-to-the-minute track of the situation on a garri-

soned world; the garrison performs that duty, and serves as a secure landing head in the event Imperial military presence becomes necessary.

Army

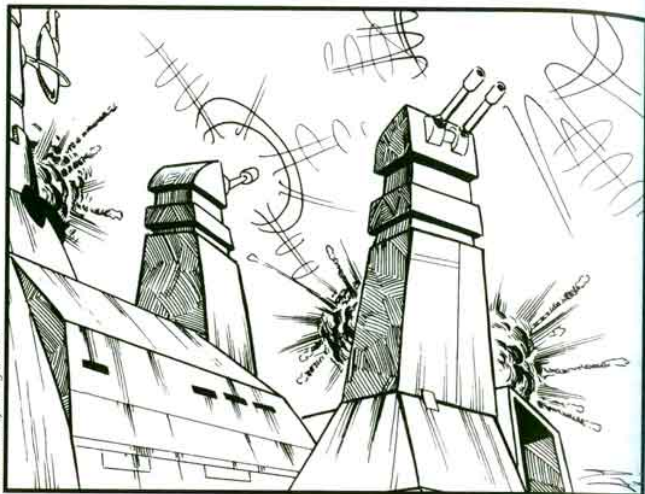
On non-secure worlds, where COMPNOR and government rely on the garrison, the major general is in command. Technically, the non-military personnel are simply tenants in the garrison and under the nominal control of either the planetary governor or a prefect. On relatively secure worlds, the tenant offices become garrison liaisons to the respective branch, and are still essentially under the major general's control.

Major generals are not usually superior quality officers. While competent, garrison commanders are usually dead-ended career officers waiting for retirement.⁹ There is a large demand for garrison commanders (thousands of garrisons exist throughout the Empire), but vastly less demand for generals or high generals. Most major generals retire within five years of appointment, often to minor governorships.

The corps HQ has a fairly lean staff for such a large unit—the major general is aided by five staff officers at the rank of high colonel: the second in command, who has responsibility for military intelligence; a logistics officer; a medical officer; a technical officer; and the headquarters officer, responsible for internal organization, especially security. Each of these has two sub-staff officers at the rank of lieutenant colonel to assist with their assigned duties.

The corps HQ is guarded by a line company (referred to as a security company in scandocs), under the command of the headquarters officer. An additional six platoons of troopers, the perimeter guard, answer to the major general or his second-in-command.

In theory, a garrison houses four battalions. In practice, however, a garrison may find itself with anything from four companies to four battlegroups. These units are not usually organized into their respective superior units—four companies, for example, does not make a battalion unless a battalion HQ is present. Unlike garrisoned corps HQs, other HQs travel to wherever they are needed. In many cases, this means that groups of floating units without mother HQs may be attached to garrisons for lack of the correct headquarters. Small units are usually housed on base. Larger units require the construction of barracks away from the garrison.



Support technicians for the base are attached to the HQ, and are responsible for garrison maintenance, sensors, weaponry and defenses, and general repair. Unit support technicians are attached to the units directly and rarely cross over to garrison maintenance.

Navy

A detached TIE unit—a Navy unit under Army operational command—is assigned to almost all garrisons. This unit is grouped under an auxiliary battlegroup status, but is often the only unit in that battlegroup.¹⁰ Army operational needs are different from Navy needs, and the resulting unit consists of 40 TIEs—10 flights of four fighters. Three flights are bomber squadrons, usually the older TIE/gt model, six are line fighter squadrons, either TIE or TIE/ln, and one flight is a spotter unit—TIE/rc fighters serving as scouts, observers, and fire enhancers.

The pilots are highly competent, and have a slight advantage over their space-borne brethren in that they practice over the ground they are intended to fight for. The ground wing is served by 60 technicians and 25 controllers.

COMPNOR

COMPNOR provides a garrison with about 50 ISB agents for internal and external intelligence work (internal intelligence consists of loyalty checks, while external intelligence concerns the more standard ferreting out of the Empire's enemies). Some garrisons also house a CompForce support and observation unit.

COMPNOR, especially the ISB, prefers to situate its branches off-garrison, but this is often not practical. Depending on the particulars of the situation, therefore, COMPNOR uses one of three organizational models: COMPNOR internal to the garrison, COMPNOR liaison offices in the garrison, or COMPNOR headquartered in the garrison with main personnel offices elsewhere.

Imperial Intelligence

Imperial Intelligence provides only one agent to a garrison, usually called the Ubiquitorate Man. This officer provides an average of 15 to 20 percent of a corps' useful intelligence, culled from the local system cells and DiploSer agents. The Ubiquitorate Man is never in direct contact with local system cells and receives that intelligence via Sector Plexus. The Ubiquitorate Man himself is attached to the local Sector Branch and is usually the head of any Crisis branch formed on a planet.

Stormtrooper

Overseeing all of these assets is a stormtrooper contingent, usually a full battalion, plus a scout trooper platoon. Stormtrooper command structure remains a murky issue, but, as far as has been determined, the stormtroopers answer to the major general and other Imperial officers.

A garrison stormtrooper battalion has 10 AT-ATs and 10 AT-STs attached to it, allowing the garrison commander to send up to 400 stormtroopers away from the garrison in safety, with scout escort. The AT vehicles are driven, maintained, and supervised by a small unit of 70 veteran Army assault troops on detached duty.

Staffing Policy

Garrisons are always staffed by non-natives. Imperial occupation theory is explicit about this. A commander can expect troopers from the other side of the sector, or better yet another sector altogether, to fire on rioting or rebelling locals. That same commander cannot realistically expect the same of natives under all

circumstances. There are many worlds with multiple rival cultures, and native troops can often be used effectively against another native group, but garrison forces are, in almost all circumstances, staffed by out-of-system units. The Army takes this as a general policy—recruits are simply posted out of sector.

These officers, however, are not privy to classified data.

Droids

Droids are not generally considered personnel, but they function essentially as such. A garrison has a huge number of support droids, with some cases exceeding 2,000 units. Most of these droids are engaged in running the droid-industrial complex, which they do with only limited sentient supervision. The industrial droids most commonly in service are I2F series manufacturing droids, a highly competent model. The remaining staff droids are a fairly standard mix of mouse droids, astromechs, protocol, labor, servant, and security models.

Vehicles

A garrison has approximately 60 surface vehicles in service, including an armored limousine for the major general, assorted military landspeeders including five Chariot command speeders, a Mobile Command Base, often one or more juggernauts for Army trooper deployment, and on almost any world with urban development, a Floating Fortress. Additionally, the garrison repulsorlift pool has standard landspeeders, speeder bikes (aside from the scout troop's bikes), and troop transports.

The motor pool also assists in the maintenance of the stormtrooper vehicles—the AT-ATs, AT-STs, and speeder bikes. Vehicles of repulsorlift and armor units are generally maintained by their own technicians, at their housing base.

Multiple Garrisons

In the event a world hosts several garrisons, the garrison defending the planetary capital or the main spaceport (depending on Imperial needs) is nominated as garrison command and the others are set up using a battlegroup HQ model.¹¹ Such a subordinate garrison is commanded by a high colonel, aided by five staff officers and four sub-staff officers. The sub-garrison is guarded by two security platoons and an abbreviated support staff.

The sub-garrison serves as the headquarters for smaller at-

tached units, up to four regiments. Stormtrooper presence is often reduced as well, down to one, two, or three companies.

To make up the ground troop gap, sub-garrisons often rotate attached units into the base as additional security, or deploy CompForce units (the commanders prefer regular troopers). The sub-garrisons generally mothball their flight decks, as the Navy has steadfastly refused to deploy TIEs to non-corps HQs.¹²

A sub-garrison lacks the extensive COMPNOR and bureaucratic support—and headaches—that a regular garrison has, although every large unit has to deal with the ISB and CompForce observers. A sub-garrison is often able to requisition some superior, even priority equipment, using the argument that their lack of manpower must be compensated for by superior equipment; sub-garrisons often have several Floating Fortresses, which are much coveted by occupational commands.

Local Community and Social Issues

Many local communities look on Imperial garrisons with a mixture of relief and unease.

On the one hand, most early garrisons provided security after the fall of the Old Republic, and their arrival signaled the beginning of a period of peace and order, backed up with a fair amount of might. Furthermore, the garrison provides a economic benefits in the form of a secure spaceport and military customers buying local goods and services. Enlisted personnel are housed on base, but many officers maintain off-base quarters, and everybody except the stormtroopers goes into town for leave.¹³ This economic boon includes not only the 3,000 garrison personnel, but also the hundreds or thousands of military personnel in units attached to the garrison.

On the other hand, the garrison also represents the increasingly repressive Empire. The enlisted garrison personnel are mostly bored young men, and when on leave away from NCO supervision their tastes tend to run base. A large proportion of the economy these men support is often not to community preferences. There is also a disruption in local routine as troops maneuver on exercises and block roads, armored vehicles plow through the countryside, and TIEs scream overhead at all hours. Family relations can become strained as local women are pursued by troopers from the other side of the Empire, who may or may not have legitimate intentions. Thousands of local cultural standards can be rudely

stepped on by garrison personnel, intentionally, callously, or innocently.

All of this assumes a friendly local populace. On occupied worlds, the situation becomes positively grim. In such cases, a garrison is a drain on the economy, as supplies are usually simply seized or requisitioned at cost, and all of the usual garrison problems are magnified tenfold. Crackdowns and purges become routine, and the locals are often little more than slave labor forces for Imperialized corporations.

Military Issues

Overall, an Imperial garrison has a fairly simple, straightforward mission: to provide a fortified position from which to guard and control planets and local systems, and to provide deployed Army units with a central command.

The Alliance generally has had little interest in taking garrisons. Garrisons are fantastically difficult to seize by conventional means, and cannot be held against the inevitable counterattack. However, High Command foresees a time when Imperial coordination is reduced, and our military assets are up to the task of neutralizing enemy garrisons. It should be noted that garrisons are capable of self-destruction in the face of seizure, which can be initiated by any two staff officers or by the commanding officer alone.

Seizure

Garrison seizure comes in three basic varieties:

Assault by conventional military means is not currently practical for the Alliance. This involves artillery, aerial, and orbital bombardment of the garrison, followed by a frontal assault by a combined force of repulsorlifted infantry and heavy armor. The garrison is likely to be able to hold off a concerted assault by up to a division. This is aside from the issue of dealing with the garrison's attached units, which must also be neutralized. If Alliance forces are able to attack a garrison with a small attached Army contingent, however, the garrison may be taken by surprise and quickly overpowered.

Siege, the second possible tactic, is the usual result of a failed assault. A besieged garrison is unlikely to fall, as a garrison stores supplies for one year, and is able to recycle material into new parts indefinitely, using its droid-industrial complex. Under current circumstances, a besieged garrison can expect to be relieved by



Imperial Garrisons

Illustration by Doug Shuler

Imperial counterattack within a month. If the Alliance is able to isolate or distract other Imperial forces in the sector, perhaps in a coordinated uprising, it may be possible to successfully besiege a remote, under-supplied garrison.

Infiltration has a much better chance of success. Using this tactic, we have been able to temporarily seize and disable several garrisons. Infiltration involves using a small SpecForce unit, usually Pathfinders and Infiltrators, to sneak into a garrison under cover of dark or through use of a ruse. The infiltrating troops quickly take control of the command level and issue orders to allow arriving troop carriers to enter the grounds, or clear an arriving shuttle carrying troops. Once a sufficient force has arrived, the Imperials often surrender, although stormtroopers can be very difficult to subdue.

Such a seizure requires knowledge of Imperial command procedures and prior intelligence work to gain proper access codes. These seizures are always temporary, as we are unable and unwilling to maintain the garrisons as bases. We do sabotage the garrisons, and if possible, destroy them.

Alternate Tactics

There are two other methods of coping with garrisons that do not involve seizure:

The first is to obliterate the garrison via orbital bombardment. Unfortunately, this operation often proves impractical due to local population centers and/or lack of capital ships.

The other is to ignore the garrison itself, and deal instead with the attached units, drawing them away from their secured zone and conducting a commando campaign while interfering with arriving troops, conducting mobile hit-and-fade attacks, and drawing the garrison's contingent into a thin, stretched command. This tactic is the very heart of Alliance strategy.

Questions?

Cadet 1: Sir, what is your preferred method of garrison seizure?

Major Qol: I would prefer to ignore them or obliterate them from orbit. To actually seize a garrison...well, covert operation seems to work best for us. A few Sector Commands have attempted to overtly assault garrisons, or besiege them in remote areas, and they ended in worse than failure—they were slaughters.

In particular, the case on Syni IV, where the commanding officer besieged a garrison by carefully remaining outside the garrison's weapons range and launching over-the-horizon artillery barrages every time the garrison tried to sally. The Alliance commander thought he had cut the remote system off via sub-space jamming. Unfortunately, when sector command realized the garrison wasn't transmitting, they dispatched a Star Destroyer to investigate. Syni IV remains under martial law.

You must remember that the Imperial war machine is highly coordinated and intelligent, albeit rigid, and that we cannot afford to hold ground.

Cadet 2: Wouldn't precision strikes effectively deal with most garrisons?

Major Qol: Precision strikes on a scale to deal with a garrison are rarely precise, and as I mentioned, most garrisons are near population centers. There have been a few campaigns where the local urban centers are deserted due to ongoing fighting, and some garrisons are already remote, but overall, orbital strikes aren't practical. Collateral damage, a polite term for civilian casualties, is inevitable, but the Alliance tries to keep it to a minimum. Starfighter

Imperial Garrison

Scale: Capital
Personnel: 3,000
Consumables: 1 year
Hull: 7D
Shields: 3D
Sensors:
 Passive: 40/1D
 Scan: 60/3D
 Search: 80/4D
 Focus: 10/4D+2

Weapons:

3 Heavy Twin Turbolasers

Fire Arc: Turret
Crew: 3
Skill: Blaster artillery
Fire Control: 3D
Space Range: 3-15/35/75
Atmosphere Range: 6-30/70/150 km
Damage: 7D

6 Heavy Twin Laser Cannon

Fire Arc: Forward¹⁴
Crew: 2
Scale: Walker
Skill: Blaster artillery
Fire Control: 2D
Atmosphere Range: 50-500/1/2 km
Damage: 7D

3 Tractor Beams

Fire Arc: Forward
Crew: 4
Scale: Starfighter
Skill: Blaster artillery
Fire Control: 3D
Atmosphere Range: 50-250/750/1.5 km
Damage: 6D

and combat airspeeders can be useful for destroying weapon mounts and harassment, but they generally don't have the firepower to crack the garrison defenses.

Major Qol's Transcript Notes

1. Non-Imperial prisoners are rarely held in garrison—local despots generally have their own facilities. Also, Imperial detainees are only temporary residents; their sentence is served in a penal institution.

2. This is not ideal, as it makes every troop deployment to the surface a landing, a vulnerable situation.
3. Military jurisdiction over orbital space has long been a one of contention between the two branches. The Navy considers all space theirs, while the Army wants to be able to call on orbital fire support under their own command.
4. This controversy led directly to the Navy's commissioning the creation of a Navy-controlled orbital defense station. The controversy is further complicated by the deployment of Army garrisons on asteroid, sometimes in deep space.
5. Terrain is no guarantee of safety: Imperial mines can be quite capable of blasting through duracrete.
6. The garrison shields are entirely separate from local defense shields. Even if the planetary defenses are knocked down, the garrison remains able to use defectors. Most of the time, of course, the shields are down to save costs and stress on the system.
7. If engaging in assault against a garrison, do not allow your ships to position themselves anywhere but directly over the garrison. The turbolasers cannot elevate directly up. They can depress to point almost at the base of the walls, however, and will destroy any target they hit on the ground.
8. Refer to your Imperial sourcebook, datapage 99 for more on corps and corps headquarters. Note: This publication contains a mis-statement of a garrison's military assets, correctly stating that a garrison military contingent is in theory four battalions, then incorrectly saying that these are stormtroopers, AT-ATs, and AT-STs. Apparently the crucial phrase in addition to was dropped and the confusion arose in editing. Taken literally, the text requires a single AT-AT to be the equivalent of 10 repulsortanks, and an AT-ST the equivalent of five repulsortanks.
9. In this, garrison commanders are unlike corps commanders, major generals in command of a field corps. Corps commanders are genuinely fearsome, fire-eating, blood-and-entrails creatures, willing to put entire populations to the sword and commit the atrocities necessary to invade a planet. They are, fortunately, correspondingly rare.
10. Although many garrisons are indeed saddled with CompForce regiments, especially on occupied worlds.

11. See datapage 94 of your Imperial sourcebook.
12. The Navy considers the designation of a garrison as a corps HQ a bit of a dirty trick—and they're quite right, since the Army uses the garrison as an excuse to acquire TIE support wings, occasionally dropping a garrison where a non-fortified base would serve perfectly well, simply for the TIEs.
13. No one is quite sure what, if anything, stormtroopers do on their time off.
14. Each weapon faces outward from the hexagonal garrison along one of its six points, allowing overlapping fields of fire.

■ **Viran Qol**

Type: Alliance engineer

DEXTERITY 2D

Blaster 4D, blaster artillery 4D+1, brawling parry 3D, dodge 5D, grenade 4D, vehicle blasters 3D

KNOWLEDGE 4D

Alien species 5D, bureaucracy 6D, bureaucracy: Imperial 7D, cultures 5D, streetwise 5D, survival 5D, tactics 6D, willpower 4D+2

MECHANICAL 2D

Communications 4D, ground vehicle operations 3D, sensors 5D, repulsortank operations 4D

PERCEPTION 4D

Command 6D, investigation 4D+2, persuasion 5D, search 5D, sneak 4D+2

STRENGTH 2D

Climbing/jumping 4D, stamina 3D+2

TECHNICAL 4D

Computer programming/repair 5D, construction 6D, demolition 6D, (A) engineering 2D, (A) engineering: civil 4D, first aid 5D, security 5D

Force Points: 2

Character Points: 12

Move: 10

Equipment: Datapad, measuring sensor, blaster (4D), 2 cubes detonite

Capsule: The day after Viran Qol graduated from his civil engineering program, the Empire invaded his homeworld of Niran. Within a week he was part of the Niran Resistance, which was later absorbed into the Rebel Alliance. Qol had trained to build engineering marvels—now he trains others to destroy them.



Illustration by Doug Shuler

NEWS NETS

A selection of newsfeeds culled from NewsNets major and minor throughout the Empire, which may or may not prove to be factual.



BREMA NEWS

37:10:5/BMA/Node/MLL.3.CDI/REL

Pinacism Movement Spreading Through Brema Sector

CMAOLIDI, MALLONORE: The Pinacism movement, characterized by a belief that those who sit out the grand events of history will eventually emerge to pick up the pieces, is sweeping communities in Brema sector. Numerous city councils and community governments are withdrawing their leaders from sector affairs, and some are restructuring their communities to reduce dependence on outside sources.

Some sector authorities are worried about potential problems with the Empire if the spread of Pinacism continues. Nalco Farell, a Thimwa precinct director, says that he is worried that his constituents, many of whom are Pinacists, will not remain content with insularity. "There is a real concern,

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both here and in the Moff's office, that the [Pinacist] communities will eventually move to withdraw from the Empire and form independent enclaves. That, of course, is a violation of the Imperial charter."

Moff Malcom's office has released a statement requesting communities to discourage Pinacism recruitment.

• CORUSCANT DAILY NEWSFEED •

37:10:19/CDN/G76D/COR.1.IPC/POL

Vader Assigned to Accompany Task Force to Outer Rim

CORUSCANT, IMPERIAL CITY: The Emperor announced in Court today that Lord Darth Vader will be joining Admiral Ozzel's Death Squadron. Ozzel's task force is scheduled to leave the Core for an unspecified length of time — at least six months, according to some estimates.

The reason for Vader's departure from Imperial Center is unclear. Vader often leaves Coruscant on the Emperor's business, but seldom for more than a few weeks. Some Court observers theorize that Vader has displeased the Emperor in some way, and is being banished from Court as a punishment. Others say that Vader himself requested the assignment for his own reasons.

Whatever the reason, Grand Admiral Tigellinus is definitely looking chipper this evening. Small wonder, with one of his greatest rivals out of the way for the foreseeable future.

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Imperial Defense Daily

37:10:23/IDD/BLR3/KDY.0.ITP/MIL

Super Star Destroyer *Executor* Unveiled In Kuat Ceremony

KUAT, IMPERIAL TRANSFER POST: The *Executor*, the first in a new class of Super Star Destroyers, was officially commissioned in a ceremony held at the Imperial Transfer Post near the Kuat system. The august Emperor himself presided over the ceremony, flanked by Lord Darth Vader, Admiral Thrawn and Grand Admiral Tigelinus. Members of the Navy's general staff were also present, among them Admirals Tandres, Ozzel, and Tavares.

The *Executor*, which completed a six-month-long shake-down cruise just five weeks ago, will join Admiral Ozzel's newly formed Death Squadron, a task force charged with locating Rebel military forces. Ozzel is expected to transfer his flag to the *Executor* before the Death Squadron heads for the Outer Rim next month. Darth Vader is expected to accompany the fleet as the Emperor's liaison.

The *Super-class* Star Destroyer is the largest ship in all of Known Space. Five times the length of the Imperial Star Destroyer, the *Super-class* boasts over a thousand turbolaser batteries, ion cannons, and tractor beam emplacements. It carries 12 squadrons of fighters and support vessels, 25 AT-AT walkers, 50 AT-STs, and an assortment of other ground assault vehicles. Over a quarter million men and 10,000 droids crew the mighty fortress, including an entire corps of

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stormtroopers and Army troopers.

Three additional *Super-class* Star Destroyers are in their final phases of construction at undisclosed locations, according to Navy officials. They are scheduled to enter service over the next 16 months.

Colonial News Nets

37:11:9/COL/TNL4/LAN.5.SHN/Subject
Classification

Hutt Enclave Driven From Lirra

LIRRA, SHANDO: Imperial forces claimed Lirra and surrounding systems over the weekend, driving out the Hutt dynasty which has ruled the planet for the past nine decades. The take-over was largely peaceful, and the Shando metro area is calm this morning.

Pressure to send in Imperial troops to reclaim the planet grew in intensity three months ago when an undercover news investigation team revealed that over a million human slaves were living on Lirra to serve the Jhank Shel Hutt clan.

In his address claiming the planet, Moff Heedra of Baxel sector declared Lirra a disaster planet. Government relief assistance groups are en route to Lirra to give aid to the new Imperial citizens and help them build a new society. It is expected that the Emperor's staff will appoint a governor to supervise the rebuilding of the planet's infrastructure.

Lirra, which is on the border of Hutt space and Baxel sector, is a resort world well known for its extensive networks of

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mineral pools and mud flats. Settlement rights disputes between the Jhank Shel clan and the human Imperial citizens of Baxel sector span three centuries. The Jhank Shel clan claimed the world nearly a hundred years ago by moving enough of its members to Lirra to outnumber the human settlers. Once they had a majority, the Hutts called for a plebiscite to bring the world into the Hutt fold.

The Hutt government has lodged an official protest with Coruscant, but there has been no official response thus far.

• CORUSCANT DAILY NEWSFEED •

37:11:13/CDN/G76D/COR.1.IPC/POL

Thrawn Inducted into Order of Canted Circle

CORUSCANT, IMPERIAL CITY: Admiral Thrawn was inducted into the august Order of the Canted Circle this evening in the traditional open ceremony held in the Skydome Botanical Gardens. Court observers are amazed, both because Thrawn is not a pure human, and because he is the fourteenth member to be admitted in ten years; traditionally, only eleven members are admitted in a decade.

An Order member, who desires to remain anonymous, claims that Thrawn's invitation came at the behest of the Emperor himself, who is known to be quite pleased with Thrawn's work in the Outer Rim. This source adds that some members rose in forceful opposition to Thrawn's induction, until Palpatine's wishes were made known.

Though the source declined to name names, it is almost certain that Grand Admiral Ruffa Tigellinus was one of the

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opposition leaders. It is common knowledge that Thrawn's return to Coruscant has badly disrupted his plans. Tigellinus has spent the past year assembling one of the Court's most powerful factions.

The Order of the Canted Circle is one of the most ancient and exclusive social organizations on Coruscant.

• TRINEBULON NEWS

37:11:27/TRI/I6DE/SEC.4.HPC/ECO

Galladinium Datalog Banned in Spirva Sector

LENTHALIS, HREAS PORT CITY: Moff Shinda of Spirva sector announced yesterday that the famed Galladinium Datalog was being placed on a sector-wide contraband list, effective immediately.

The move does not come entirely as a surprise to observers, who note that sector law enforcement agencies have had increasing difficulty in combating street gangs and anti-Empire groups employing goods obtained from the datalog, most notably modified gladiator walkers and personal weapons.

Gans Dent, associate director of Galladinium Galactic Exports, announced today that the shipping company would comply with the ban, and cancel all orders originating from Spirva sector. Another company official, who asked not to be identified, said that Galladinium was cooperating with Imperial investigators in tracking down customers who may have illegally modified equipment obtained from Galladinium.

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SMALL FAVORS

by Paul Danner

He stood absolutely still in front of the viewport, returning the unblinking gaze of the Kuat sun with icy indifference. Viewed on some primitive planet in the far reaches of space, the towering figure in polished black armor might have appeared to be the carved likeness of an evil deity. Aboard the Imperial Transfer Station, however, the Dark Lord of the Sith was seldom mistaken for statuary.

Darth Vader watched the might of the Empire converge around him. The gathered fleet was immense. Ships numbered in the thousands. But the Dark Lord ignored the multitude of combat and support craft that darted into position like an insect swarm. To the hundreds of cruisers, Dreadnaughts, and frigates, he gave nothing more than a cursory glance. Even the assembled Star Destroyers, three dozen strong, received minimal attention.

The observation platform was absolutely silent as the focus of Vader's concentration slowly drifted into view. And its arrival sent every other ship scurrying out of the way...

At 8,000 meters, or five Star Destroyers, in length, the warship dwarfed everything except for the space station itself. The first *Super-class* Star Destroyer was a gift from the Emperor, and like all of Palpatine's favors, it came with a price. The *Executor* was to serve as Lord Vader's personal flagship, from which he would carry out the order to engineer the final destruction of the Rebel Alliance.

The Dark Lord finally moved, slightly inclining his masked head. "Your presence was requested over an hour ago." There was a pause punctuated by a hollow, filtered breath. "You are late, Sollaine."

"My apologies, Lord Vader," responded a figure from the shadows of the entranceway, "I was attending to more important matters."

"Indeed?"

"The Emperor has charged me with ferreting out Rebel spies."

Sollaine stepped into the room, boots cracking with sharp reports against the polished floor. He was dressed in a customized version of the standard Imperial ISB uniform: black, without rank insignia, and creased as if by razor's edge. What caught one's attention immediately, though, was not the man's fashion sense: both of Sollaine's hands were prosthetic replacements. Not unusual in and of themselves, except for the fact that they were not covered by synthflesh. His hands entertained no pretense of being real, their silver-blue metal frighteningly skeletal, each finger adorned with a long, serrated claw.

Sollaine calmly approached Vader, seemingly unruffled by the fear that affected most everyone in the Dark Lord's presence. To that end, the ISB had come under his control.

Without turning, Vader extended a hand toward Sollaine. A small datapad rested between the gloved fingers. "How fortunate then that I selected you for this assignment, the first you will assume in your new capacity."

Sollaine accepted the pad and quickly perused the information it held. He betrayed no outward emotion, save for a nearly imperceptible facial twitch. "These files are heavily encoded. It would take at least five standard days for Cryptanalysis to decipher them. And we know full well the Rebel scum will have all their agents out in half that time."

"Then for your sake, I suggest you work with double the efficiency. The Emperor considers this a mission of the most vital nature."

"What do you mean?"

Vader slowly turned his head to face the ISB officer. "You are charged with identifying an Alliance deep-cover agent and delivering this thorn in the Emperor's side to me." A long echoing breath interrupted the Dark Lord. "Alive."

Sollaine eyed the gloved finger that could direct the dark side of the Force to squeeze the life from a man. "As you wish," he answered, voice dripping with venom. "It shall be done."

Vader returned his gaze to the far reaches of space. "I would have performed this task myself, but the Emperor has other work for me," he said nodding in the direction of the *Executor*.

Sollaine stared at the remarkable spaceship without bothering to hide his envy.

Vader continued, "So I recommended you..." Sollaine's eyes widened with sudden realization. "I am pleased that we understand each other," the Dark Lord said.

After a short pause, Sollaine found his voice. "As am I." "Excellent." Vader crossed the room in three graceful strides. Sollaine stood silently for a few moments, too stunned to do anything except stare at the datapad in his hands. The machine merely stared back, offering either triumph or damnation within its electronic memory.

"And, Sollaine?" The booming voice demanded the ISB officer's attention.

The Dark Lord of the Sith had paused in the entranceway. "Congratulations," Vader said, and in a swirl of voluminous black cape, he was gone.



General Airen Cracken stared at the report on his datapad in disbelief. How could this happen? he asked whatever gods of fortune ruled the galaxy. If they heard, they gave no response.

"You wanted to see me?"

Surprised, Cracken glanced at the man who stood inside his door. The General tried to suppress a grin, but was only partially successful. "Don't you ever knock?"

"Only when I have to," Cyle Cavv said with a wink. He was in his late forties, but his bright azure eyes gleamed with the mischief of a much younger man.

Cracken stood up to embrace his friend. "It's been too long, you old thief."

"Well, the renowned Alliance General is always busy. And who are you calling old?" Cavv folded his arms across his chest. "I'm insulted."

"So am I," Cracken said, holding out his hand.

Sheepishly, Cavv returned the General's chronometer. "As I always say, you may be able to spot a thief in a second..."

"...but by that time your chronometer's already in his pocket." Cracken shook his head. "Same old Cavv."

Cavv surveyed the small office, sparse by any account. "Same old Cracken. Just enough to get by." His eyes locked onto the only

item that seemed out of place, a small glass display case containing a gold hydrosponder carved with the inscription: 'Cracken's Crew Says Hello.' Cavv smiled, tracing a hand respectfully over the case. "The good old days on Contruum."

Cracken nodded. "Don't even think about it."

The thief grinned, then removed his hand from the case and took a seat. "So, how are Josta and the kids?"

"Great. Dena just started school and Pash... Well, I may just make a starfighter pilot out of him, yet." Cracken grew serious. "I'm sorry to hear about Tascin and Rannah. The attack on Ryvella came as a shock to everyone here."

Cavv nodded. "When I arrived in V'eldalv, there was nothing left except smoking ruins. I was lucky to find my nephew at all, let alone alive."

"How is he holding up?"

"Well, it hasn't been easy, but he's still young. Children are tough, and Sienn's no exception. The boy's got Cavvian blood in his veins, after all."

"Yeah... poor kid."

Cavv grinned impishly. "Well, as much as I enjoy trading insults with my favorite ex-Commander, I assume that's not the sole reason for this auspicious invitation."

"If only the galaxy was that accommodating..." The General gave a long sigh. "And as you well know, lately it has become an even more dangerous place."

"You mean merely because we have a power-crazed Emperor freely wielding planet-destroying technology like the Death Star? Surely you jest..."

Cracken rolled his eyes and continued, "Well, it's even more dangerous if you happen to be an Alliance spy..."

"I know the feeling," Cavv said with an arched eyebrow.

"An Imperial infiltrator recently secured a coded Alliance file containing top secret information, including the identities of some of our agents. He was caught, but not before transmitting the data to the Empire... Luckily, most of our operatives can easily disappear before the files are decrypted."

Cavv paled slightly. "My name was in those files?"

"No. And though I'm sure the Empire would be happy to pick up everyone's favorite ex-Special Ops Agent, they may get something just as valuable: an extremely useful deep-cover operative whose cover is actually quite authentic."

"An well-placed Imperial turncoat? Very intriguing, General," the thief said with a smile. "You have my undivided attention."

"The operative in question is Rivoche Tarkin, niece of the late Grand Moff."

For the first time, Cavv was silent. "You must be joking."

"I wish I were." Cracken paused, his face deadly serious. "Everything I'm telling you is heavily classified, of course. Only a few of my top agents even know about her."

Cavv nodded.

"Rivoche has been an incredible help to us. New Cylimba would never have been evacuated without her information. I want to return the favor. Her heritage isn't going to save her from a very public and painful execution when the Empire discovers the truth."

A look of understanding dawned on the thief's face. "You want me to get her out..."

"You're the only one I can count on for this, Cavv. I'll be honest with you, I almost didn't ask for your help, but I had no other choice. Intelligence resources are already spread thin as it is, and Mon Mothma can't authorize a full-scale rescue attempt." The General lowered his voice. "Unfortunately, there are also political considerations we must consider. There will be repercussions within the Alliance if Rivoche's name became public. A lot of people just aren't going to believe her because of her lineage. Tarkin and his Doctrine spread terror, hatred, and death throughout the galaxy. The blood of millions was on his hands."

Drawing in a deep breath, Cavv leaned back in his chair. "Okay, I'll go get her."

General Cracken smiled in relief, clapping his friend on the arm.

Cavv held up a warning finger. "I'm not sure I can pull this off alone, though. Can I borrow somebody?"

"Already taken care of," Cracken said, tapping the comlink on his desk.

The thief shook his head, chuckling softly. "You think you know me that well, huh?"

"That's why I've got the rank insignia..."

The door opened, and a small man stumbled into the room. His face was barely visible above the stack of datapads in his arms. The mousy assistant finally managed to place his burden on the desk. He straightened up and cleared his throat. "You rang, General?"

Cavv shot Cracken a look. "Please tell me this isn't him."

The General laughed out loud. "No. This is Gerind, my assistant.

Those datapads contain everything you need to know for the mission." Cracken gestured behind Cavv. "That's your partner."

The thief turned around, but all he saw was an armored chestpiece. Cavv slowly angled his head until he was staring at a face. The big stranger snarled, baring sharpened teeth.

Cavv promptly took one step back.

Amused, Cracken stepped around the desk to make the introductions. "Cavv, I'd like you to meet Quillin Arkell."

Arkell grunted an acknowledgment.

"Pleasure, I'm sure," Cavv said, extending a hand.

The big man stared at it, but made no move to accept the greeting.

Cavv shrugged, studying his partner. Arkell stood over two meters tall, with a shock of silver hair shaved military-style in the back and on the sides. His eyes were solid blue and contained no pupils. Armor plating the color of ash covered Arkell's torso, and the dark bodysuit underneath was strained by solid muscle.

"I'm glad he's on our side," the thief noted.

Cracken checked his chronometer. "I hate to interrupt this touching introduction, but you can get to know each other on the way. With this mission, time might be the most dangerous enemy you'll have worry about."

Cavv gave a rueful smile. "Somehow, I get the feeling that won't be the case."

The General shook each man's hand. "Good luck, and may the Force be with you both."

The thief paused at the door, cocking one eyebrow. "Assuming I survive this little endeavor, I'm probably going to require a small favor in return..."

"You pull this off, Cavv, and you can have anything you want..."

"Good," Cavv said with an unmistakable twinkle in his eye, and disappeared out of the room.



The *G Cat* entered hyperspace, the sleek craft cutting an easy path through the starlines.

"We've got about nineteen hours until we reach Corulag," Cavv announced from the pilot's chair. He glanced back at the passenger seats for a response, but Arkell was staring straight ahead as if he hadn't heard.

"Refreshments are currently being served on the lido deck," Cavv continued, "and our shockball tournament begins at 1200 standard time."

Still no reply from the big man...

"Oookay," Cavv said, turning back around, "I can see this is going to be a long trip."

Uncomfortable silence filled the cockpit for what seemed like an eternity. It was broken only by the periodic beeping of the only other occupant: a weathered gold and green R2 unit. The astromech droid rested snugly in a jury-rigged compartment that would have served as the usual seat for a co-pilot.

"It is dishonorable among my people to associate with thieves."

Cavv was so shocked by the sound of a voice other than his own, he nearly jumped out of his chair. "I'm sorry?"

"It is not befitting for a noble warrior to ally himself with cowardly scum," Arkell said with bared teeth.

"Don't get your shiny hair in knots about it, pal." Cavv gave a reassuring wink. "I'll just make an exception in your case."

"You dare mock me?" Arkell suddenly rose to his full height, an act that would surely have been impressive had it not been performed in the relatively tight confines of a spaceship.



Arkell slowly opened his eyes, and moaned as a dull pain seemed to sharpen itself in his skull. As groggy as he was, it took him a moment to get oriented. The big man was stretched out on a bunk bed, staring up at Cavv's grinning face.

Shaking his head ruefully, the thief slipped a small medpac back into its container. "Seems I was wrong," he said, checking his chronometer. "This was a pretty fast trip."

Arkell growled something unintelligible and started to rise. Waves of nausea and a sudden throbbing in his head sent him back to his horizontal orientation.

Cavv took a seat on the bed across the way. "The painkiller should take effect any moment. We have an hour left, and I suggest you use it to relax and regain your strength."

"Wise words...From whom did you steal them?"

"Though you may find this hard to believe, I don't just grab whatever's not protected by a force field." Cavv narrowed his eyes,

appraising the big man. "I've met one like you before. A Velabri, I mean. I meet plenty of thickskulls."

Arkell looked about ready to suffer the pain and get up to throttle Cavv. "If you claim to know my species, then you should also know we take offense to foolishness."

"You mean, no sense of humor."

"There is nothing funny about war. And war is life to a Velabri Lancer. We are the sovereign protectors of our people. The elite of the elite chosen to fight for the Velabri species."

"So where does the famed Velabri Bloodvow fit into the puzzle?"

It was Arkell's turn to be shocked, though he quickly recovered his composure. "What would you know of a pledge of honor?"

Cavv's eyes seemed to look past Arkell. "Only what I learned when I promised my dying sister that I'd raise her son as if he were my own."

Arkell turned away, gazing at the underside of the bunk above him with unusual interest. There was uncomfortable silence, and then the big man spoke softly. "A long time ago, in the earliest days of the Alliance, the Rebels aided in the evacuation of the rightful government of Velabri, the homeworld of my people. The officials and their families were smuggled out of the system just before the Imperial invasion fleet arrived. One of the transports came under fire and was about to be captured. If it were not for the quick action of a young fighter pilot, the transport would have been lost. The transport was carrying the family of Quillin Durand, my father, and he swore a Bloodvow that the debt would be repaid one day." His voice faltered only slightly. "He was killed soon after, but the Bloodvow passed from father to eldest son...to me. You see, that young pilot was Airen Cracken." Arkell's eyes flashed. "And I am here to discharge the debt my family owes him."

Cavv nodded in appreciation. "Let's hope it gets repaid in full." "I assume you have some semblance of a strategy for this mission."

"Sure," the thief said, getting to his feet. "When you're feeling better, come back up to the cockpit and I'll tell you about it."

"In other words, there's no plan," Arkell said flatly.

Cavv flashed a wide grin, and then disappeared down the corridor.



Captain Nevik quickly crossed the command deck of the Imperial Star Destroyer *Devastator*, quite a feat considering the man's apparent lack of regular exercise. "The techs have just finished decoding—"

Sollaine snatched the datapad out of the captain's hands and quickly began cycling through the data.

Unperturbed, Nevik proudly puffed out his substantial chest and continued. "We can begin rounding up the Rebel scum immediately. I believe one of them is in the Alfestril System, which of course is less than an hour away from our current position—"

Sollaine's eyes flew open as he read the last name on the list. "It can't be..."

"I assure you, sir. This ship can be there in forty standard minutes."

"Idiot!" Sollaine shoved the datapad into the captain's gut, the sheer strength of the prosthetic hand driving the large man to the deck. "Set a new course: maximum speed to Corulag." His lips twisted slightly as an idea came to him. "Terminate our transponder signal and maintain wideband communications silence."

In near unison, the *Devastator's* bridge crew stared up from the electronic pits to either side of the elevated walkway that Sollaine was currently pacing. They seemed unsure of whether to follow his orders without the approval of their captain, who was just getting to his feet.

"Are you idiots deaf as well as dumb? I said, best speed to Corulag!"

"Belay that order!" Nevik said, his face flushing in anger. "This is utterly unacceptable."

Sollaine swiveled his head around, cold eyes locking onto the captain from under narrowed lids.

The captain continued undaunted. "We are not some smuggler ship sneaking around the galaxy. This is an Imperial Star Destroyer. And I will not be party to your dubious scheme..."

Sollaine walked over to Captain Nevik, patting the man's shoulder. "You're right, of course. This is quite unacceptable..."

"I'm glad that you understand—" Nevik was abruptly silenced as Sollaine's prosthetic hand closed around his throat. The silver-blue

claws dug into the thick folds of flesh, drawing blood. Gurgling for breath, Nevik frantically tried to pry himself free, but the artificial hand proved too strong.

Suddenly, a loud pulse of energy formed around Sollaine's hand. Shimmering lances of bluish electricity danced across the metallic surface, traveling down the hand and arcing through the fingers. The shimmering serpents quickly reached their prey. The captain's eyes flew open, and the last thing he saw before the massive shock short-circuited his life was Sollaine's maniacal grin...

The younger officers looked away almost immediately, and even the hardened veterans didn't last long. Only Sollaine was left to witness the horrid spectacle in its entirety. After seemingly endless moments, Nevik's body ceased its shaking. The captain's uniform was blackened, and smoke trailed into the air in thin wisps.

Still retaining his grip on the corpse, Sollaine let his icy gaze sweep the room, falling on each officer in turn.

The crew's doubts seemed to instantly evaporate as they rushed to obey his commands.

Sollaine loosened his grip and what was left of Nevik hit the floor hard, causing many among the crew to wince. He gestured at two junior techs. "Remove this mess."

The men paled at their assigned task, but quickly complied.

Without another word, Sollaine walked over to the viewport and stared out at the expanse of space that lay ahead of him. A smile began to curl one side of his lip. "You will not take the credit for this one, Vader," Sollaine whispered to the stars. "I will bring the traitor to the Emperor, himself. And when I do, the *Executor* will have a new master."



Arkell studied the cockpit displays, taking careful stock of the *G Car's* equipment. When he got too close to one of the consoles, the R2 unit swiveled its head around and emitted two scolding beeps.

"What's going on?" Cavv asked from around the corner.

"Nothing. This hunk of junk seems to be touchy," Arkell said with a snarl.

"Fweeep beep thwaap boo-beep," was the droid's indignant reply.

"Artoo-Arcee may be touchy, but he's also right. Don't touch

anything, Velabri. My ship is a delicate work of art."

"Black market art is more like it. If I'm not mistaken, this is an Arakyd Helix—an extremely rare, outrageously expensive, Light Interceptor."

"Light freighter," the thief's voice corrected.

Arkell snorted. "If this is a pure transport vessel, then I'm a Jawa." He shook his head in amazement. "I've seen less of a weapons load-out on military starfighters. If you expect to sneak into Corulag with this ship, you're in for a rude awakening. From what I've heard, most Imperial agents are suspicious as soon as they hear the word 'Helix.' We'll be searched for sure..."

"All the better to hide in plain sight, then." Cavv stepped into the cockpit and executed an elegant twirl, proudly displaying the finely tailored jumpsuit and embroidered half-cloak he wore. The brilliant coloration of the clothing turned the movement into a prismatic blur. "What do you think? Does it say 'Imperial Noble'?"

"If so, thief, it's talking very loudly."

"Wonderful," the thief said. "There's no such thing as a restrained nobleman. Which explains not only the clothing, but the exotic taste in ships as well."

"I assume, then, that all of this craft's datawork has been extensively falsified."

"My version makes the real thing look like a forgery," Cavv said with a wink.

"I'm still not convinced this is going to work, thief. If there's—"

Cavv interrupted him, raising a finger into the air. "Oh, by the way. From now on, you shall address me as Lord Velastor T'nnac. M'lord will be fine, though."

Arkell smiled, but the gesture was anything but friendly. His sharp incisors were clearly visible. "And why would I want to do that?"

"How else should an alien slave address his master?" Noting the expression on Arkell's face, Cavv quickly continued. "Well, actually you'll be serving as my bodyguard. Come on, Velabri...With those eyes and teeth, you can't expect to pass for human. And we all know how xenophobic the residents of the Core Worlds are..."

The argument seemed to work, at least for the moment. Arkell obviously wasn't happy about the situation, but he reluctantly nodded in agreement.

"See? I told you everything was going to work out. Easy credits, Velabri. All you need is a good plan. It's like the Jawas always say,



Illustration by Doug Schuster

"Chikkel atik binmett nikk jchimmen kha."

"Meaning?"

"Follow the Bantha to water, but watch where you step."

Arkell frowned. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Well, nothing really," Cavv said, "but I really like that one."

"Boooo-weeee woop."

"I see it, Arcee." Cavv blinked twice, stunned. Then he added in a soft voice, "How could you miss it?"

"I thought you said everything was going to work out...easy credits," Arkell said mockingly as he leaned over the thief's shoulder.

The space lanes were overflowing with ships of all shapes and sizes. Cavv had never seen so many vessels gather where there wasn't a war taking place. They numbered well into the hundred thousands and moved like a giant herd of Bantha. Only instead of Sand People doing the shepherding, it was a fleet of Star Destroyers and countless Imperial picket ships. The large blue-green sphere of Corulag could barely be seen for all the congestion.

Arkell was stunned. "Such a gathering of ships. What does it mean?"

"Well, either the Corulag Bureau of Tourism is giving away free Death Stars to the first million visitors," Cavv said dryly, "or else the Empire knew we were coming and grossly overestimated our capabilities."

"Fweeeep weee-beep."

"Time to put our little masquerade to the test," Cavv calmly answered, reaching for the comlink. "We're being hailed..."

The thief stared at the screen for a moment, reading the incoming message with a look of utter shock.

"What is it?" Arkell asked impatiently.

"Hold on a second. This can't be right...Arcee, run a slice and see if you can dig up some more information."

"Bo-beep."

"Well?"

The thief looked up, a strange expression on his face. "It was an automatic message welcoming us to an engagement party."

"That's some party..."

Arcee let out another series of beeps, drawing the thief's attention back to the screen.

"You can say that again," Cavv said, growing very pale. "The guest list includes the local governors, Moff Jamson Caglio, and..." His voice raised an entire octave. "Darth Vader."

Arkell's eyes began to scour the ships. "Vader's here?"

"Not for another nine hours or so...just before the ceremony starts."

"Tarrek's eyes!" Arkell exclaimed. "Who in the galaxy is getting engaged here?"

"Vastin Caglio, eldest son of the Moff. And his bride-to-be is...Rivoche Tarkin."

The Velabri warrior shook his head. "We'll never make it past security now."

"I was once told that 'never is merely a state of mind. If you are so sure it cannot be done, then it will not be done.'"

Arkell solemnly nodded in agreement. "For once, you make sense. Where did you learn such wise advice?"

"You'd be surprised what you can learn after crash landing on an uninhabited swamp planet in the middle of nowhere." Cavv ignored Arkell's confused expression and turned back to the controls.

"Arcee, think you can get us added to the guest list?"

"Fweep beep."

Cavv patted the droid and grinned. "Looks like we'll be attending

our first Imperial soiree." The thief unbuckled himself from the pilot's seat and disappeared down the corridor. "I hope they're serving those tiny multi-meat cylinders in the baked bread pockets."

Arkell stared after him. "Now what are you doing?"

"Why, looking for a gift of course," Cavv said with a wink. "We wouldn't want to drop in empty-handed, would we?"



The *Devastator* dropped out of hyperspace, nearly running into a large cargo frigate.

Sollaine stared out the viewport, gaping at the massive gathering of vessels. "What in the Empire is going on here?"

Major Gistol, Sollaine's ISB adjutant, quickly answered. "We've just been contacted by the Star Destroyer *Nullifier*. It seems there's some sort of engagement party taking place on Corulag."

"I don't care if a Moff is marrying a wampa. Just navigate through this mess and order a path cleared for our landing force."

"Well, sir, there's a problem..." The Major shifted uncomfortably under Sollaine's harsh glare and quickly continued. "For security reasons, no vessel is permitted to land on the planet without proper clearance. I suppose that's why the space lanes are so congested."

Sollaine strode over to the communications console and jabbed a metal finger into the comlink switch. "Get me the officer in command."

After a moment, a gravelly voice responded. "Admiral Nyran here. To whom am I speaking?"

"This is Sollaine, ISB Central Commander. I demand that you grant me immediate clearance."

"That will be impossible, sir," Nyran said. "I am under very strict orders."

"I am countermanding those orders," Sollaine said through clenched teeth.

"I regret to inform you, sir, that you don't have the authority to do so. My actions have been directed by Lord Vader, himself."

There was absolute silence on the *Devastator's* bridge. The crew closest to the comm station backed away as far as decorum allowed, for Sollaine seemed ready to explode.

Instead, he lowered his voice to a dangerous whisper and spoke

into the comlink. "Let me clarify the situation, Admiral. What if I dispatch my ground force to Corulag regardless of orders?"

"Then a most unfortunate situation will arise. Though considering the strength of my battle fleet, it will be mercifully brief. Is that clear enough for you? Sir?"

One side of Sollaine's face twisted into a mockery of a smile. "Crystal clear. Thank you, Admiral. We'll be taking our leave, now. Enjoy the celebration." He slammed his fist onto the console, abruptly ending communication.

Much to the comm crew's relief, Sollaine stalked away. Gistol hurried after him, datapad in hand.

"Ready a *Beta*-class shuttle," Sollaine said in a tone that made it clear he was in no mood to be further argued with. "I want a squad of Storm Commandos prepped and ready for departure in three minutes. At which point, the *Devastator* will take a moment to open fire on any independent ship in sight, then escape to hyperspace. In the confusion, the shuttle will make its way to the planet below where I will personally deal with this entire matter." He paused, allowing his stony gaze to over sweep the bridge. "Does anyone have a problem with that?"

No one did.

Sollaine nodded, then took Gistol by the shoulder. "We have work to do..."



Rivoche Tarkin was surprised to hear her door chime. She wasn't expecting anyone. In fact, she had given the guards orders not to disturb her. It was bad enough that in a few hours she'd be stuck playing gracious hostess to half the sector. All she wanted in the meantime was a little peace and quiet. Was that so much to ask?

With a long-suffering sigh, Rivoche left the comfortable chair out on the balcony of her penthouse suite. She walked over to the door, growing more annoyed with each step. Tucking an errant strand of hair back over her ear, she asked curtly, "Who is it?"

There was a slight pause. "Flower delivery, ma'am."

"Just leave it by the door, then."

"Uhhh...you need to sign for it."

"Someone downstairs can do that," she said, growing even more irritated, "I'm busy."

"They're, uh, delicate flowers. They could possibly, uh, wilt if you don't get them in water immediately."

Having reached her limit, Rivoche keyed the panel, and the door slid open, revealing Cavv and Arkell. The thief held an elegantly wrapped package, tied with a bow, under his arm.

"What is going on here?" she asked.

Cavv was too busy glaring at his partner to answer her. "That's the last time I let you try your hand at subtlety. Better stick to bashing skulls." The thief shook his head in disgust. "Flower delivery, indeed."

"Is this some sort of joke?" She narrowed her eyes, studying the duo.

Cavv put on his best grin. "I'm sure I can explain everything."

"Somehow, I doubt that. But feel free to go ahead and begin while I call for my guards."

"Not a good idea," Cavv cautioned. "They're taking a prolonged nap..."

Rivoche suddenly jammed her hand on the control panel. Before the door could slide closed, though, Arkell stepped forward and extended a muscular arm. The door remained open. Rivoche stumbled backwards, unsure of what to do.

Cavv moved around the Velabri and entered the room. "It's okay. We're here to help you." Noting the look on her face, he quickly added. "The Jawa rides at midnight."

Rivoche paused, tilting her head. After a moment's confusion, she responded. "The Jawa rides alone."

The thief nodded in approval and held out a hand. "We're here to get you out. You're in grave danger, Rivoche."

Arkell entered, letting the door close behind him. "Time is short. We must hurry..."

She seemed slightly disoriented. "I never thought this day would come..."

Noting her unsteadiness, Cavv slipped an arm around Rivoche's waist. "As much as it pains me to say, my partner is correct. Our best chance of escape lies in celerity. We can sort things out when we're safely out of the system."

Rivoche nodded in agreement.

"Is there anything you need to take with you?" Cavv asked.

"All my important personal possessions are at the family estate on Eriadu. There's nothing here that I'll particularly miss."

"Good, then let's go."

She paused, glancing at the present that Arkell carried. "Is that for me?"

Arkell snorted derisively. "Just like a female..."

Rivoche put her hands on her hips and glared. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Can we please continue this conversation later?" Cavv asked, keying the control panel.

Sollaine was waiting outside the door, arms folded and a grin of triumph on his face. A handful of black-armored Imperial Storm Commandos stood behind him, weapons held at the ready.

"Excuse me...I have reason to believe there is a traitor in your midst." Sollaine said, staring directly at Rivoche with a predatory smile. Then he noticed Arkell and Cavv, and narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "May I see your invitations, gentlemen?"

"Of course," Cavv said quickly. "I have them right here." He flashed an embarrassed grin as he realized his hands were full with the package. "Could you hold this a moment?"

Without waiting for an answer, Cavv shoved the package into Sollaine's arms, knocking the ISB Commander back into the hall. The thief quickly shut the door just as blaster fire erupted from the hall.

As the door began to strain under the barrage, Cavv reached for a control device wrapped around his wrist. Tapping it once, he dove to the floor and screamed, "Down!"

Arkell's reflexes took over and the warrior wordlessly obeyed, dragging a confused Rivoche down with him.

The thunderous explosion that followed seemed to shake the entire building. What was left of the door was blown off its hinges and sailed through the apartment, crashing into the far wall. Smoke and ash showered the room, and everything was dark for a few moments.

Arkell rose, helping Rivoche to her feet. Cavv let out a small cough and wiped his face. All three of them were covered with dark soot, but were otherwise unharmed.

There was no sign of Sollaine or his Storm Commandos, but the hall was now marred by a gaping hole that displayed the floor beneath them. A few surprised bystanders stared up through the opening in confusion.

The roof had suffered a similar fate as a result of the blast, offering a splendid view of Corulag's blue sky.

"What was in that gift?" Rivoche asked.

"Thermite," Cavv answered.

"I'm truly touched," she said.

"It never fails," the thief said with a dramatic shake of his head.

"You try to do something nice for someone and it blows up in your face."

Arkell rolled his eyes. "If you two are done trading witticisms, I'd like to leave. Preferably before someone tips off the authorities to our impromptu adjustment of the building's decor."

"I wouldn't call it much of an improvement," Rivoche said, wrinkling her nose.

Cavv pouted dramatically. "Everybody's a critic..."



Pain.

It was all his consciousness could embrace for the moment. The agony was so overwhelming, there wasn't room for anything else.

The searing white light didn't fade, but other functions began to slowly return.

Memory.

With his vision blurred, the recalled images were all he had to behold. The last thing he remembered was tossing the package away from him. The command for the squad to open fire...

And then his world exploded into force and fury.

He assumed the armored bodies of the Storm Commandos that surrounded him had provided adequate shielding. Or he would have shared their fate...

His eyes began to focus and he realized the large azure blur was really the sky. At that moment, he knew he must be on the roof.

In great pain, he took stock of his injuries. Something was wrong internally; he could feel unusual movement in his ribcage. His breath was labored, but respiration was otherwise unaffected. Countless bruises and cuts had found a home under the tattered remains of his uniform.

He flexed his hands, reassured by the click-clack of his claws. His legs were similarly unaffected, and after a minor struggle, he managed to stand.

Sollaine took a cautious first step, and then another. And another. It quickly became easier to ignore the pain.

He smiled as best he could, despite the bright red gash that bisected his face.

As long as he lived, the outcome was not in question. Vader had laid down a challenge of ascendancy, but Sollaine would win the game.

It was only a matter of time.



"This is not good."

Cavv ducked back into the alleyway and leaned heavily against the wall. "In fact, as these things go, it's really, really bad."

"The patrols have increased?" Arkell asked solemnly.

Cavv nodded. "You'd think Curamelle was under martial law. Moff Caglio must have mobilized all of the city's defense forces to search for you..." He nibbled on the tip of his thumb, and said softly, "Something just doesn't fit here, though."

"Vastin is very protective," Rivoche said. "And whatever the spoiled brat wants, his daddy gets for him."

"Not exactly the gushing adoration of a typical fiancée-to-be..." Cavv commented.

She snorted derisively. "That's because this entire relationship is nothing but a fraud. Vastin sees me as the perfect token wife—yet another stepping stone on the road to political power. As far as I'm concerned, all he's good for is providing cover. You see, as of late, certain high-ranking Imperials have voiced their belief that it's time I was married and raised a generation of cannon fodder for the Emperor's army."

Arkell glanced at the Imperial military speeders streaking past their hiding place. "As much as I dislike agreeing with the thief, his assessment of the situation is quite accurate. And the longer we remain, the worse it will become."

"They sent a thief to rescue me?" Rivoche asked.

"Watch your tone, young lady. You don't know a thing about me."

Rivoche crossed her arms and smirked. "I do know that so far, this hasn't exactly been a flawless rescue..."

The thief sighed and looked to Arkell for support, but the big men shook his head and said, "We forbid our unmarried females to leave the family habitat without permission of their master."

Rivoche spun around, staring lasers at Arkell. "You belligerent, chauvinistic warmonger! I have a—"

"I've got it!" Cavv said suddenly.

"What?" asked Rivoche and Arkell in unison.

"I think we have two distinct groups of Imperials here. And they're not working together."

"That'll be the day," Rivoche laughed. "The Empire isn't about to be torn apart by factions."

"Think about it, though. The man who showed up at the penthouse was definitely ISB. He knew you were a spy, and he only brought a single squad with him. And when was the last time you saw Storm Commandos around here?" Before anyone could argue, he continued. "Besides, from what we've seen of Caglio's forces, they aren't hunting you as much as looking for you. I bet the Moff thinks you were attacked at the penthouse and have been kidnapped—probably by Rebels."

"What you're saying makes sense, thief," Arkell said, "but why wouldn't the ISB agent have shared his information?"

Cavv shrugged. "Maybe he wants the credit all to himself. We know the Imps aren't above petty political maneuvering as long as they don't think they'll be caught."

"Well, if he and his squad are all dead, then maybe no one else knows about me." Rivoche turned to Cavv. "We could use that to our advantage, right?"

"Possibly, but I'm not sure how yet. Our situation doesn't improve much, though." Cavv gently pulled her hood back up over her face. "Either way, we still have to keep your identity hidden or else..." The whine of repulsorlift vehicles made him flinch. "We can't stay here much longer."

Arkell glowered, holding up his blaster pistol. "We're not going to be able to make it back to the ship, either. I can imagine the security measures at the starport..."

"If we can't get to the ship," Cavv said, pulling out a small comlink, "Then we'll have the ship come to us."

Rivoche turned to Arkell with a raised eyebrow. "Is he firing on all thrusters?"

The Velabri warrior shrugged.

She turned her attention back to Cavv. "The last I checked, this bustling metropolis wasn't exactly filled with landing sites."

"Improvisation is the child of desperation," Cavv said with a self-satisfied grin. "What's the tallest building in the city?"

After a moment's thought, Rivoche answered. "The Royal Galaxy Hotel." She unsuccessfully tried to fight off a smile as she glanced at the Velabri. "Is it always this annoying when he's right?"

"No," Arkell answered with a straight face. "It's usually worse..."



Sollaine stumbled into the building, bleeding on the plush white carpet. When the secretary tried to stop him, he shoved her to the floor, and didn't stop until he threw open the office door. He was unfazed by the large blaster rifle pointed at his head.

"What is the meaning of this?" the man with the gun asked from behind the cover of his desk.

Sollaine threw his rank cylinders onto the table and sneered, "The Empire is officially requesting your bounty hunting services..."

"There must be some mistake, sir. Coreguard Security does not employ bounty—"

"A flat fee of 100,000 credits now, that amount to be matched upon delivery. Do we have a deal?"

The proprietor of Coreguard Security Services smiled. "How many of our employees would you like to activate for this job, sir?"

"All of them."

Sollaine stared at the motley group of bounty hunters assembled before him. Just over fifty strong, they were mean, ugly, and produced a unique combined aroma.

The ISB Commander didn't notice; his sense of smell had dulled slightly. Not that it mattered. Only one thing was important.

Capturing Rivoche and returning with her to the Emperor. Watching Vader tossed aside like the fool that he was, then taking his rightful place at the Emperor's side.

Sollaine shook himself from the daydream and returned his attention to the matter at hand. He knew with Moff Caglio's forces guarding all points of egress out of the city, her accomplices would have no chance of getting her out through the starport.

With that in mind, there was only one way to escape. They would have to leave her somewhere and return to get her in a starship. And there very few places in Curamelle to do that without attracting attention.

The answer suddenly came to him.

Sollaine stared down the congested street, and up into Corulag's sky. He let his eyes drift up the gleaming structure until he could no longer make out the rest of the starscraper, which continued up into the atmosphere and beyond...



His eyes then re-focused on the glittering holosign that read, Royal Galaxy Hotel.

Cavv slipped the door open and replaced the vibropick into his pocket. "You just can't beat the five-fingered discount on a hotel room."

Rivoche and Arkell quickly entered behind him, and the thief secured the door.

Cavv took stock of the room and grinned. "Hey, this is a pretty nice place."

"I'm glad it's up to your standards," Rivoche said.

Ignoring the barb, Cavv continued his exploration of the room.

"I don't know how we're going to get out of this one." Arkell was pacing like a caged animal in front of the large transparisteel window. He stopped for a moment and glanced out. From his vantage point, the ground was nothing but a distant memory.

Cavv grinned up at Arkell from a relatively comfortable position on one of the beds. "I don't suppose the Velabri can metamorphose into an avian species at will?" He grinned, giving a shrug of theatrical quality. "I guess your race isn't quite as 'perfectly evolved' as you like to think you are."

Clearly not amused, Arkell stopped his pacing and started toward Cavv. "If I throw you out that window, the only thing you'll evolve into will be a liquid-based lifeform..."

"Enough!" Rivoche had just about reached her limit. She sat down on the other bed, covering her ears. "Don't you two think the little time we have left could be better spent? For instance—oh, I don't know—trying to save our lives?"

The Velabri folded his arms across his massive chest. "We're trapped in a hotel room, with no other way out except the one we can't use, thanks to that mechanized ISB agent and his legion of bounty hunters up on the roof."

"At least we discovered they were there," Cavv argued. "If I hadn't told Arcee to tap into the surveillance imagers on the roof, we would've walked into his trap."

"One of the few intelligent things you've done," Arkell said.

Rivoche brushed fallen hair from her face. "I wonder how he survived that blast?"

"From the datafile that Arcee called up, this Sollaine fellow seems to be one mean Imperial. Even by ISB standards..."

Arkell's distant gaze returned to the window. "This is impossible."

Cavv frowned, fluffing his pillow. "You make everything sound so...pessimistic."

For the first time, Arkell was at a loss for words. He opened his mouth, closed it, then just turned and headed for the door.

Rivoche raised a curious eyebrow. "Where are you going?" Arkell stopped in front of the door, pulling out his heavy blaster pistol. "I'd rather go out there and die like a warrior than remain here to cower like a selliwyrm!"

"Sometimes cowering to escape notice has its advantages," Cavv argued. "Of course, other times, it's better to hide in plain sight."

"And I've also had enough of your idiotic platitudes!"

"Relax, Velabri," Cavv said, finally standing up. "I've got things taken care of."

"Oh, you do, do you?"

Rivoche turned her curious gaze to Cavv. "How, exactly?"

Cavv checked his chronometer. "My back-up should be arriving very soon, now."

"The sooner, the better..." Arkell reached for the door control. "Because it's amazing how things continually get worse."

"Including your attitude," Rivoche said, drawing a stifled laugh from Cavv.

Arkell shook his head and thumbed the panel, then turned around. "If it weren't for you, we wouldn't be in this situation. Which is exactly why our females are confined to the Velabri Homeworld."

When he saw the expression on her face, he thought he was in for another round of insults, then he realized she wasn't looking at him so much as looking past him. Confused, he looked to Cavv, who was absolutely expressionless.

Arkell quickly turned around. He immediately wished he hadn't, for now he was staring at the female figure standing at the entrance to their room. A long braid of hair hung down her back, though what hung from her bandoleer was worse: a dozen thermal detonators. She was dressed in a skintight black bodysuit and gray body armor with a dark faceplate that coldly reflected the look of dread on Arkell's face. One word danced through the Velabri's head, over and over.

Beylyssa.

Arkell could feel the blood drain out of his face. He quickly moved his hand up the wall toward the control panel.

The door shut in the figure's face.

Arkell could only muster enough will to sound out a single word, and it was ranged much higher in pitch than his usual voice. "Down!"

Rivoche didn't need to be told twice. She dropped down behind the bed immediately, just as Arkell came flying over the top of it, landing beside her. He quickly lifted from behind the cover, drawing a bead on the door with his blaster.

That's when Arkell noticed that Cavv wasn't taking cover. In fact, the idiotic thief had calmly walked over to the door, and was about to thumb the panel.

Even worse, he was laughing.

Arkell couldn't believe it. "Are you certifiably insane? That's Beylyssa, the bounty hunter that likes to make things go boom!"

"No...and no," Cavv answered.

Rivoche chanced a look. "What?"

"No, I'm not insane." Cavv grinned as he opened the door. The armored figure stepped into the room. "And, no," Cavv continued, "this is not Beylyssa, although that is the impression that I was hoping for..."

The door shut and Cavv put his arm around the figure. "This is Finn Varatha—our back-up."

Utterly relieved, Arkell stood up, helping Rivoche to her feet. Holstering the blaster, he walked over. He couldn't help but grin as he extended a hand. "I already like her. Even if she is ugly."

Cavv chuckled. "Wrong again."

The Velabri was confused. "On my planet it is customary to make homely women conceal themselves," he explained.

The armored figure removed the helmet. At first no face was visible, thanks to the release of cascading ebony curls as she shook out the braid. The hair was quickly pushed away from a beautiful, young face. Arkell felt a soft hand close around his, but he was too busy staring with disbelief into a pair of bright blue eyes and a salacious grin.

Varatha was simply breathtaking. "Obviously your planet doesn't have a similar custom forbidding its idiots from traveling the galaxy," she said with a grin.

Arkell took a step back from the armored woman. "Are you trying to make fun of me?"

"Naah," Cavv said with a smirk, "'Trying' would imply that she hasn't succeeded yet, Velabri."

"Velabri, huh?" Varatha directed her gaze at Arkell. "He doesn't look so tough to me."

"Not merely a Velabri," Arkell said, drawing up to his full height. "I am a Lancer. And for your information, I am tougher than any two humans put together."

Varatha just grinned and moved closer. "Care to try and prove that?"

The thief quickly interposed himself between them. "Well, are we all ready to leave this party?"

Varatha pursed her lips. "But I just got here..."

Cavv winked at her. "I have it on good authority that there's an even better gala about to start on the roof. Do you wish to join us, my dear?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world. Got our invitations?"

The thief handed her a datapad.

Varatha examined the information and shook her head. "Hate to burst your blaster, old man, but we're about forty-five troops short of a fair fight."

"About even odds, then," Cavv said with a shrug.

"Excuse me?" Rivoche was staring at the thief as if he'd just grown another head. "Unless the Alliance has recently adopted a different mathematical system, I'm figuring we're severely outnumbered."

"Come on, don't you read our own propaganda? 'Any one Rebel can whip any ten Imperials.' Says so in the manual...and these aren't even Imps." The thief grinned. "There are four of us, so we can take out forty of them."

Varatha chimed in. "And what about the other ten?"

"That's where our esteemed Lancer comes in. Tough as two of us, remember? That means he should be able to handle twice our share without breaking a sweat." Cavv placed a hand onto Arkell's shoulder. "Right?"

The Velabri's cheeks flushed red and for a moment, his fangs were bared and promising something painful for Cavv. With great determination, though, Arkell's snarl slowly twisted into a forced smile. "Of course," he hissed through clenched teeth.

It was Varatha's turn to quickly position herself between the would-be combatants. She pulled a blaster from her pack and tossed it to Rivoche. "Know how to handle it, honey?"

Rivoche expertly checked the power pack, lined up the sights, and held the weapon in a marksman's ready position.

"I take it that's an affirmative." Varatha turned to Cavv. "So, what's the plan, old man?"

The thief just smiled.

"Is that the 'I've got it all taken care of, Finn, don't you worry about a thing' smile or the 'I'm gonna make it up as I go along and hope the Force is with me' smile?"

Cavv's mischievous grin widened even further. He took a pair of thermal detonators from Varatha and headed for the door.

Varatha gave a long sigh and reached for her blaster rifle. "Great."



"Well, that's about it," Cavv wheezed, wiping the mixture of perspiration and blood from his forehead as he scanned the rooftop.

"Especially for you!" said a rumbling voice.

Shocked, Cavv slowly turned...and found himself staring down the business end of a pair of blaster rifles. Two bounty hunters remained.

"Numbers never really were my strong suit," the thief muttered, raising his hands in surrender.

That's when he noticed Arkell maneuvering up from behind the oblivious hunters. Without warning, the big Velabri slammed their heads together with bone-jarring force.

Until that moment, the thief had never seen battle armor crack like an eggshell. He didn't even want to imagine what happened on the inside...

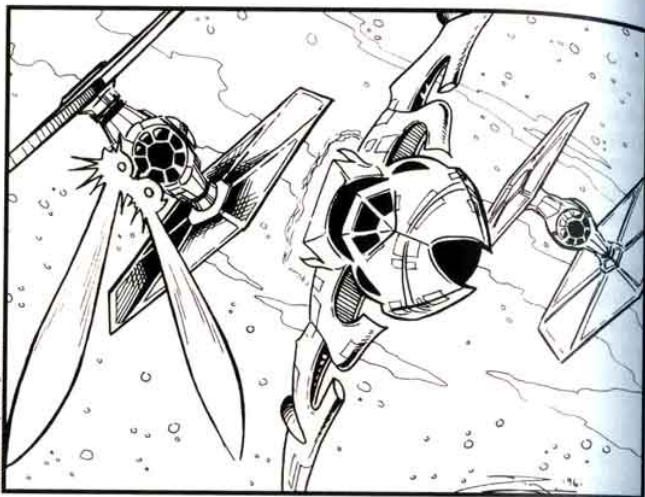
Arkell stepped forward, pressing a hand against a blaster burn on his leg. He sank to the ground between the bodies and glowered at Cavv. "Twice your share."

The thief shook his head, lightly patting Arkell's shoulder. "Be careful, Velabri. Keep this up and I might start to like you."

Looking none the worse for wear, Varatha approached them.

"Is Rivoche okay?" Cavv asked.

Varatha pulled off her helmet, pushing her sweat-soaked hair out of her eyes. "I'm fine, thanks." She jerked a thumb over her shoulder. "So is she."



The thief saw Rivoche resting against a transparisteel pylon and nodded. He surveyed the damage. The roof was cluttered with bodies and pock-marked with craters caused by heavy-duty explosions. Smaller holes, the result of blaster fire, were also quite abundant. Alarms were screaming in the background. "Any sign of Sollaine?"

Varatha shook her head. "He disappeared when the detonators started blowing up."

Rivoche made her way over. "It's a little hard to breathe..."

"If the Royal Galaxy didn't generate atmosphere shielding up here, we wouldn't be able to breathe at all." Cavv glanced at his chronometer. "I hope Arcee didn't run into any trouble. He's a bit late..."

As if on cue, the inverted triangular nose of the *G Cat* lifted into view. The light freighter hovered in place as Cavv's comlink sounded.

"Bweep-deep tooo-eeep."

Everyone turned expectantly toward the thief.

Cavv offered a shrug. "Better late than never."



The *G Cat* surged away from the planet, chased by a full squadron of TIE fighters.

Cavv turned to face his passengers. "Everybody strap in! This is going to get ugly." A burst of blaster fire rocked the ship. "Someone man the plasburst cannons." He stared at the mass of ships ahead of him. The congestion would provide cover, especially from the Imperials, but it was tantamount to flying through an asteroid field. "Arcee and I are going to have our hands full trying to get us through this maze in one piece."

Varatha started to unbuckle herself, but Arkell was already on his feet. "He said 'man.'" The Velabri grinned and quickly ascended into the turret before she could respond.

He locked himself into position, and flipped on the targeting systems to track the first TIE. "The battle is joined, thief," Arkell said and a second later, the plasburst lasers reduced the Imperial fighter to tiny bits.

"You can say that again," Cavv commented as he saw two Imperial *Carrack*-class cruisers quickly closing on either side of him.

As the firefight raged across the spacelanes and between the myriad of ships, no one noticed a lone Imperial shuttle slip out of the combat zone into less crowded space. It hung there, motionless, for a few moments; a small, white speck on the dark tapestry surrounding it.

Moments later, it was no longer alone.

The familiar triangular shape of the Imperial Star Destroyer *Devastator* shimmered into existence, its massive docking bay doors open and patiently awaiting the smaller craft.

The *G Cat* completed a sharp 360-degree roll straight down, and quickly leveled off.

Cavv switched the monitor screen to a rear view and watched as the two *Carrack*-class cruisers tried to box him in with a unified tractor beam net—but they snared each other instead.

The thief imagined the warning klaxons screaming to no avail and found himself wincing as the great spacecraft slammed into each other. "Ouch...now that has got to hurt."

"Thaweeep deep beeeeeeep!"

Cavv turned his attention back to the viewport, and saw an Imperial Star Destroyer closing fast.

"I see it, Arcee. Get our jump calculated as fast as you can. Let me know the microsecond we're clear!"

Arcee gave an affirmative bleep, leaving Cavv to concentrate on avoiding another group of TIE fighters. He painted one of the Imperial craft with a target lock and fired off a proton torpedo.

"Gotcha!" Cavv gave a whoop of delight as the *Cat* roared through the TIE's debris.

His excitement was short-lived, though, as the approaching Star Destroyer let loose with a punishing barrage of turbolaser fire.



"Careful, you idiots!" Sollaine stared out the main viewports on the *Devastator's* bridge. He hadn't had time to attend to his wounds, but the pain no longer registered.

Only one thing mattered...

"I want that ship intact!"

Major Gistol nodded crisply. "Ready tractor beams..."



"I think we're going to make it," Cavv said, almost afraid to believe his own words.

"Think again," Varatha answered flatly, motioning out the viewport.

The gesture wasn't necessary. Cavv already saw the *Executor* thunder out of hyperspace.

The mammoth Super Star Destroyer materialized directly in the flight path of the *G Cat*.

"Tarrek's eyes!" Arkell said upon returning to the cockpit, his mouth falling open slightly. "What is that thing?"

Cavv spared the giant ship a quick glance that turned into a double-take. "Trouble," he murmured, pushing forward on the control stick with all his might.

The *G Cat* seemed to groan in response, but gamely pointed its nose downward.

At that moment, the *Devastator's* tractor beam emitters reached

out with pulsing fingers of energy. Grasping in desperation at the *G Cat*...

They closed on empty space.

Cavv released a long breath as the *Helix's* engines propelled it underneath the Imperial flagship and out of harm's way. As they streaked under its superstructure, Arcee let out a shrill beep.

"Punch it!" Varatha yelled.

Cavv didn't need much convincing. The stars around them became blurring lines and the *G Cat* roared into hyperspace.

"It's a good thing the Dark Lord is punctual," Rivoche said with a relieved sigh.

Cavv leaned back and let loose a nervous chuckle. "Thank the Force for small favors..."



Sollaine howled as if he'd been shot. "Damn you, Vader! You'll pay for this, I swear it." Spittle flew from his mouth. "This is not over!"

Gistol quickly distanced himself from the ISB Commander and a hush fell over the bridge. The *Devastator's* crew froze as if plunged into carbonite.

"I am afraid it is over..." The voice was unmistakable, as was the echoing rasp of labored breath tinged with a mechanical echo.

Sollaine slowly turned around, and found himself staring at a full size holo-image of Darth Vader.

The glowing image raised a gauntleted fist, with a single finger extended like a lightsaber. "...for you."



Cracken couldn't help but smile. "Well, I don't know how you did it, but you managed to pull it off. Thank you."

"You're very welcome." Cavv was grinning from ear-to-ear as he exited the General's office.

Arkell was right behind him. "Consider the Bloodvow paid in full."

"You guys made a great team," Cracken said, patting Arkell's shoulder.

"A pity we won't be able to continue the relationship..."

"Oh, but you will."

Arkell's eyes narrowed to slits. "What?"

"I promised Cavv a favor if he succeeded. He asked to have his Special Ops Group reinstated. He requested that you and Finn Varatha be immediately transferred into his tactical unit."

"What?"

"Cavv wanted it to be a surprise, I guess."

"Excuse me, General."

Before Cracken could respond, Arkell was moving quickly down the hall.

The General shrugged and closed the door.

Adventure Idea

The characters are assigned to rescue Rivoche Tarkin from Corulag before the ISB can close in on her. If they are Alliance operatives, General Cracken can send them on the mission. If the characters are independents, they can be hired by a mysterious party (Cracken) who wants Rivoche kidnapped and will pay handsomely for her return.

Either way, a load of obstacles will be waiting on Corulag as the engagement celebration goes into full swing, not the least of which will be Sollaine and his squad of Storm Commandos. Depending on when and how the rescue progresses, Moff Caglio can have a large Imperial force scrambled to find her—hounding the characters at every turn.

And then there's the small matter of time until Darth Vader arrives aboard the *Executor*...

Roleplaying Game Statistics

■ Cryle Cavv

Type: Master Thief/Special Ops Agent

DEXTERITY 3D+2

Blaster 5D, brawling parry 4D+2, dodge 8D, grenade 5D, pick pocket 9D, running 4D+1

KNOWLEDGE 3D

Alien species 7D+1, cultures 6D, languages 6D, streetwise 8D+1, value 9D, willpower 7D+2

MECHANICAL 3D+1

Astrogation 6D, sensors 5D, space transports: Arakyd Helix 7D, starship gunnery 6D+2, starship shields 5D

PERCEPTION 4D

Con 10D, hide 9D, investigation 7D+1, search 8D, sneak 7D

STRENGTH 2D

Brawling 4D

TECHNICAL 2D

Computer programming/repair 5D, demolition 5D, droid repair 4D, security 8D

Force points: 3

Character Points: 43

Move: 10

Equipment: Chronometer, comlink, extensive wardrobe, R2-Arcee astromech droid

Capsule: Cryle Cavv is a man who relies more on brain instead of blaster. He's always ready with a platitude, obscure axiom, or instant word of wisdom. As he's fond of saying, 'There's always somebody waiting with a bigger, better blaster—it's a lot harder to upgrade wits. And they never run out of energy.'

It's hard to argue with success. At the age of forty-seven, Cavv has kept one step ahead of the Empire his entire life. Though much of his past is a well-guarded (and sometimes classified) secret, it is known that he spent a good amount of time on the planet Contruum, birthplace of Alliance General Airen Cracken. Cavv was part of 'Cracken's Crew,' the infamous commando group that terrorized the Imperial occupation forces on Contruum.

The best description of Cavv was offered by General Cracken, who said, 'For somebody who talks so much, it's amazing how very little actually gets said.'

■ Quillin Arkell

Type: Lancer

DEXTERITY 4D

Blaster 7D, brawling parry 8D+1, dodge 7D, melee combat 6D, melee parry 6D+1

KNOWLEDGE 3D

Alien species 4D+2, intimidation 7D, tactics: squads 6D, willpower 6D+2

MECHANICAL 2D

Beast riding: T'loxx 4D

PERCEPTION 2D

Command 5D, search 5D+2

STRENGTH 5D

Brawling 8D+2, climbing/jumping 7D+2, lifting 8D, stamina 9D

TECHNICAL 2D

First aid 4D, security 6D+2

Force Points: 1

Character Points: 22

Move: 10



Illustration by Mary Lee Bryning

Equipment: Heavy blaster pistol (5D), Lancer armor (+2 energy, +2D physical)

Capsule: The war-like Velabri have no love for the Empire, and Quillin Arkell is no exception. Ever since an Imperial invasion fleet arrived to enslave the physically powerful race for slave labor, the Velabri have fought hard for their freedom.

When the Alliance offered aid in what limited forms they could, the grateful Velabri quickly joined the swelling ranks of the Rebellion. Arkell became part of the Lancers, a Velabri strike force consisting of the planet's greatest warriors. Wishing to follow in the footsteps of his hero father, Quillin Durand, Arkell has set his sights on emancipating his homeworld and reestablishing rightful Velabri rule.

The younger Quillin has a long way to go (especially with his temper) before he reaches those lofty goals, but under the right tutelage his dreams may yet come true.

■ Sollaine

Type: ISB Central Commander

DEXTERITY 3D

Dodge 7D+2

KNOWLEDGE 3D+1

Bureaucracy: Imperial military 8D+2, cultures 6D, intimidation 9D, willpower 8D+1

MECHANICAL 2D+2

Astrogation 4D, capital ship gunnery 5D+2, capital ship piloting 6D, capital ship shields 5D+1, sensors 5D

PERCEPTION 3D

Command 9D+2, investigation 9D, search 7D

STRENGTH 3D+2

Brawling 8D, climbing/jumping 6D+1

TECHNICAL 2D+1

Computer programming/repair 7D, first aid 4D, security 10D+1

Force Points: 2

Dark Side Points: 17

Character Points: 27

Move: 10

Equipment: Comlink, datapad, electroshock prosthetic hands (STR+1D; +4D electric-shock damage at the user's dis-



Illustration by Mary Lee Bryning



Illustration by Mary Lee Bryning

cretion), Imperial rank cylinders, modified ISB uniform

Capsule: Sollaine's swift rise through the ranks of the Imperial Security Bureau serves as fodder for endless speculation and wild rumors. To call him a controversial figure would be an appalling understatement.

Only a few facts are readily apparent: he is endlessly ambitious, very dangerous, and bitterly jealous of Darth Vader. The rumors are more abundant. Some reports say he's insane, others claim he has hidden talent with the dark side of the Force, and still others portray him as a mere puppet of the Emperor.

Though the particular incident that cost Sollaine his hands is a mystery, it is widely known that he has walked away from many encounters that by all rights he should never have survived. This just fuels the previous rumors.

■ Rivoche Tarkin

Type: Arrogant Noble

DEXTERITY 3D

Blaster 3D+2, blaster: hold-out blaster 4D, pick pocket 5D, running 5D+2

KNOWLEDGE 4D

Bureaucracy 5D+1, bureaucracy: Imperial military planning 7D, cultures 5D, cultures: Imperial Court 7D, languages 4D+2, willpower 5D+1

MECHANICAL 2D+2

Beast riding 4D+2, communications 3D

PERCEPTION 3D+1

Command 4D, con 7D+1, investigation 5D, persuasion 8D, search 4D

STRENGTH 3D

Stamina 5D, swimming 4D

TECHNICAL 2D

Computer programming/repair 3D+2, first aid 4D+1

Force Points: 4

Character Points: 8

Move: 10

Equipment: Hold-out stunner (4D stun)

Capsule: The daughter of Brigadier Gideon Tarkin and niece of the late Grand Moff, Rivoche comes from a family of great wealth and power.

It is quite a surprise, then, that a child from such a privileged background would turn against the very instrument of her family's success—the Empire. But the seeds were sown after she began questioning the beliefs of her nefarious uncle. She soon met many others who secretly detested the Empire, one such person being a young man by the name of Biggs



Illustration by Mike Vilardi

Darklighter. Rivoche began spying in earnest for the Alliance, and her information has saved countless lives that would have otherwise been lost.

Rivoche's position and bloodline make her the perfect deep-cover spy, however if her treason is discovered, they will do nothing to save her from a dark fate...

■ Finn Varatha

Type: Bounty Hunter

DEXTERITY 3D

Blaster 6D, brawling parry 5D+1, dodge 7D, grenade 7D+1, melee combat 6D

KNOWLEDGE 3D

Alien species 5D, cultures 7D+1, intimidation 6D, languages 7D, planetary systems 6D, willpower 6D

MECHANICAL 2D

Powersuit operation 5D, repulsorlift operation 4D+2

PERCEPTION 4D

Con 8D+2, hide 6D, persuasion 7D, search 6D+2, sneak 5D+1

STRENGTH 3D

Brawling 5D+2, climbing/jumping 6D

TECHNICAL 3D

Armor repair 6D, computer programming/repair 5D+1, first aid 4D+2

Force Points: 1

Character Points: 17

Move: 10

Equipment: Hold-out blaster (3D+2), blaster rifle (6D), multiple changes of clothing, disguise kit, voice modulator

Capsule: Finn Varatha is rather unique, even for a bounty hunter. In this case it's not really what makes her different from all the other trackers in the galaxy so much as what makes her the same. Varatha is extremely adept at turning herself into other people. She doesn't just disguise herself as ordinary citizens, either. Varatha has been known to make herself appear as people known personally to her bounties, even going so far as to impersonate family members or loved ones.

She also has no qualms about disguising herself as other bounty hunters, and has done so many times. Depending on the approach, these elaborate deceptions help Varatha get close to unsuspecting targets or flush them out in the open.

As a result of all this subterfuge, not much is known about the personal life and history of this chameleon-like hunter, other than the fact that she is as beautiful as she is deadly.



Illustration by Mary Lee Brynning

Corulag

Type: Terrestrial

Temperature: Temperate

Atmosphere: Type 1 (breathable)

Hydrosphere: Moderate

Gravity: Standard

Terrain: Urban

Length of Day: 25 standard hours

Length of Year: 371 local days

Sapient Species: Human

Starport: Imperial class

Population: 15 billion

Planet Function: Administration

Government: Imperial governor

Tech Level: Space

Major Imports: Raw materials, foodstuffs

Major Exports: High tech, luxury goods

Capsule: One of the more well-known Core Worlds, Corulag is located in the Bormea Sector of the famed Ringali Shell. A bland world that serves as a model of Imperial rule, Corulag is completely cosmopolitan and utterly loyal to the Emperor's New Order.

The planet is ruled by Imperial Governor Zafiel Snopps, a popular figure who shepherds the world's booming economy and tends to leave petty Imperial politics out to graze in the pasture. The people of Corulag tend to be wealthy and firm believers in the Emperor's Human High Culture. They have little use for aliens, and expand that definition to include anyone other themselves.

Corulag is also home to a branch of the famed Imperial Academy as well as the headquarters of many high tech corporations such as Gowix Computers, Danthe Artifice, Ltd., and Gwain Spices.

The G Cat

Craft: Arakyd Helix

Type: Light freighter

Scale: Starfighter

Length: 30.9 meters

Skill: Space transports: Arakyd Helix

Crew: 2

Passengers: 4

Cargo capacity: 25 metric tons

Consumables: 6 weeks

Hyperdrive Multiplier: x3/4

Hyperdrive Backup: x12

Nav Computer: Yes

Maneuverability: 2D+2 (in space), +2 (in atmosphere)

Speed: 8

Atmosphere: 295; 850 kmh

Hull: 4D

Shields: 3D

Sensors:

Passive: 15/1D

Scan: 30/2D

Search: 50/3D

Focus: 2/4D

Weapons:

4 Plasmid Laser Cannons (fire-linked)

Fire Arc: Turret

Skill: Starship gunnery

Fire Control: 4D

Space Range: 1-3/12/25

Atmosphere Range: 100-300/1.2/2.5 km

Damage: 6D

2 Proton Torpedo Launchers

Fire Arc: Forward

Skill: Starship gunnery

Fire Control: 2D

Space Range: 1/3/7

Atmosphere Range: 100/300/700

Damage: 9D

Game Notes: Sensor operators searching for an Arakyd Helix gain a +5 bonus to their sensors rolls as long as the Helix is under way using its main ion drives

Send Us Your Questions!

Do you have questions about the *Star Wars Roleplaying Game*? Have them answered by the West End Games *Star Wars* staff! Send a letter with up to three questions to:

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We'll try to answer your questions in an upcoming issue of the *Official Star Wars Adventure Journal*. Since some questions may be too specific to address in this column, you may want to include a self-addressed, stamped envelope for a response.

Please try to phrase your questions so that they may be answered with a "Yes" or "No." All material (including letters) published by the *Official Star Wars Adventure Journal* becomes the property of Lucasfilm Ltd. Questions are subject to editing for publication.

STAR WARS

**A BATTERED WARSHIP,
IMPOSSIBLE ODDS, AND AN ANCIENT EVIL ...**
(Saving the galaxy has never been this much fun!)

THE DARKSTRYDER CAMPAIGN

The DarkStryder Campaign Boxed Set

A New Republic task force has been dispatched to the distant Kathol sector to topple Moff Kentor Sarne, who possesses mysterious alien technology. This boxed set contains two guidebooks (featuring an introductory story by Timothy Zahn), dozens of color character and ship recognition cards, and a poster insert featuring detailed deck plans of the New Republic vessel, the *FarStar*.

The Kathol Outback

The *FarStar* has pursued the renegade Imperial Moff Sarne into the uncharted reaches of the Kathol Outback. Join the intrepid *FarStar* crew as they track Sarne's forces through this isolated and dangerous region of space. This 56-page campaign supplement features five new adventures that continue the DarkStryder saga as well as extensive source material on the Outback, allowing gamemasters to expand the scope of the *DarkStryder Campaign*.

The Kathol Rift

Having successfully traversed the dangers of the Kathol Outback, the *FarStar* crew arrives at the dreaded "Kathol Rift," a mass of charged particles and magnetic storms that most sane sentients regard as impassable. The Rift — which has long had a reputation of being haunted or cursed — hides many secrets ... one of which may be the final clue that leads to Moff Sarne. This 56-page campaign supplement contains five new adventures, as well as background information on the fearsome Kathol Rift.

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SHAPE SHIFTERS

BY PABLO HIDALGO

It was a speedy piece, set in two-four time, and the red ball jett organ was programmed for a brassy oscillation. None of these musical features inspired the form behind the corner table to sip his glass of foamy blue liquor any faster. Rather, it was an invisible tension that quickened his pace.

"Pyrron?" a voice found its way through the tangle of background conversation and jizz-wailing. "Pyrron Nox, is that you?"

The glass of liquor came to rest on the table, allowing a response. "Yes. I'm sorry... I can't see you from here..."

"It's Gideon. Skies, it's been orbits since I've seen you last. You haven't changed a bit." A lanky man stepped through the parting shadows. He was handsome, as humanoid standards went, with a mop of tousled blond hair, and a face lined by stellar radiation.

"Well, my eyes aren't quite as good as they once were." Pyrron pointed toward his shaded plasses. "Caught a coronal flare with my phototropics down. Now I get to watch that flare all the time."

"Ouch. It'd be a shame not to be able to get a look at the *Beginner's Luck's* lines. How is the ol' bird?" Gideon pulled a seat from a neighboring unoccupied table and sat down.

"Oh.. she still soars. And your ship? How goes it with her?"

"The *Independent Class* can still run ellipses 'round you, if that's what you're asking. In fact, me and Keeta are in port picking up a new intermix cowlings. Ol' *Classy* keeps melting the used ones." Gideon tapped the menu keys set into the table. Pyrron made a mental note of what he ordered.

"Keeta? How is Keeta?" Pyrron asked, trying not to sound too awkward.

"She's as strong as she ever was, and as playful as a kit' sometimes, you hear? She should be along in a moment. She'll be glad to see you." Gideon's voice lowered. "You should know, she lost an eye. We're saving for some cybers, but, credit's tight right now."

"That's terrible. How did it happen?" Pyrron downed a draught of drink.

"Got into a tussle with some of Boss Trome's muscle. A bloody shifter, it was."

"Shifter?" Pyrron brought his glass up again. "You mean a shape-shifter. What kind?"

"Does it matter?" Gideon grimaced. "The slimy gobs are all the same. Not a drop of honor in any of 'em. I mean, the Empire might be two-faced, but at least they don't go 'round pretending to be my mother, you copy?"

"Gideon, I believe you're being quite dense. Firstly, there are many types of shape-shifter aliens out there, and I find there are even more rumors than there are facts. I could tell you stories. Actually, I heard one just recently..."

Proteans

It was a soul-less moan, thought Moff Bendor. The product of a being that *thought* it felt pain. Bendor keyed his deskcomm. "Berlihat, be sure to feed Lonchan."

A nasal voice responded on the opposite end of the circuit. "Sir? I'm an analytical programmer, sir. I'm afraid I do not..."

"You are my servant, Berlihat. I pay you well, don't I? The cook has left a pile of vegetables near the mess hall. All you have to do is bring them down, and leave them at the entrance."

Berlihat keyed off the switch. He'd served at Bendor's palace for only a week here on Questal, and already it was quite different than his time at Eriadu. He was used to a Moff's eccentricities, but Bendor was like none he'd ever served. He had a reputation for striking fear in his opponents from a distance, and some believed him to have tapped into long-forgotten Sith powers. His crowning obsession, however, was located meters beneath the palace—Bendor's cursed game chambers, where he would pit his foes in a deadly game of survival.

One of Bendor's pets needed tending to, and now Russo Berlihat, a graduate of the finest Technical Academy in the Core, found himself carrying a platter of foul-smelling, wilted vegetables into the caverns.

To: Obo Rin

From: Major Vontenn

RE: Parameters of inclusion for *Catalog of Sentient Life in the Galaxy*

I feel it necessary to stipulate an important point in your continued research in the service of the Empire. Following the fall of the Republic, a great deal of information was lost from the government archives. Among the databases that greatly suffered where the accounts of amorphous intelligent beings. The Empire is most interested in obtaining information regarding the following species, as most of what is known is from second-hand (or worse) accounts, conjecture, or wild rumors. While the position of the Imperial Military in regard to non-humans is known, it is the Emperor's decree that a great deal can be learned from these evolutionary freaks.

While you have compiled reports in the past regarding certain aliens that fall under the classification amorphous, like the wretched Ugors, you are ordered to compile information about the Proteans, the Polydroxol, the Stennes Shifters, and the Shi'ido. Please complete your research as promptly as possible. Do your best to separate the myth from reality.

Perhaps humiliation was another of Bendor's obsessions. The progress into the catacombs was uneventful. From polished corridors to ragged rock walls, Berlihat refused to be scared by the shadows dancing in the corners. He continued down the steps, remembering the tales he had heard from the secretarial pool. Laser traps, rooms triggered to simulate earthquakes, rogue bounty hunters, "a pit of wind," and other unspeakable items tucked away in forgotten chambers.

No. Focus on your task. No one is in the chambers now, so none of the traps will be activated. Berlihat locked his eyes on his tray before him, refusing to let the dark shadows and craggy walls distract him. He stared at the rannagourds and balka greens...and then it struck him.

Why would Bendor keep a herbivore in his game chambers?

A clatter filled the narrow corridor as Berlihat dropped the vegetable platter. He began running back toward the entry. A solid disk of stone rolled across the opening. Berlihat slammed balled fists, scraping them against the implacable door.

"Twenty-three minutes, twelve seconds. Well done, Berlihat. You nearly halved the time of our last analytical engineer." Bendor's voice echoed from unseen speakers.

"Bendor!" Berlihat shouted indignantly. "You son of a vervikk! Get me out of here! Feed your pets, will I?"

"Yes, you will." A few seconds of silence. Then the wall poured itself onto the ground, forming a puddle of rock that reached out, making a loop around Berlihat's leg. Frozen in panic, he watched as the inner curve of the loop grew small conical lumps. His senses returned from whatever portion of his body they had fled to, and the instant that Berlihat flinched his leg, the lumps turned into jagged teeth...



Proteans

The species tentatively named Proteans was discovered in the Questal sector by Imperial scientists. They located the silicon-based lifeforms on a cold, airless world. There the Proteans lived in small communal groups of approximately five beings, though accurate counts were impossible due to the natural camouflage available to the species.



Illustration by Steve Bryant

Proteans remain a sort of evolutionary mystery. Their shape-changing ability is perfect for hiding, but to date no known predator has been discovered that would prompt the Proteans to hide. It may aid them in hunting, but the Proteans seem to be the only sizable lifeforms on the planet, and they do not hunt each other.

Proteans appear as amorphous blobs of clay-like matter, approximately 80 to 150 kilograms in mass depending on maturity. They ingest all essential elements by surrounding their meal, and absorbing it into their matter. There it is broken down into constituent molecules that the Proteans need to survive. Waste particles are exuded in a fine liquid sheen that gradually evaporates.

Proteans do appear to have a dense circulatory and nerve cluster that they keep deep in their forms for protection. This cluster, approximately 30 centimeters in diameter, forms the minimum width of their central body, although they can create pseudopodia and other appendages as small as a single centimeter in diameter.

Proteans use oxygen to help fuel their metabolism. On their airless world, they synthesize the oxygen trapped in the rocks, using their great strength to crack open and grind the stones into a fine powder. Proteans use this absorption technique to both "breathe" and feed.

While they can survive in a vacuum, Proteans cannot do so indefinitely. Proteans require gravity to maintain their shape. In experiments conducted by Imperial scientists, a Protean deposited in space eventually expanded beyond its limits, tearing apart its nerve and circulatory cluster.

Proteans appear to have very primitive minds, but have proven intelligent with a capacity to learn. They appear to communicate by a combination of chemical and tactile signals exchanged when in direct contact. It is thought that they have no written records, but strange stone pillars carved by the Proteans seem to have some significance to them.

Protean communal groups are most probably family based, and it is doubtful that the culture has any form of political leadership or government. While Proteans do not appear to have genders, it is known that at least two Proteans are required to mate and produce offspring. The two Proteans somehow identify one another, and then merge into a single entity that remains immobile for about one standard year. After that year, this ersatz boulder cracks open, revealing the original Protean pair, and a newborn, approximately 25 kilograms in mass.

Proteans have the ability to change color, and adopt the surface features of any stone surface they come in contact with. They cannot alter their form to reproduce any complex rectilinear patterns, like lettering or checkered or striped walls, but they can reproduce intricate marbling that occurs in some stones.

Proteans can be taught to adopt a humanoid shape, but it is not in their nature. Even though a Protean may take on the outward characteristics of a particular stone type, it will still retain its original durability and other physical properties. Proteans cannot alter their mass.

Proteans have four senses: visual, audial, tactile, and chemical. Despite no outwardly visible sensory apparatus, the Proteans have acute senses. Their entire surfaces form their sensory receptors. Upon close inspection, the seemingly smooth Protean skin has tiny cup-like receptacles lined with tiny optical and tympanic nerves. It is doubtful the tympanic nerves were used for auditory vibrations

on their airless world—they were most likely used to sense vibrations along the ground.

Perhaps the most haunting feature of Protean adaptability is its song. Of the few Proteans examined by researchers, most of them mastered the ability to vocalize. This is notable since the Proteans developed on an airless world, where vocalizations could not be transmitted. Yet somehow, Proteans learned to funnel air through their forms, and modulate it, so as to create tonal variations. The end result is a wordless “language” of chilling moans.

■ Proteans

Attribute Dice: 13D
DEXTERITY 1D/ 3D+2
KNOWLEDGE 1D/ 2D+2
MECHANICAL 1D/ 2D+2
PERCEPTION 3D/ 4D+2
STRENGTH 3D/ 5D
TECHNICAL 1D/ 2D+2

Special Skills:

Strength skills:

Shape-shifting: Time to use: Varies, depending on shape; generally 1-10 minutes. Consider this skill advanced for advancement purposes. This skill allows the Protean to assume complex shapes. Simple geometric shapes, like cubes or spheres, are Very Easy or Easy to replicate. A basic humanoid form is Difficult to replicate, additional details add more modifiers to the difficulty. Proteans roll this skill when assuming the new form. They don't have to roll to maintain the new form or to resume their normal state.

Special Abilities:

Shape-shifting: A Protean can alter its shape. It cannot alter its mass. It can reform its shape to fit into a space as small as 30 centimeters wide. It can mimic most rocky materials. A shape-shifter that performs an Easy *shape-shifting* can produce a weapon from its form, with added spikes, which increases *brawling* damage by +2D. When concealing themselves as a rock-like form, characters roll their *Perception* or *search* against the Protean's *shape-shifting* to detect. The Protean receives bonus modifiers if the searching characters are unfamiliar with the nature of the Protean or the native rocks.

Chemical and Tactile Communications: Although they can vocalize, Proteans communicate through touch and chemical exchange. They cannot communicate to non-Proteans.

Story Factors:

Primitive: Beginning Protean characters cannot place any dice in *Mechanical* or *Technical* skills. They are limited in their selection of *Knowledge* skills as well.

Move: 9/10

Size: 80-150 kilograms in mass.

Note: It is recommended that player characters do not play Proteans.



The Smother Attack

A favorite attack of a hungry Protean is the smother attack. The Protean typically hides as a rock form, lying in wait for unwitting prey. If a potential meal comes within reach, the Protean strikes, enveloping its prey.

To simulate this tactic, have the Protean make a successful *brawling* attempt against a character's *dodge*. If it succeeds, the Protean does no damage, but has trapped the prey. It then smothers its victim, who must make three Difficult *Strength* attempts to break free. If the victim fails the three attempts, the Protean begins dealing STR damage. If the Protean is having difficulty subduing the enveloped prey, it will grow “teeth” (Easy *shape-shifting* roll), increasing its damage by +2D.

Note that the enveloped victim will eventually suffocate if she doesn't break free. A Difficult *Strength* or *Dexterity* is needed to draw any weapons. An *incapacitated* total against the Protean forces it to release its victim.

“That's supposed to make me feel better?” Gideon snarled. “You have the sensitivity of a worrt.”

“Don't you see,” Pyrron continued. “That Protean only killed because that's what it was made into...by a *human*.”

“I'm not buying this, Pyrron. Next, you'll have me feeling sorry for the rancor 'cause of the abuse it sustained from a Hutt.”

“Well, actually—” Pyrron was cut off as a tall, supple form walked to the table.

She was tall, with wiry muscles, a twitching tail, and a piercing green eye. The other eye, if it still existed, would be concealed beneath a black leather patch. Her fur was cream-colored, and her fangs white. She was a Trianii named Keeta.

“The cowl's been bought,” she purred, “we just have to go pick it up. Nox...how you holding up?”

“Oh, reasonably well.” He smiled.

“That's good news, Keet. Great news.” Gideon sipped his drink. Keeta's eyes narrowed. “What'd I walk in on?”

“Nothing,” Gideon said.

“Well, actually...we were talking about shape-shifters.” Pyrron continued, not looking at Gideon.

"Pyrron—" Gideon half stood up.

"It's okay," she sat down, helping herself to Gideon's drink. "What did we come up with?"

"Pyrron was just trying to tell me that not all the slimy gobs are bad. Like it's social conditioning, for Core's sake!"

"I don't know about that, Nox. The one that got me didn't even give me the grace of looking it right in the eye. I just saw my reflection, my eyes, when it bit." Keeta cupped her glass, staring off into the past.

"Reflection?" Pyrron asked.

"Yeah. This—what'd you call it, Protean?—of yours looked like a quicksilver killer." Gideon offered.

"Oh, that wasn't a Protean, then." Pyrron clarified. "It was a Polydroxol."

"A what?" Keeta asked.

"Polydroxol. Boss Trome must've been to Sevatta and wrangled one up. It's a shame. On their own world, they're really quite beautiful."

"Beautiful?" If Gideon had had his drink, he would have doubtlessly been choking by now.

"Yes. I once heard of a Polydroxol caught by the Karflo corporation..."

The Polydroxol

"Computer," DeSelvaine began, "start recording. Subject: Polydroxol. Silver in coloration."

DeSelvaine paced around the lab, checking instrumentation as he spoke into the tiny, ring-mounted pick-up.

"Mass: 135.4 kilograms. Current configuration is an oblong tapered oval, about 1.5 meters in length, and .45 meters in diameter. Surface exhibits no movement. Has retained this form for the past thirty minutes, thirty-four seconds. Computer, pause recording."

DeSelvaine went to the interface screen, checking the logs. He had recorded over 125 reports, every half hour, for the past two days. He had very little sleep, napping in twenty-minute stints so as not to miss anything.

"Computer, access personal notes...continuing from before. It seems that the Polydroxol has a very long rest cycle, at least eighteen hours in length. During its waking hours, of which there are about six, it has so far not demonstrated much energy. It's quite a puzzle—why would it need that much rest? Am going to try to get

some rest...Polly's moving onto her sleep cycle, so who am I to argue?"

Hour 72

DeSelvaine downed his coffiene with renewed vigor. He hadn't realized he was so tired, and after over eight hours of rest, he hoped to stumble on something new with a fresh perspective.

"Computer: personal notes. I programmed myself to dream about the Polly last night. I'm not sure if I did, the only recollection I have is dreaming about Nela Pentase from accounting. I put some thought into what the corporation wants me to do with Polly. I've heard stories about Karflo ever since I was a junior tech. Bad stories. I usually don't go in for urban legends, or for that matter, corporate ones."

He tapped some keys on his control board, raising the blocking screen from the Polydroxol's metal cage.

"This is special. I just hope the corporation sees it as such. Hopefully Renerdat will look beyond the mineral deposits on Sevatta and realize that there are people there. Not flesh and blood people, but people nonetheless. Well, I guess it's up to me to teach them."

"It's really a testament to the tenacity of life that it developed on Sevatta at all. Volcanic plains, liquid metal lakes, a surface temperature of over two hundred and fifty standard degrees. But somehow, in those mercurial lakes, *this* evolved."

"Needless to say, Sevatta has a poisonous atmosphere. Its pressure is slightly above standard, and most of its lifeforms seem silicon-based. Actually, the Polydroxol remind me of the stoniesinger form of Vaathkree."

"I know intelligence must lurk somewhere in that reflective lump. It will awaken in...nine hours from now. I also know it's not the answer that Administrator Renerdat wants to hear. If these beings are sentient, then he can't skim the metal lakes for the ores he needs. He's a man of profit, not science, I'm afraid. He didn't even see the potential of the being he had his toadies drag into my labs. All he saw was an impedance in his financial planning. What a narrow-sighted fool."

DeSelvaine paused, took another sip. "Computer: delete last 10 seconds of personal notes."

Hour 77

DeSelvaine double-checked the probe rig, a set of spindly me-

chanical arms with disruptor generators that would penetrate the magnetic field holding the metal cage.

"Computer, start recording. Subject: Polydrexol, hour 77. The magnetoscopic and EM scans reveal a central circulatory system like none I have ever seen. There seems to be a flexible network of arterial passages, made from the same metallic substance as the rest of the subject. However, no oxygenated iron-rich blood flows through these passages.

"It appears to be a gaseous plasma, electrically charged. Electroglobin. From the look of the makeup of the arterial passages, I would venture to call this the Polydrexol's nucleus. Closer examination of the plasma shows remarkably complex patterns that suggest that this is where a Polydrexol's life energy rests. This answers several questions as to whether the Polydrexol can completely physically disassociate itself. It seems that the subject can take no actions that would breach this nucleus. Computer, end recording."

DeSelvaine fit his hands into the mimic gloves controlling the probe. He didn't really want to do this, but if he had to, the subject's sleep cycle would be the best time to do it.

With a haze of discharged energy, the probe's arms pierced the magnetic containment field. The spindly arms produced what to humans would be a frightening tool. DeSelvaine wondered if the Polydrexol had any inkling as to what fear was.

Hour 81

"Computer, begin recording. After thorough examination of the biopsy, it seems my theory that Polydrexol cannot control elements separated from their body is false. Somehow, the surface fluctuations inherent in the larger subject is replicated perfectly in the smaller section. I have determined the upper range of this link to be thirty-five meters when I took the sample to the mess hall, and noticed the activity to drop off suddenly.

"Examination of the smaller fragment shows the metallic substance to be a highly complex variant of denantium, with several trace composites of unknown material. I would perform standard temperature and pressure tests, but I fear doing it in this lab, since this may transmit pain to the parent body. I have looked into requesting time in Sera's labs, but he seems to be busy concocting something—computer, replace 'concocting' with 'working on.'"

DeSelvaine smiled. Officially, both he and Sera were told to

knock off their rivalry. There were many scientists in this division, and they were no more privileged than the others when it came to requisitioning lab space and supplies. However, DeSelvaine was certain the Polydrexol was going to make him famous. It was—

"Computer, begin recording! This is most remarkable. The subject seems to have...awakened. It is definitely moving...to place a humanoid analogy on it...I would say that it was *stretching*. It—oh my—it is now undergoing some sort of surface transformation. Its silvery substance seems to be reforming, adopting...adopting...remarkable!"

The metallic blob was no longer silver. It was the exact dull gray of the cage that surrounded it.

Hour 84

"Computer: begin personal note recording. If I were a child, this would make the perfect Fete Week gift. A mimetic polymorph. I have, for the last three hours, exposed Polly to forty-six different substances to see which surface patterns it can mimic.

"Polly seems only able to copy and reproduce surface textures of metallic compounds, and some plastics. She cannot replicate organic patterns, as my experiments with fur, wood, and certain animal test subjects attest to. I have not attempted human flesh as yet. Polly cannot assume the surface texture of minerals such as stone, or most crystalline structures. She can, seemingly on a reflex level, copy most metallic surfaces, including non-inherent surface textures. When I took a studded segment of deck plating, not only did she reproduce the dark gray coloration, but the surface studs as well. She seems capable of reproducing surface markings as well, as she copied the logo from a can of fizzyglug, although only the 'f' through 'l' were copied and reproduced. Presumably, if she understood Basic or Aurebesh, she could reproduce most markings. It's important to note that only the surface texture is replicated, and Polly's essential material does not undergo any physical change. The change apparently must be prompted through contact."

Hour 87

The Polydrexol was asleep again.

"It was an incredible six hours." DeSelvaine spoke into his personal logs. "Any shape that I showed Polly she would form. And not just basic geometric shapes like squares or spheres. She



Illustration by Steve Bryant

reproduced dodecahedrons, and even Mobius curves. I know this is more than reflex. There *must* be intelligence behind it. I have begun talking to her, coaxing her on. I know it makes a difference, but it is hardly scientific."

Hour 102

The coffiene had long been replaced by a flask of Corellian brandy.

"Computer, begin recording personal notes. I wonder what Polly's society is like. Is there hatred? Is there injustice? Are there Empires that choke scientific exploration? Are there petty rivalries? Are there teases like Nela Pentase that feign interest and then break your heart? Are there administrators that promise you scientific fulfillment, and then strangle you with bureaucratic flexor cord?"

"I did a scan of the planet, including parameters from my research. I scanned for the EM signatures of Polydroxol nuclei. Even from orbit, when I targeted the lake, I found hundreds of them. *Hundreds*. And what astounded me the most from the scans: they travel in pairs. They always

have partners, as they swim formlessly in the lake of liquid metal. "What a truly enviable species."

Hour 113

DeSelvaine rubbed his eyes. They burned with a vengeance. It was bad enough his head hurt from the brandy, but his back was sore from sleeping in a chair, and his face bore the marks of laying atop a console all night. He wasn't proud of himself. Nor at the task of erasing his personal logs of last night. *Who knows what I said?*

His embarrassing soliloquy of the night before was now nothing more than free memory. Most of what followed was snoring loudly into the ring-pickup. But not all of it.

"Computer, replay from time-index 106:2:24." DeSelvaine adjusted the volume controls, listening carefully.

It was indistinct at first, a sort of gurgling sound. Then... he heard it: "What a truly enviable species. Envia-ble. Envia-ble. What a truly enviable species."

It wasn't his voice. It was too deep, and stilted, as if tasting these words for the first time.

"Computer, visual record, time-index 106:2:24." The viewscreen flickered, and there, in flickering holographic was the Polydroxol.

With his face.

Hour 114

It hadn't been a perfect replica, of course. It was as if Dr. Trem DeSelvaine had been honored with a silver statue. One that spoke a single phrase over and over again. According to the logs, the Polydroxol had kept this up for close to an hour.

DeSelvaine crouched in front of the protected cage. He peered at the seemingly lifeless blob of liquid silver. He held the same holoprojector he had used when he tried the shape experiments. Now, they held holographic records of decidedly non-metallic shapes.

He started with a fish from Mon Calamari. He then moved on to a stormtrooper helmet. Then a TIE fighter. The Polydroxol attempted copies of each one, within the scale possible. The fish was near-perfect. The stormtrooper helmet was a bit skewed, with its lenses appearing larger than they should. The TIE fighter was too complicated to reproduce exactly—its contours too angular, its wings too heavy.

He then moved on to portraits. His own was reproduced flawlessly. Little wonder, given the amount of time he had already spent

with the being. Those of Nela, Sera, Administrator Renerdat, and even the Emperor came out more like caricatures. And so far, the Polydroxol only produced busts floating in liquid metal, not full forms.

DeSelvaine's headache was forgotten. His adrenaline had eliminated the pain. He couldn't even remember the last time he ate. Despite his excitement, he couldn't help but dial up Nela's image on the holoprojector.

Even in a flickering quarter-scale he admired the curve of her smile, the brightness of her eyes. Bringing his eyes up from the holo, DeSelvaine found the same image reproduced in swirling silver, next to a bust of his own. The silver DeSelvaine and the silver Nela floated there, in the shimmering puddle, and then elongated and melted together, with unparalleled grace.

"You...you understand, don't you?" DeSelvaine stammered. "You know. You're intelligent!"

"Nela..." the deep echoing voice bubbled up from the metal quagmire.

"You're intelligent." DeSelvaine repeated, breathlessly.

Hour 115

"Computer, begin personal notes. It's ironic, isn't it. The one proof of intelligence, and I can't bring myself to admit it because it implicates my feelings. I guess every scientist must face the burden of ego in the light of scientific proof, but who would have guessed that I would have to do so when I was right, instead of admitting I was wrong?"

DeSelvaine walked closer to the metal cage. He wanted to touch Polly, but even he wouldn't dare drop the magnetic containment field.

"The subject understands love. It knows what I feel. It can recognize it. Surely, this is proof that it is intelligent. I doubt that Renerdat will want to hear this. Station scuttlebutt has it that he has already organized a squad to go down there and 'troll the metal lake.' Fool. Ignorant fool. He doesn't know what he's got here. Computer, you better delete—"

A buzz from his intercom station interrupted DeSelvaine's order. He slid his chair to the station, punching in the access key. "DeSelvaine," he greeted.

"Renerdat," the administrator identified himself. "I trust progress goes well on your end of the investigation?"

His end? "Actually, sir. I have some very exciting news. I believe I have proof that the Polydroxol is intelligent." DeSelvaine wished he could've checked a mirror before he answered the intercom. He was certain he looked like something the proom dragged in.

"It is a moot point," Renerdat said. Now that he looked closer, DeSelvaine thought he could see a large welt running across the administrator's face. "You are hereby ordered to destroy the subject."

"Destroy, sir? Perhaps you didn't understand me. It is intelligent. I cannot—"

"You can and you will." Renerdat's face reddened. "Regardless if it is intelligent, those creatures are dangerous. We just lost twelve of our men in an unprovoked attack from the lake."

Unprovoked! Hardly! "You went back to the lake...?" DeSelvaine cringed as he pictured the men in corporate armor, firing riot guns into the mercury, the screams of breached nuclei echoing through the Polydroxol pairs...

"Sir, I respectfully point out that we have yet to test a definitive means of killing the subject. You see, it has the ability to segment..." DeSelvaine began.

"I know all about the creature's segmenting ability. Dr. Sera discovered it as well. He has also developed a toxin that can kill the subject quite quickly." Renerdat said, conversationally. "You should see it in use, actually. Their deaths are quite spectacular as their electroplasma vents to the surface."

"You had others...?" DeSelvaine was stunned.

"Don't overestimate your value to us. You are but part of the whole. Unfortunately we cannot synthesize enough of the toxin to kill the lake. But we do not want this one lingering around any longer than need be. Sera will be by shortly with the toxin." Renerdat rubbed the welt self-consciously.

Another one, killed already. Did Sera know what he was doing? Did he know what he was killing? DeSelvaine stopped his questioning, realizing what was at stake. He had a good job, with more pay than he could have dreamed. He was not going to jeopardize it.

"Yes, sir. One request, sir? I would like to administer the toxin myself."

"If this is part of your silly rivalry—" Renerdat began.

"Please, sir," DeSelvaine insisted.

"Very well. You'll find the magno-injector in Sera's lab."

Hour 115.5

It had taken half an hour to get to Sera's lab on the other side of the station. During the long stroll, DeSelvaine had gathered his thoughts, and heard enough to verify the rumors that Karflo was moving out of Sevetta. "Not enough profit margin" was the official reason given.

He held the metal cylinder in both hands. Inside was an electropasmatic toxin capable of killing the Polydroxol. What could he do? He couldn't set it free. And once Sera perfected the toxin in an easy-to-replicate formula, all the Polydroxol would be doomed.

And no one knew they were intelligent. Not that it mattered.

DeSelvaine stepped through the decontam-station at the front of his lab. He entered his security codes, and walked toward the cage.

And stopped, the metal magno-injector dropping to the ground. The Polydroxol was gone. The metal cage was empty.

"Computer, remove containment field." DeSelvaine rushed to the cage. His knees weakened—how tired was he?—he stumbled, a fresh vein of ice running through his spine. He rushed into the cage, running a hand-held scanner along its bars.

"Where did you go, girl? Where?" Maybe the Polydroxol vented some of its electroplasma, at a particular phase signature that disrupted the containment field. Maybe he was wrong, and the being could disassociate itself into *incredibly* small particles. Maybe—

By the time he figured it out, DeSelvaine only had a fraction of a second to congratulate himself. After that, a sharp metal spire knifed through his brain, ironically spearing the synapses that concluded that thought. The cage melted around him, looking as if the original one was shedding its skin, like some sort of exotic snake. Had he checked the mass readout seconds before, DeSelvaine would have seen the cage register at 135.4 kilograms heavier than it should have been.

An eerie voice echoed. "Fool. Ignorant fool. He doesn't know what he's got here."

"You should write children's books, you know that, Pyrron?"

"Pardon?" Pyrron blinked.

"I've seen blind mynocks with more social grace—"

"Pyrron," Keeta interjected, "if the scientist and all aboard the station were murdered, how did you find out about the story?"

"Not every one was killed. The administrator and his aide escaped, and logged the report. Karflo hushed it up, and some

Polydroxol

Attribute Dice: 12D
DEXTERITY 2D/4D
KNOWLEDGE 1D/ 3D+2
MECHANICAL 2D/ 4D
PERCEPTION 1D/ 3D+2
STRENGTH 3D/ 7D
TECHNICAL 1D/ 4D+1

Special Skills:

Strength skills:

Shape-shifting. Time to use: Varies, depending on shape; generally 1–10 minutes. Consider this skill advanced for advancement purposes. This skill allows the Polydroxol to assume complex shapes. Simple geometric shapes, like cubes or spheres, are Very Easy or Easy to replicate. A basic humanoid form is Difficult to replicate, additional details add more modifiers to the difficulty. Polydroxol roll this skill when assuming the new form. They don't have to roll to maintain the new form. This skill can be used in place of a *sneak* attempt, with a +2D bonus if in an environment where a metallic object is likely to be found.

Special Abilities:

Shape-shifting: A Polydroxol can alter its shape. It cannot alter its mass. It cannot assume a form smaller than 10 centimeters in total width, although it can slim its "limbs" down to centimeter-width. A shape-shifter that makes an *Easy shape-shifting* roll can produce a weapon from its form, with added blades, which increases *brawling* damage by up to +3D.

Surface altering: A Polydroxol can alter its surface texture to match most metals. It does not draw the properties of that metal, just the surface texture. It can reproduce lettering and complex patterns.

Segmenting: A Polydroxol can reduce its *Strength* by 1D to produce a segment. This segment, which shares all of the Polydroxol's attributes and skills except *Strength*, is under the control of the Polydroxol. The segment can operate within a 35-meter radius of its host. It can "see" and "feel," transmitting sensory information to the host. It can suffer damage, with a *Strength* attribute of 1D. If the segment is wounded, the host is also wounded until it breaks contact. If the segment is incapacitated or killed, the host suffers a wound, and contact is broken. Maintaining contact with a segment counts as an action, as do any actions taken by the segment.

Story Factors:

Rare: Polydroxol are rare, and their abilities are largely unknown to the rest of the galaxy.

Move: 6/11

Size: 80 to 200 kilograms

slicers came across the reports just recently. And it wasn't murder. It was self-defense. Self-defense against genocide."

"Will you listen to this guy?" Gideon asked to no one in particular.

Keeta's nose wrinkled. "You seem well-versed in this branch of xenobiology, Pyrron. Tell me, do you know of the Stennes legends?"

"The Stennes Shifters? Oh, they are not legends, my dear. They are real!" Pyrron leaned forward, almost as if the table were an

In my research I have come across innumerable misconceptions—far more than any hard facts when it comes to shape-shifters. Even the name is inaccurate, as no respected scientific journal would use the term shape-shifters.

There have been other terms: polymorphs, metamorphs, and even quasimorphs. None of these terms do the beings justice, because it assumes each shape-shifter belongs to the same family. There is no basis for such an assumption.

Firstly, there are mammalian shape-shifters, such as the Stennes and the Shi'ido. These are more closely related to humanity than some of the more bigoted members would like to find out. Then, there are beings who do not fit the traditional picture of shape-shifters, but who fit the vague definition because they lack static forms: the gaseous Filar-Nitzan, or the Lahsbees and Dazouri, who have two distinct morphological forms. Certain species of insectoids could be called shape-shifters, as they radically assume new forms in different stages of their lives. If taken to the extreme, even we humans can be accused of shape-shifting, as we achieve new size and dimension in our normal growth cycle.

It is both troubling and exciting as a scientist that there is such a lack of standardization or base of knowledge in this field. It does mean that there is ample room for discovery, and many rumors or myths to dispel.

Firstly, human prejudice has painted the role of deceptive killer on all shape-shifting beings. While some species like the Stennes may be warranted of this stereotype, most shape-shifters are unfairly tarred with this epithet. The Proteans and the Ugors have great appetites, and must kill for sustenance, but this does not make them cold-blooded killers. Due to the lack of available information,

paranoia has painted in the ignorance with fear.

Among other assumptions, many believe that these shape-shifters can produce exact simulacra of other beings. This is not true. The most determined probe, whether medical or interrogative, will reveal an attempted impersonation.

Secondly, many believe that shape-shifters can assume any shape, any size, any form. Each species has definite physical, physiological, and even cultural limits on their shape-shifting ability. Very few can accrue additional matter, building their mass significantly, like the Lahsbees when they change into their Huhk form. Most are trapped at their current mass limits. Not all can alter their surface to match their surroundings. Most are challenged by complex patterns. Even those shifters who rely on psionic and telepathic "smokescreening" to alter their form are vulnerable to mechanical cameras or droid photoreceptors. The amorphic shape-shifters, like the Ugors and Polydroxol, find the humanoid form difficult to maintain. These beings can make do with blob-like forms, without having to exude the redundant and complex extremities of the humanoid form.

Until more research, like the sort undertaken by myself, comes to light, the galaxy will have to continue living in the shroud of ignorance when it comes to these remarkable species.

Obo Rin

Obo Rin.

ancient bonfire, and he, the respected storyteller.

"I actually met one, many years back, on Tatooine..."

Stennes Shifter

I am Trinto Duaba, though, you may never tell. I sink into shadows. I am a shadow.

There are millions of Stennes. We are near-humans. You "pure" humans remark that we look sad, sullen, ghostly. But a rare few are Stennes Shifters. We are the privileged, for we can shade the eyes. We can shade your mind.

Some find it offensive, some find it alluring, some find it frightening. It is merely a survival technique. To avoid predators. To aid in hunting.

As civilization spread through the Stennes sector, we either became prized commodities, or hunted. That is the way with humans, near or otherwise.

But we are not easy prey. How can you hunt what you cannot see? Or rather, how can you hunt what you cannot help but not see?

If any species was deserving of the fear and prejudice that marks shape-shifters, then it is the Stennes Shifter. Like other shape-shifters, there is very little known about the Stennes Shifters, save that it is a genetic off-shoot of the near-human Stennes race. Ancient records indicate that more was known about the species in the ancient past of the Republic, but those records are incomplete and largely incomprehensible.

The Jedi Knights of 5,000 years ago faced the Stennes Shifters, and recognized them as a threat. The records indicate that the Jedi of that era decimated the species, and today estimates place the Stennes Shifter population anywhere from several million to less than a thousand.

Legend tells of the dangers of the Stennes Shifter. These beings have been alternately named Force-eaters, due to their eerie natural abilities. The Stennes Shifter have a bizarre sensitivity to the Force. This in itself is not unheard of, as the Gotal and non-sentient vornskr have a limited natural sensitivity to the Force. However, the Stennes's ability to use the Force is possibly unique.

Stennes Shifters draw power from expended Force energy. If those within the vicinity alter the flow of Force around them, the Stennes gain its energy. Furthermore, legends state that Stennes Shifters can tap the stored Force within unwary beings, like the vampires that lurk in the mythologies of many cultures.

No known Stennes Shifter has ever been medically examined in

recent history, so whether these powers are true or only wild conjecture is unknown. The standard Stennes shows no exotic physiological developments that would suggest these abilities.

The Stennes near-humans are a xenophobic lot, as millennia of persecution has ensured that many non-shifters have been killed. The Stennes homeworld of Stennaros is a world pock-marked with artillery craters, and the scars of years of persecution. While the Stennes avoid contact with the outside world, they are generally sociable and culturally advanced in their own closed system.

The Stennes have taken to hunting their own kind, tracking down any shifters that may attempt to conceal themselves among the population. As a result, the Stennes Shifters are a homeless species, not welcome even on their own world.

The Stennes Shifter's shifting ability is not based on physical change, but on telepathic manipulation. Whether this is a Force-based ability is unknown. It is known that this ability does not extend to mechanical optical devices, like photoreceptors and holocams. The shifter appears in its normal form: a slight humanoid with grayish skin and a sunken, skull-like face.

The shifter's reputed abilities far exceed its actual "shape-changing" abilities. In truth, the Stennes cannot alter their form, or make others perceive them as different beings. Rather, the Stennes Shifters have the ability to mask their appearances by making others not notice them. This ability only works in large crowds, as a single, isolated Stennes Shifter in an empty room could not mask his presence.

The few Stennes Shifters that exist today do their best to remain hidden, only using their powers when absolutely necessary and posing as normal Stennes. Those who cannot assimilate into society blend into crowds, earning a living as thieves, spies, or informants.

Pyrron finished his tale, staring off into space. His attention drifted back to the present, noticing Keeta and Gideon having a heated—but whispered—exchange.

"My friends," Pyrron said, "I seem to be the only one equipped with a voice-box today. Please, tell me about yourself."

"Right..." said Gideon. "Well...um."

"We were just by Kessel the other week," said Keeta. "We saw Clevon there. You remember Clevon."

"Um, of course," Pyrron finished his drink. "How is Clevon? It seems like ages."

Stennes Shifter

Attribute Dice: 12D
DEXTERITY 2D/ 4D
KNOWLEDGE 1D+1/ 3D+2
MECHANICAL 2D/ 4D
PERCEPTION 2D+1/ 4D+2
STRENGTH 2D/ 4D
TECHNICAL 2D/ 3D+2

Special Abilities:

Shifting: The Stennes Shifter uses its shifting ability to conceal itself in large crowds. This counts as an action. In crowds of 20–50 individuals, a Stennes gains +1D to *sneak* rolls. In crowds of 51–75 individuals, a Shifter gains +2D. In crowds of 76–100, the bonus increases to +3D. In crowds of over 100 individuals, a Shifter gains +4D. This shifting affects everybody, except telepathic-resistant beings like Hutts.

Feed on Force: On a Difficult *Perception* total, a Stennes Shifter can gain a Force Point if one is spent in its presence. This can be actively resisted by the Force Point's spender by adding his *Perception* or *control* skill to the Stennes's difficulty. Actively resisting this ability counts as an action, and can only be done by those who know of the Stennes's ability. Stennes can also gain spent Character Points by generating an Easy *Perception* total. It can be resisted as described above.

Tap Force: A Stennes can steal unspent Force Points or Character Points characters have by making a Very Difficult *Perception* total for Force Points, or an Easy *Perception* total for Character Points. If successful, the Stennes gains the Point, and the target character loses it. This can be actively resisted as described above.

Story Factors:

Legendary: Though many people have heard of Stennes Shifters, the existence of the species is considered only a legend.

Move: 8/10

Size: 1.3/1.7 meters tall

"Actually, its only been about eight months, remember?" Gideon answered. "Eight months ago when Clevon was killed."

Whatever entity controlled such things in the universe decided that now would be the most opportune moment to stop the music. As the band took a breather, Pyrron also inhaled deeply.

Gideon's hand came up from below the table, filled with a mean-looking blaster.

Keeta kept both hands on her drink. "So, which one are you?" She asked.

"Friends, please, there has been a misunderstanding—" Pyrron raised both hands slowly.

"What did you do with Pyrron, gob? You kill him too?" Gideon asked.

"K-kill? No, I never killed anyone. He gave me transport..." Pyrron stopped, closed his mind.

And Gideon felt it...the tugging at his mind, the blurring of his vision, the erasing of his memory...

His reflexes, however, were unaffected. And as any spacer knows, the trigger-finger is powered by reflex.

A blast of sound and light ended the conversation...

Shi'ido

The Shi'ido are a rare species of beings reportedly from a world within the Colonies region. Their planet, when they speak of it, is referred to as a garden world ravaged by disease, but no other information is ever offered. No corresponding planet has been discovered in Republic or Imperial records.

The Shi'ido's reputation precedes them as criminals, spies, and thieves, although many have entered investigative and educational fields. Of all shape-shifters, perhaps the Shi'ido are the most accepted.

Shi'ido have limited shifting ability, a mixture of physiological and telepathic manipulation. Their physical forms undergo only minimal transforma-



Shape-shifters

Shi'ido

Attribute Dice: 12D
DEXTERITY 2D/ 3D+2
KNOWLEDGE 2D/4D
MECHANICAL 1D/ 3D+1
PERCEPTION 2D/ 4D+2
STRENGTH 3D/ 4D+1
TECHNICAL 3D/ 4D

Special Skills:

Perception skills:

Mind-disguise: Time to use: One round or longer. This skill is used to shroud the mind of those perceiving the Shi'ido, thereby concealing the Shi'ido's appearance. Each person targeted by the skill counts as an action. A character may resist this attempt with *Perception* or *sense*.

Strength skills:

Shape-shifting: Time to use: One round or longer. This skill is considered advanced for advancement purposes. *Shape-shifting* allows a Shi'ido to adopt a new humanoid form. The Shi'ido cannot appear shorter than 1.3 meters, or taller than 2.1 meters. Adopting a new but similar form is a Moderate task. Adopting a form much taller or much smaller form, or a body shape considerably different from the Shi'ido, is a Difficult or Very Difficult task.

Special Abilities:

Shape-shifting: Shi'ido can change their shape to other humanoid forms. Their skin color or surface features do not change.

Mind-disguising: Shi'ido use this ability to complete their disguise, projecting their image into the minds of others. This can be resisted by opposed *Perception* or *sense* rolls, but only by those who actively suspect and resist. The mind-disguise does not affect automated cameras or droids.

Story Factors:

Reputation: Those who have heard of Shi'ido know them as thieves, spies, or criminals.

Move: 8/12

Size: 1.3-2.1 meters tall

tion. They are humanoid in shape, with large craniums, pronounced faces, and thin limbs. The bulk of their mass tends to be concentrated in their body, which they then distribute throughout their form when the adjust their shape.

Shi'ido physiology is remarkably flexible. Their thin bones are very dense, allowing support even in the most awkward mass configuration. Their musculature features "floating anchors," a series of tendons that can reattach themselves in different structures. The physical process is like any other, and requires exercise to perform. While maintaining a new form does not require exertion, the transformation process does. Shi'ido can only form humanoid shapes, as they are limited by their skeletal structure and mass limits.



Illustration by Steve Bryant

To: Major Vontenn
From: Obo Rin
Re: Report on Shape-shifters.

After only four standard months of research, I must ask for an extension in my continued report. You must understand the complexity of these cultures and the difficulty of obtaining information regarding them. When I attempted reaching Moff Bendor, he was busy dealing with an apparent Rebel uprising on his world. His bureaucrats did send me medical records of the Proteans, so I am confident that these files are accurate.

The Polydroxol report I had to obtain from slicers who cut into Karflo Corporation databanks. They insist that the files are genuine. You'll find their fee in the attached expense vouchers. No information was available on the Stennes Shifter, and I am afraid that this species will remain a mystery.

When it comes to the Shi'ido, an interesting tale unfolds. I had counted on Imperial Senior Anthropologist (Indeterminate) Vandolae to be my prime source of information, as this respected Shi'ido was actually in the employ of a university on Coruscant. When my message was received, I was informed that Vandolae was on an undercover anthropological study of fringe spacer life, and was currently on Centares.

When I arrived there, I found Vandolae dead, killed by a pair of spacers. It seems that he became too involved in his research. He was disguised as a spacer himself, complete with cosmetic appliances and false features. Although my research into the Shi'ido is incomplete, I cannot think of a better example of the limitations of a shape-shifter's abilities.

The finishing touches of Shi'ido transformation are executed telepathically. This telepathic process does not appear to be related to the Force, and is instead a function of a neurotransmitter organ located at the base of the Shi'ido brain. The telepathic process is used to "paint" an image atop the new humanoid form, giving it a final look as envisioned by the Shi'ido. Certain species, like the Hutts, who are more resistant to telepathic suggestion, cannot be fooled by the Shi'ido.

Beyond this telepathic painting, Shi'ido also use their natural telepathy to fog the minds of those around them, erasing suspicion and distracting people from asking probing questions. This is reportedly a difficult process, and maintaining a telepathic aura among many people is difficult, if those people are actively examining the Shi'ido. In large bustling crowds, however, the Shi'ido, like most species, can disappear with little effort.

Journal Submissions Policy

The Official Star Wars Adventure Journal has been asked by Lucasfilm to solicit material only from previously published authors. Therefore, we must require potential writers to meet the following guidelines.

If you are a published author, please send a brief cover letter outlining your interests in writing for *Star Wars* as well as your writing experience. Include a bibliography of previously published works and samples from that list. Please include your daytime phone number so we can contact you.

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If you are not a published author, we encourage you to pursue publishing your writing in other areas. It has been our experience that some of our industry's best writers are newcomers to the field. Newspaper, magazine, and fanzine editors often seek freelance authors to help fill their pages—this is a good place to gain some writing and publishing experience so you can later be considered for *The Official Star Wars Adventure Journal*.

HEROES NEED NOT APPLY

By Anthony P. Russo
and Eric S. Trautmann

Adventure Introduction

In the virtually lawless region between Imperial and New Republic space, a backwater system has become the focus of intense activity by criminals and powerful corporations.

Chrona was a peaceful, harmless agriworld until the recent discovery of a valuable new resource. The rare mineral *chronamite* can be processed into an incredibly strong alloy for use in vehicles and starships. As a result, Chrona quickly became a boom world—as well as the new home to gangsters, thieves, con artists, gamblers, and corporate “facilitators” (unscrupulous execs that ensure their parent company’s interests are served—at any cost).

Now that chronamite has revitalized the economy in this part of the sector, entrepreneurs and conglomerates have flooded the world with easy credits and sudden wealth. Since the Empire was forced to retreat from this area (to augment flagging Imperial forces closer to the Core Worlds), Chrona has become a world where law and justice have little meaning.

This adventure is designed for four to six player characters of mixed backgrounds. The characters could be prospectors or smugglers looking to steal some valuable mineral for sale on the black market, or altruistic seekers of justice intent on restoring law and order to the beleaguered planet. Mercenaries, bounty hunters and law-enforcement officers will also find Chrona a suitable adventuring locale. A mix of character templates with negotiating and combat skills are recommended.

Chrona

Type: Terrestrial
Temperature: Temperate
Atmosphere: Type I (breathable)
Hydrosphere: Moist
Gravity: Standard
Terrain: Plains, forested mountain ranges, humid equatorial belt
Length of Day: 25 standard hours
Length of Year: 348 local days
Sapient Species: Humans, assorted alien species
Starports: 5 standard class; landing fields in smaller towns
Population: 450,000
Planet Function: Agricultural and mining products
Government: Local town councils
Tech Level: Space
Major Exports: Primacale grains, fruits, chronamite ore
Major Imports: Space and mining technology, construction materials

Capsule: The Chrona system is located in the Inner Rim region, a boundary of space that once separated the Core Worlds from the Outer Rim Territories. In these times, portions of the Inner Rim serve as a buffer zone between the retreating forces of the Empire and the victorious New Republic. Located near the Vaathkree Trade Corridor, the Chrona system contains only one habitable world: Chrona. Primarily an agriworld with a negligible axial tilt and mild seasons, bulk freighters and barges were Chrona’s only visitors. The holds of such ships would be stuffed full with primacale or other fast-growing grains from the mid-latitudes, fruits from the humid equatorial belt, and bantha stocks raised on rolling scrub plains. With its temperate climate, Chrona’s few population centers grew no larger than the size of modest towns. Many of the beings who settled here thrived on the uneventful life that this world offered.

Background Information

Life on Chrona was peaceful until several bantha herders in the scrub regions realized that the livestock (transplanted from several systems) was dying of a rare blood disorder. Botanists, biologists, and geologists were quickly brought to the planet to develop a solution to the problem. The cause was traced to the brush scrub that dominated the herds’ grazing lands. The deep tap roots of the plants were picking up elements of a previously undetected mineral found in the planet’s soil. This mineral was the cause of the blood disorder, and led to the eventual decline of further bantha herding on Chrona.

The geologists that studied the problem determined that the

mineral—while harmful to the bantha herding effort—was extremely valuable. The mineral (dubbed “chronamite” by the science teams) could be processed into an incredibly strong, lightweight alloy ideal for use in vehicle engines.

Almost immediately, there was strong off-world interest in Chrona. Corporations, independent prospectors, and even some criminal syndicates quickly mounted mining operations on Chrona. Credits for development and production efforts poured in. Claims and mining rights were sold. Land owners became rich beyond their wildest expectations. The scrub plains (long stretches of lonely, rolling territory dotted by low thorny bushes) became home to drifting surface mining ships and bore drillers. Newer prefab towns and industrial processors sprung up among the farming communities.

During this hectic population expansion, many citizens complained about the newcomers. The miners and explorers had little or no concern for the environment or the creatures that lived in the fragile scrub plains. To make matters worse, claims to profitable regions and mining rights were disputed on a daily basis. Without a powerful, central government or authority, there was no means to enforce property boundaries or protect the rights of individuals. An independent prospector who went for supplies in the morning could come back to see her claim beacon tossed aside and a huge conglomerate ore-sifter squatting where her camp had once been. This outbreak of claim-jumping led to vocal and spirited disputes which eventually erupted into outright sabotage and armed combat.

The new prefab towns fared even more poorly. Swoop gangs and marauders prowled the settlements, while other towns were kept under the boot of powerful conglomerates to prevent independent prospectors from staking claims in mineral-rich regions. Despite the creation of private militias by concerned farmers and regular citizens, illegal gambling, murder, and theft were rampant.

Unfortunately, this uneasy balance has proven impossible to maintain. The farmers and merchants of Chrona longed for the days when Protectors once drove the criminals away, kept the peace, and enforced law. Many locals felt that until the New Republic arrived in sufficient numbers to help maintain the peace, the people of Chrona would have to rely upon less-savory tactics to survive.

The citizens of Chrona have decided to send out a call for strong and able individuals, willing to fight for pay. Vigilante law has come to Chrona.

Episode One: Corestrike

The town of Corestrike is located on the scrub plains, not far from where geologists first discovered chronamite. Formerly a temporary camp set amidst a collection of agrifarms, Corestrike is now a jumbled assembly of low prefab structures, inflatable domes, speeder sheds, and docking pits. The town is flooded with independent prospectors looking for the “The Big One”—a huge lode of raw chronamite that could make the sentient that discovers it fabulously wealthy.

Among the honest orediggers lurks a seedy collection of interstellar rough trade: gamblers, cons, corrupt officials, killers, and thieves. This unwanted element has turned Corestrike into a lawless frontier town where arguments are settled by the fastest blaster and criminal predators feast on the fears of frightened townspeople.

The characters—intrigued by the advertisement in the planetary holostacks—land in one of Corestrike’s docking pits. As the player characters disembark, read the following aloud:

The docking pit is typical of most small-time landing facilities. Discarded packing crates and bits of broken machinery cast off by departing ships litter the hard-packed dirt floor of the bay. Puddles of spilled lubricant and burn marks from ships’ thrusters dominate the landing pad, filling the pit with an acrid odor. A general (and fairly vague) map of the town—Corestrike—is flickering on a repeater display on the western wall of the pit.

The player characters can learn a great deal of information by investigating the map, as the map occasionally cycles through a series of advertisements.

- The first ad that the player characters see is the following:

PROTECTORS WANTED FOR CHRONA

Law-abiding beings desired for employment in the protection of life and property. Must be hard-working, diligent, and respectful. Long-term contracts offered. Security or law enforcement experience helpful. All comers welcome. Limited resources available, bring own equipment. Contact Mortris Gallorr, Town Council Adjunct; Corestrike, Chrona.

HEROES NEED NOT APPLY

• The businesses are typical for a mining community. A machine shop contains pieces of drilling and digging equipment in varying states of repair and disassembly. Several supply stores offer such advertised necessities as laser driller bits, labor droid replacement gears, and breather filters. Along the outskirts of the less random town center stands a used speeder yard with a few dilapidated repulsorlift and tracked cargo vehicles for sale.

• Three establishments in Corestrike offer lodging. The Promenade is a ramshackle structure made of gray pressure-formed blocks. The nearby Corestrike Hotel is a lodge that caters to those who don't mind spending a few extra credits for a real bed, and The Rising Moon is a gaudy, expensive parlor for conglomerate representatives, roving gamblers, and others who can write off their expenses.

• Many places in Corestrike offer food, games of chance, and refreshment: The Broken Laser Bit is but one example of a noisy dive where the occasional patron gets tossed into the street, to a chorus of laughter. The Big Quince is a sleepy bar that caters to downtime pilots and mole drivers, while The Grinder Dance Hall offers evening entertainments to the weary mining community.

The area around the docking pit offers most of the services expected from a spaceport, but the costs are noticeably higher. This is common on Chrona—almost everything is more expensive than is typical for such a remote planet. The “boom town” mentality affects just about every commodity, from foodstuffs and provisions (increases in cost range between 10 and 20 percent) to mining equipment and weapons (prices are nearly double). The characters can haggle with the local merchants if they wish, but most common items available in Corestrike are in high demand, and merchants can get away with charging exorbitantly high prices; any failed *bargain* attempts increase the price by a minimum of 30 percent.

As the player characters make their way out of the pit and into the streets of Corestrike, read the following aloud:

Corestrike looks like someone just scattered buildings at random among the scrub plains. There is some semblance of a main street—a dirt road—along which several shops face each other. In the center of town, a large dome (apparently a town government center and meeting hall) currently stands open as a marketplace.

Any character who makes an Easy *Perception* roll notices no visible security or constabulary force present on the streets of Corestrike. Many pedestrians keep their gaze forward and do not look at anyone directly. Humans and aliens blatantly wear blasters in holsters or carry rifles on their shoulders. The only organized force in town is a mixture of aliens and humans guarding the front, sides, and back of The Corestrike Credit Repository and Ore Exchange, which also happens to be the only sturdy-looking building in town. Speeders and cargo carriers cruise slowly down the street; each vehicle has a driver and at least one armed and alert passenger. Swoop bikers buzz the main avenue in packs of three or four, pedestrians giving these noisy machines and their tough-looking riders a wide berth.

The characters can find Mortris Gallorr by asking at the docking pit or at any of the shops or hotels along Corestrike's main street. The characters are directed to Gallorr's Light Repair Shed, about four buildings down from the Credit Repository.

Staging Tips

The characters may not immediately wish to join the vigilante brigade that Gallorr is attempting to put together. However, the player characters' exploration of Corestrike provides ample opportunities to steer them in the desired direction.

Perhaps the characters run across a robbery and thwart it; the hapless citizen who was being robbed thanks them and says that, if the group is interested, he can arrange a meeting with someone who will put some credits in their pockets—Gallorr.

As an alternative, if the player characters are of a less-scrupulous bent, they may inquire in the local cantinas about money making opportunities. A local thug mentions that anyone who joins Gallorr's efforts can be extremely valuable to the conglomerates and the criminal element as an information source.

As a final option, the characters' ship may be "impounded" by local criminals or corporate facilitators. Gallorr—hearing about the problem—offers to grant the characters "legal" law enforcement status...in exchange for cleaning the less-savory elements out of Corestrike.

Gallorr's Repair Shed

Gallorr's Light Repair Shed is a sturdier-looking structure than most of Corestrike's buildings. Constructed of solid materials, the garage's weathered exterior and faded paint look as if it was here long before the rush to mine chronamite. The building is in fact quite large, roughly the size of a large aircraft hangar.

The main doors are wide open, allowing the throbbing sounds of a pulse hammer to escape. A human male of middle age is bent over the hammer, letting it pound the dents out of a huge ore-extractor blade. A young boy sitting nearby sees the characters and tugs on the man's arm. He switches the hammer off and turns. He makes a wry face as he speaks. If the characters inquire about Mortris, read aloud or paraphrase the following:

"I'm Arno Gallorr. I own this shop. Mortris is my father." He motions to the boy. "Go get grandfather. Tell him that more have come to speak with him."

After a few moments, the boy comes back with a much older-looking, if more animated, version of Arno Gallorr. Smiling, Mortris Gallorr ("the honorary town adjunct," he says) heartily shakes the characters' hands and welcomes them. He invites the characters to follow him through a doorway to the back of the shop, but Arno stamps his foot, saying, "Father. What did we discuss before? I thought we agreed that we will not have any more like them coming here!"

Arno Gallorr is a hard-working man who does not, in Mortris' words, like to "rock the speeder." Ignoring his son's words, the older Gallorr invites the characters to the back of the shop. The young boy, Selmar, tags along. Arno Gallorr has nothing further to say to the characters. He turns the hammer back on, silently absorbed in his work.

Before he hires them, Mortris wants proof that the characters know what they're doing. According to the adjunct, the scum who terrorize Corestrike are not all stupid, nor are they going to surrender just because the characters wave a badge in their faces. The old mechanic is not interested in fools who just blast the nearest target into slag, either. Like his advertisement stated, "Heroes Need Not Apply." Mortris wants Protectors—law enforcers who will protect life and property and who will respect the law and the rights of beings. The Protectors of old knew when it was time to talk sense and when it was time to let one's blaster finish the conversation.

■ Mortris Gallorr

Type: Shop owner

DEXTERITY 3D+2

Blaster 4D, dodge 4D

KNOWLEDGE 3D+1

Business 5D

MECHANICAL 2D+1

Communications 3D+2, ground vehicle

operation 3D, repulsorlift operation 3D

PERCEPTION 2D+2

STRENGTH 3D

TECHNICAL 3D

Computer programming/repair 6D+2,

droid programming 6D+2, droid repair

7D+2, ground vehicle repair 5D+2,

repulsorlift repair 5D+2, space trans-

port repair 5D+2

Force Points: 1

Character Points: 5

Move: 10

Equipment: Tool belt, set of hand tools, industrial glowrod, stained worker coveralls

Capsule: Mortris Gallorr started his light repair business many years before the discovery of chronamite. In those days, there was no town of Corestrike; in fact, their community didn't even have a name. All that existed on the scrub plain were bantha herders and agrifarms spread out across many acres.

Gallorr came to Chrona looking for a peaceful place to start a family and open a shop where he could indulge his love of tinkering with mechanical devices. His shop rapidly became known as the best place in the area for fixing small vehicles and agricultural machinery. After his wife passed on, he handed over the majority of the work to his son Arno and his new wife, Serise. Unfortunately, Mortris was caught by complete surprise when the bantha farms began to abruptly fold and the town sprouted up around them. Everyone was talking about "chronamite," a shiny black rock that could be used to make anything from ceiling supports to starship hulls. The new town gave itself a name, Corestrike, and that's when the conglomerates and the miners appeared.

Mortris Gallorr wants to bring justice and peace back to Corestrike. Not everyone agrees with the old mechanic, though. Arno Gallorr, for one, would just as soon leave things the way they were, saying that interference would just make matters worse.

Throughout the interview, Selmar keeps to the background, knowing better than to interrupt his grandfather whenever he's spouting about "the good old days." The young boy eyes the characters with interest, especially if any of them wear their weapons in a "fast-draw" rig.



To test the characters, Mortris has set up a little proving ground. Behind the repair shop is another building where the family speeder and tools are kept. Beyond that is a field of unharvested, tall primacale which stands over two meters tall. All the characters have to do is reach the end of the field. "You'll know when you've reached the end," he says, smiling whimsically.

The Testing Ground

Over the past several weeks, Mortris has built a proving grounds, in order to test potential Protectors to determine if they have the skills needed for the job.

• **The Remotes.** The characters move into a grain-filled yard, surrounded by low-powered energy fences. The grain stands roughly shoulder height and makes movement difficult. All *sneak* rolls are automatically two difficulty levels higher when moving on foot in the grain.

The yard itself is roughly 75 meters square and is inhabited by several security remotes that have been modified by Gallorr. There are two remotes per player character and they attack one round after the characters have moved into the yard. Each remote is keyed to attack a specific player character, however. The characters will have a difficult time combatting the remotes assigned to themselves, but can coordinate attacks on the automatons chasing their comrades.

Remotes. All stats are 1D except: *Dexterity 2D+2, blaster 3D+2, dodge 6D+2; Perception 2D+2, sneak 4D+2.* Move 12. Stun blaster (3D+2).

In addition, the remotes do not suffer a penalty to *sneak* rolls, as they are not actually touching the brittle grain in the yard. The security remotes are deactivated if they are struck with blaster fire or by a character's melee weapon. When struck, they plummet to the ground and remain motionless.

This phase of the test ends when the remotes have all been deactivated.

• **The Holotarget Yard.** The characters enter another fenced-in area, dominated by several dilapidated buildings. At the opposite end of the yard is a bright holo-sign that simply says: "Exit."

As the characters move through the yard, holo-targets appear in the windows of the various buildings or move across open ground. One target appears each round, and it will take three rounds for the

characters to move across the yard.

Gamemasters should roll 1D secretly and consult the following table to determine the nature of the target:

Roll	Target Type
1	Swoop gang member
2	Unarmed civilian
3	Canny criminal; this holotarget initially looks like an unarmed human, but will appear to draw a weapon if the characters do not fire on it.
4	Ambush; this holotarget appears directly behind the character in the lead. The lead character must make a Very Difficult <i>Perception</i> check to notice the glow from the holotarget behind him. In addition, characters following the leader must take care not to shoot at the target as they will strike their comrade.
5	Unarmed civilian; this holotarget is of a large, burly miner carrying a long soil probe that appears at first glance to be a blaster rifle. A Moderate <i>Perception</i> roll reveals this; characters that fail this check view the target as hostile.
6	Unarmed civilian.

The targets all require Moderate *blaster* rolls to hit and they remain standing for two rounds before vanishing. If the characters miss a target in those two rounds, the character in the lead is disqualified and asked to leave the yard. Any character that shoots a civilian target is instantly disqualified.

• **The Runaway Droid.** The third and final part of the test involves a huge, mobile, nearly-unstoppable threat. The characters at first hear a steady whirring sound. A harvester droid suddenly plows through the tall primacale plants, intent on mowing down the characters.

Treadwell Harvester Droid. All stats are 1D except: *Mechanical* 3D, *ground vehicle operation: harvester droid* 4D, *Strength* 6D. Move 6. Cutter blades (6D), protective blast-plate on all sides except undercarriage (+1D to *Strength* when resisting damage).

The droid is armored on virtually every side, making it highly resistant to blaster fire. To avoid being run over, characters must roll a higher *dodge* total than the droid's *ground vehicle operation: harvester droid* result. Characters that are struck by the droid suffer 2D speeder-scale damage from the harvester's cutter blades.

The droid has a weak spot in its undercarriage, an unarmored spot located between the crawler treads. Characters can attempt to move under the droid from behind (Moderate *running* roll) or by jumping on the droid and slipping through the moving crawler treads (Moderate *climbing/jumping* roll). The characters can either deactivate the droid by manipulating its controls from underneath (Easy *droid repair* result; increase the difficulty by one level if the character does not have the skill) or by destroying the circuitry with a blaster shot (halve the harvester droid's *Strength* roll when resisting damage to this area).

The Test Results

Mortris and Selmar are waiting for the characters in a clearing just beyond the stalled harvester droid. If the characters failed the second test, Mortris is not willing to hire the characters on as Protectors—yet (particularly if a character hit a civilian). He says, "I told you, 'Heroes need not apply.' You've got to pick your targets carefully, if you can't avoid drawing a weapon."

Eventually, Gallorr will relent, particularly if the characters try and explain that a test like the holotargets is never the same as actually being on the job.

Mortris goes on to explain that the job of a Protector does not pay very well. The locals scraped together a collection of about 5,000 credits, money that will have to be split between the player characters. Many donated a few old hunting blasters and Mortris has a dilapidated speeder truck the characters can use as transportation. There is no jail or holding facility—one of the supply stores has a blockhouse which can be locked. The characters can stay at the hotel at a reduced rate and use the central town dome as an 'office.' There is one additional thing Mortris gives to the characters. He hands each one a small, four-sided metal object that they can pin on their clothing—if the characters accept the job. The badges also act as comlinks which can be used by the characters to communicate with one another. The badge-comms use a shifting frequency, making them Very Difficult to jam or monitor.

Mortris invites the characters to a meal, leaving Selmar to

Gamemaster Tips

During Mortris' conversation with the characters, they should get the impression that this is not an easy job filled with the typical glory and rewards they might receive for destroying an Imperial outpost for the New Republic. The people here are hard-working folk who do not feel safe. The characters are going to have to earn their trust and respect. The villains in this adventure easily outnumber the characters and are far better equipped. Should the characters accept the job, Mortris thanks them profusely and offers them a meal. He goes off to tell Serise to expect several more for the evening meal, leaving Selmar with the characters. The precocious lad admires the characters and their skill with weapons, but there is a sense of gloom about him.

Selmar Gallorr

Type: Impressionable youth

DEXTERITY 3D

dodge 4D, slingshot 5D, thrown weapons 5D

KNOWLEDGE 2D

MECHANICAL 2D

Communications 3D, ground vehicle operation 3D

PERCEPTION 2D+1

STRENGTH 2D

TECHNICAL 3D

Computer programming/repair 4D, droid programming 4D, droid repair 5D, security 4D

Character Points: 5

Move: 10

Equipment: Simple tools and tool belt, slingshot (3D), pocketful of rounded chronomite pebbles

Capsule: Like his father and his grandfather, Selmar Gallorr has inherent technical abilities. Gifted with his hands, Selmar takes great glee in modifying worker droid programming to suit his needs, and he often bypasses the locks on his father's tool chests to get the items he needs. Like many other youths in Corestrike, he knows far more than he lets on, and he is easily impressed by the actions of others, both good and bad. More than anything else, Selmar wants to learn how to shoot a blaster—something his parents have expressly forbidden.

entertain them while dinner is prepared. The boy states quietly that the characters are not the first to answer the call to be Protectors. "Grandfather's pretty glad more of you came. The last Protectors we had left in a big hurry. Themog got to them."

According to Selmar, Themog owns the town—most people that live in the area fear Themog and mutter about the lack of control they have over their own home.

Before Selmar can explain further, Mortris Gallorr comes rushing up with another person, a mousy-looking man wearing a work apron. Read the following aloud:

"There's trouble on the main street," Gallorr says. "A group of swoopers have come back and are in a 'playful mood.' It's time for you Protectors to get to work."

Episode Two: First Duty

As the group races to the scene, Mortris gives them a quick overview of Corestrike's basic legal codes:

- Energy weapons may only be employed in self-defense.
- Murder, theft of mining claims and theft of property are Code One infractions, punishable by life-imprisonment or—if the crime is serious enough—public execution (as determined by a jury).
- Acts of vandalism, criminal mischief and other petty crimes are punishable by up to 90 days in the local "jail."
- A trio of local businessmen and merchants (Mortris, his son, and the owner of The Grinder Dance Hall, Lady Moira Kruger) has been selected to act as the Magistrate Council, forming a basic judiciary body; any non-lethal disputes will be presided over by the Council. However, if energy weapons are employed, Protectors may react with the force they deem appropriate.
- The decisions of the Magistrate Council are final and not subject to appeal.

Six burly swoop bikers are in the process of looting a supply store across from The Broken Laser Bit. Locals have either gotten out of the way or are watching the characters as they come onto the scene. The store owner is sitting the street, a bloody gash on his forehead and a dazed look in his eyes. As he watches helplessly, the swoopers gleefully throw merchandise through the broken front window.

The swoopers are merely out for a good time—albeit a pretty rough one. Upon seeing the town's new Protectors, the swoopers immediately attack the player characters, relying on melee weapons and brawling attacks to win the fight; they will not draw their blaster pistols unless the Protectors do so first. Read the following aloud:

Six scruffy-looking humans are moving out onto the street, ostensibly to greet you. Their expressions are less than friendly, however. The leader of the group—a heavily-scarred man with a number of decorative tattoos—wraps his hand around the hilt of a wicked-looking knife and glares at you.

"Move along, 'Protectors,'" he growls, "or you'll have to answer to us...and Themog."

Run combat as described in the *Star Wars, Revised and Expanded* rules.

6 Swoop Bikers. All stats are 2D except: *Dexterity* 3D+2, *blaster* 4D+2, *brawling parry* 4D+2, *melee weapons* 4D+2, *Mechanical* 3D, *swoop operation* 6D, *Perception* 3D, *Strength* 4D, *brawling* 5D. Move 10. Studded gloves (STR+1D), knife (STR+1D), blaster pistol (4D), length of chain (STR+1D), metal prybar (STR+1D).

At the conclusion of the confrontation, the characters must deal with the bikers, the injured shopkeeper, and the growing throng of curious onlookers. In addition, the Protectors will need to notify the Magistrate Council of the arrests after which the jury will decide on an appropriate punishment.

If the confrontation is resolved without further violence (particularly if a blaster duel is avoided) the shopkeeper refrains from pressing charges *if* the swoopers make restitution for the damage. However, the swoopers will need to be *persuaded* (a Moderate skill check) to accept the plea bargain.

First Clues

If the characters bring the swoopers to the central dome for trial before the Magistrate Council, read the following aloud:

After testifying for several hours, the judiciary session has been adjourned as the swoopers await the Council's verdict.

Shortly, Mortris enters the room with a decidedly grim look on his face. "I can't believe this," he says. "We've deadlocked, which means the swoop bikers will be set free."

He pauses a moment, hanging his head in disgust. "You see, we

each 'vote' for the verdict, based on the testimony of the trial. We had one guilty vote, one innocent vote, and one abstention. Clearly one of the Council has been paid off or intimidated, because there is no question as to the swoopers guilt.

"The problem is, the votes are anonymous, and I don't know who voted for what. Either my son is corrupt, or he's been coerced into silence. Either way, we have a real problem ..."

Other Activities

Over the next several days, Corestrike's new Protectors must face an ever-changing set of challenges. The following encounters can be run in any order, and should take place over several days of game time.

- The Protectors are called upon to arbitrate a dispute between a miner who won't pay his bill and the owner of The Promenade Hotel. The miner reports that the hotel owner is secretly giving passkeys to a gang of thieves who break into rooms. Without proof, the miner does not have a case and must pay his bill.

Alternately, the player characters must attempt to apprehend the thieves in the act.

- **3 Hotel Burglars.** All stats 2D except: *Dexterity* 3D, *blaster* 4D, *dodge* 4D, *security* 6D. Move: 10. Blaster pistol (4D), electronic lock breaker (+2D to *security*).

If apprehended, the Council's verdict is again deadlocked. One of the thieves hints that the Council is indeed corrupted: "Themog can take care of his own, and you'll be sorry you messed with him."

- A "misunderstanding" ends in the injury of an unemployed drifter near The Corestrike Repository and Ore Exchange. The drifter bumped into one of the guards and the confrontation quickly changed from an argument into a shooting match. When the characters arrive, the drifter is seriously injured in the street while the guard, a Rodian who does not speak Basic, vehemently denies any wrongdoing. Altros Logan, owner of the repository, quickly offers to make amends.

Logan informs the characters that he has hired the additional security because he is worried that someone might rob the repository. The characters can either charge the Rodian with a wrongful shooting or rule that the incident was clearly self-defense.

If asked, Logan will admit that he fears thieves in the employ of

Themog. "He's hard to keep tabs on, though I hear he occasionally holes up at The Grinder Dance Hall."

• An off-world bounty hunter named Creed attempts to assassinate one or more of the player characters. However, if it looks as if the characters will win the combat—in broad daylight on Corestrike's main thoroughfare—he will surrender and trade information in exchange for his release. If the characters agree to the exchange, he informs them that he was hired by Themog to kill them, presumably for interfering in his operations. Creed also reveals that Themog has coerced one Council member—Mortris' son, Arno—into abstaining from any votes concerning his operatives. Finally, one other Council member has clearly been "bought off" or otherwise corrupted (and was also directly involved in hiring Creed to assassinate the characters): the proprietor of The Grinder Dance Hall, Lady Moira Kruger.

Episode Three: The Grinder Dance Hall

Clearly, Themog is a major criminal force in Corestrike, though no one is willing to talk about him. The best lead the characters have on tracking down Themog is The Grinder Dance Hall's proprietor, Moira Kruger.

The Grinder Dance Hall is a large, prefabricated structure resting on a foundation pressure-formed from the soil. Originally a warehouse used to store grain, The Grinder retains its agricombine look.

When the characters approach, the forward door slides open on grooved tracks, and a large, well-dressed alien bouncer greets them. If the characters are wearing their Protector badges, admission is free. Otherwise, the charge is five credits. As the characters enter The Grinder, read the following aloud:

The Grinder is a chaotic swirl of aliens, humans and droids, partially obscured by the clouds of smoke drifting through the room. In the center of the bar's main floor stand several tables offering games of chance: sabacc, sanchango, and even some hyper-dejarik (a version of the popular hologame that is played at near-frantic speeds).

One side of the room is a busy bar managed by a human, with several mobile servant droids shuttling beverages to gamblers and revelers.



Illustration by Steve Bryant

Moira Kruger is moving among the crowd, drifting from table to table. When she sees the characters, she ducks behind a curtained partition in the rear of the room. A pair of armed Gamorreans flank the partition, standing guard. At her order, the Gamorreans move to intercept the nearest player character and a brawl ensues.

2 Gamorrean Thugs. All stats 2D except: *brawling* 6D, *melee combat* 5D. Move: 10. Vibro-ax (STR+2D).

The guards will not attempt to kill the Protectors, instead intending to deliver a punitive beating to the player characters. After two rounds of combat, three more Gamorreans arrive and leap into the fray.

During the fight, the patrons watch nervously; several seedy-looking locals are surreptitiously placing their backs to the walls and preparing to draw concealed weapons. If a player character shoots at a Gamorrean and misses, a firefight breaks out, though a Moderate *command* roll will "convince" the agitated crowd that firing on the Protectors is a bad move.

If the characters lose the fight, they are disarmed and brought to

face Themog, who is seated on the other side of the curtained partition. Cut to "Meeting With Themog."

Meeting In The Grinder

Read the following aloud:

As you brush aside the curtain, you see something unexpected: a gleaming, metallic figure is seated at a table, accompanied by a pair of Gamorreans (an unusual arrangement given the porcine aliens' hatred of droids). Moira Kruger is nervously standing nearby, watching both sides of the confrontation, clearly unhappy with the situation.

"Do come in," the droid says. "My Master wishes to send you a message."

With a hiss, the droid's chest panels swing aside, revealing a holographic projector that sparkles to life immediately. A glittering cone of light shoots from the droid's thorax, coalescing into an image of a human male in his mid-thirties, heavily scarred and wearing a patch over his left eye.

"My name is Themog," the hologram says, a sarcastic smirk tugging at the corners of his illusory lips. "I believe that it is time we talk."

"You have until moonrise tomorrow night to go to your ship and leave Corestrike—and Chrona—behind," he continues, his single eye gleaming with predatory glee. "Otherwise, your friends Mortris, Selmarr and Serise will pay the consequences."

The hologram flickers briefly, as if the holocam that recorded it is changing focus. A moment later, the bound and gagged figures of your friends are visible. Themog's voice continues: "Remember, Protectors, moonrise tomorrow, or your friends will suffer for your mistakes."

■ Moira Kruger

Type: Successful entrepreneur

DEXTERITY 3D

Blaster: hold-out blaster 5D, brawling parry 6D, dodge 5D

KNOWLEDGE 3D+2

Business 6D+2, value 6D+2

MECHANICAL 3D

Communications 4D, ground vehicle operation 4D, repulsorlift operation 4D

PERCEPTION 3D+1

Gambling 6D+1, hide 4D+1, persuasion 7D+1

STRENGTH 2D

TECHNICAL 3D

Computer programming/repair 4D, droid programming 4D, first aid 4D, security 4D

Character Points: 5

Move: 10

Equipment: Hold-out blaster (3D), comlink, deck of sabacc cards, several sets of expensive clothing

Capsule: Little is known about Lady Kruger's background. She came to Corestrike several years ago, planning to raise livestock, a plan that was cut abruptly short by the chronamite poisoning that nearly wiped out the colony.

After the loss of her livestock herds, Lady Kruger won the Grinder Dance Hall in a cutthroat game of sabacc and has run the establishment ever since. (There are rumors that Moira actually cheated her way to victory, and that she had spent her youth as a wandering gambler and thief, though these tales have never been substantiated.)

Several months ago, Moira became romantically entangled with "Themog," and has granted him permission to hide-out in the Grinder. In addition, Moira is the "corrupted" vote on the Council, voting to free Themog's henchmen at every opportunity.



Illustration by Steve Bryant

Decisions and Consequences

The player characters have two obvious options at this point:

- **Arrest Moira.** Moira is romantically entangled with Themog, and it is possible that he may be willing to exchange her for the Gallorr family. However, if the Protectors attempt to apprehend her, BG-12 and the Gamorrean thugs will move to protect her. However, if captured in this manner, Moira plays along with the exchange plan, setting up the meeting at Mortris' training yard. Cut to Episode Four.
- **Capture Themog's associates.** Perhaps the characters attempt to capture and interrogate Themog's accomplices. The swoopers and the Gamorreans are less than helpful if apprehended, admitting that they have no idea where Themog is currently holed up. They will reveal (on a Moderate *con*, *intimidation* or *persuasion* roll) that Moira or BG-12 probably know *exactly* where the criminal is hiding. BG-12 will not willingly surrender, though if the droid is damaged or rendered inoperative, the information can be retrieved from the unit's memory. A successful Moderate droid programming roll

BG-12

Type: Assassin droid

DEXTERITY 1D+2

Brawling parry 3D, dodge 4D+2, blaster 5D+2, vehicle blasters 5D

KNOWLEDGE 3D

Alien species 6D, bureaucracy 7D, business 7D+2, intimidation 7D+2, languages 8D, law enforcement 7D, planetary systems 8D, tactics 8D, value 8D+2

MECHANICAL 1D

communications 3D, hover vehicle operation 3D, repulsorlift operation 3D, sensors 3D+2

PERCEPTION 1D

Bargain 5D+2, command 6D, con 5D, persuasion 6D+2

STRENGTH 1D

Brawling 2D+2

TECHNICAL 1D

Computer programming/repair 7D, demolitions 5D, droid programming 7D, droid repair 7D, security 7D+2

Character Points: 10

Equipped with:

- Humanoid body (two arms, two legs, one head)
- Armored chassis (+2D physical, +1D energy)
- Enhanced visual and audio sensors (+2D to search)
- Broadband antenna receiver
- Gerdoor GG-22 tactical decision-making node
- Verbo 212-38 vocabulator and language interpreter
- Two Blaster pistols (4D) hidden in arm recesses
- Holographic recorder/projector (concealed behind armored chest panels)

Capsule: BG-12 is an older assassin droid, a model that has not been available for decades. In fact, it is widely believed that all BG-series droids have been destroyed, a belief that is apparently inaccurate.

allows the characters to access the droid's memory banks. Themog has apparently captured the family and is holding them in the practice yard where Mortris first tested the characters. Cut to Episode Four.

• **Investigate around Corestrike.** The player characters may search the town for clues that can lead them to Themog. Any of the characters can use their *con*, *persuasion* or *intimidation* skills to get more information out of the locals, though few—if any—of Corestrike's average citizens are privy to any useful information. However, the characters may decide to hunt down and sweat the information out of the swoop-riding thugs they have encountered. If captured, the leader of the swoopers will pinpoint Themog's location. Cut to Episode Four.



Swoop Bikers. All stats are 2D except: *Dexterity* 3D+2, *blaster* 4D+2, *brawling parry* 4D+2, *melee weapons* 4D+2, *Mechanical* 3D, *swoop operation* 6D, *Perception* 3D, *Strength* 4D, *brawling* 5D. Move 10. Studded gloves (STR+1D), knife (STR+1D), blaster pistol (4D), length of chain (STR+1D), metal prybar (STR+1D).

Episode Four: Showdown with Themog

The characters should be well aware of Themog's location; however, the crime boss and his gang have set up an ambush very carefully. The characters do not have as much firepower as Themog's gang, but—if they plan ahead—they may have surprise on their side.

The bulk of Themog's gang is hiding in positions throughout Gallorr's Repair Shed (though he has kept a small contingent near the hostages); six are concealed among the various pieces of broken down machinery, while the rest are in position in the rafters of the large hangar-like building.

Themog's Thugs. All stats are 2D except: *Dexterity* 3D+2, *blaster* 5D, *brawling parry* 4D+2, *melee weapons* 4D+2, *Mechanical* 3D, *swoop operation* 6D, *Perception* 3D, *sneak* 5D, *Strength* 4D, *brawling*

5D. Move 10. Knife (STR+1D), blaster pistol (4D), blaster rifle (5D).

As the characters move into the building, the thugs attack in waves; Themog's rafter-walking henchmen fire blaster rifles at the group as they walk in the door, each gaining +1D to blaster for the first round of combat (since they have the element of surprise). However, there is ample cover nearby, and if the Protectors can make it to the clutter of machinery, they may go on the offensive.

Run combat as described in *Star Wars, Revised and Expanded*. However, the possible presence of hostages should give the characters pause; obviously, until the Gallorr family is located, the Protectors should avoid wantonly spraying blaster fire around the repair shop. Any character who makes an *Easy law enforcement* or *streetwise* check realizes this and should caution the other Protectors to set their weapons on stun.

After half of the thugs are defeated, those remaining surrender. If questioned, they reveal that Themog and the Gallorrs are hidden in the practice yard behind the repair shed, though they don't know exactly where. However, any character who attempts to *bargain*, *con* or *intimidate* more information from the thugs learns (on a Moderate result) that five more armed henchmen are also lurking throughout the yard.

Danger in the Practice Yard

As before, the characters must run a gauntlet through the practice yard; however, the stakes are considerably higher, as five armed criminals and four hostages and Themog himself are hidden nearby.

• **The Remotes.** The remotes that the characters had to overcome earlier are once again active, and have had their stun blasters replaced by *real* weapons. All *sneak* rolls are automatically two difficulty levels higher when moving on foot in the grain.

In addition, Arno Gallorr is tied up in the yard; he can be found with a Moderate *search* check. If released, he will help the characters search for Themog and his family.

Remotes. All stats are 1D except: *Dexterity* 2D+2, *blaster* 3D+2, *dodge* 6D+2; *Perception* 2D+2, *sneak* 4D+2. Move 12. Modified blaster (3D+2 damage).

• **The Holotarget Yard.** The characters enter another fenced-in area, dominated by several dilapidated buildings. At the opposite end of the yard is a bright holo-sign that simply says: "Exit."

As the characters move through the yard, holo-targets appear in the windows of the various buildings or move across open ground. One target appears each round, and it will take three rounds for the characters to move across the yard.

Gamemasters should roll 1D secretly and consult the following table to determine the nature of the target:

Roll	Target Type
1	Actual swoop gang member
2	Holographic unarmed civilian
3	Holographic hostage
4	Ambush; one of Themog's henchmen springs from behind cover, directly behind the character in the lead. Characters following the leader must take care not to shoot at the target as they will strike their comrade.
5	Holographic unarmed civilian; this holotarget is of a large, burly miner carrying a long soil probe that appears at first glance to be a blaster rifle. A Moderate <i>Perception</i> roll reveals this; characters that fail this check view the target as hostile.
6	Actual hostage: Mortris Gallorr.

• **The Runaway Droid.** The third and final leg of the gauntlet is once again a runaway droid. However, strapped to the front of the droid's chassis are Serise and Selmar, and riding atop the huge, nearly-unstoppable construct is Themog himself.

Treadwell Harvester Droid. All stats are 1D except: *Mechanical* 3D, *ground vehicle operation: harvester droid* 4D, *Strength* 6D. Move 6. Cutter blades (6D), protective blast-plate on all sides except undercarriage (+1D to *Strength* when resisting damage).

The characters can defeat the droid as they did before (probably by striking the vulnerable point on the unit's underside) though they should be even more careful about where they place their shots; the hostages strapped to the droid can be struck by blaster fire rather easily, and all blaster difficulty rolls are one level higher until the Gallorrs are free and out of the line of fire.

Themog will not surrender easily; unless stunned or wounded into unconsciousness, he will fight as hard as he can to avoid capture. In addition, any remaining thugs that were not dealt with

in the practice yard will arrive after three rounds and attack the characters from the rear.

Themog's Thugs. All stats are 2D except: *Dexterity* 3D+2, *blaster* 5D, *brawling parry* 4D+2, *melee weapons* 4D+2, *Mechanical* 3D, *swoop operation* 6D, *Perception* 3D, *sneak* 5D, *Strength* 4D, *brawling* 5D. Move 10. Knife (STR+1D), blaster pistol (4D), blaster rifle (5D).

The Aftermath

Corestrike is free once more. The defeat of Themog sends many of his remaining allies and crooked business partners fleeing from the wrath of the townspeople. Many of the illegitimate businesses shut down as their owners find Corestrike a less-than desirable place to stay.

As Protectors, the characters' job is far from complete. Many other towns suffer from similar ailments like Corestrike, and even Corestrike is not safe from future criminal incursions; violent and greedy individuals like Themog can smell a power vacuum from a parsec away and newcomers may attempt to fill the void he leaves behind.

Staging Tip

If the characters go hopelessly "off the rails"—particularly if the characters have failed to successfully pass through the repair shed, the practice yard, or defeat Themog—gamemasters can still steer the adventure towards its intended conclusion.

Perhaps Moira Kruger, finally realizing that Themog is not the "misunderstood" individual she believed him to be, arrives and distracts the crimelord at the crucial moment, allowing one of the characters to disarm or wound him. Alternatively, Moira could assemble a host of angry townsfolk to storm through the repair shed and the practice yard, defeating the hidden thugs lurking inside.

As a final alternative, the characters could use Moira as a bargaining chip, offering to exchange her for the Gallors—the final condition of the swap being Themog's immediate exile from Chrona. (Of course, the ex-law enforcement officer will likely plan his return trip—and his vengeance—in short order.)

Themog

Type: Local criminal

DEXTERITY 3D+2

Blaster 5D+2, dodge 6D, melee combat 4D+2

KNOWLEDGE 3D

Bureaucracy 5D, business 5D, intimidation 6D, law enforcement 6D, planetary systems 4D

MECHANICAL 3D

Astrogation 3D+2, beast riding 3D+2, repulsorlift operation 4D, space transports 5D

PERCEPTION 2D+1

Bargain 4D, command 4D, con 5D, forgery 5D, hide 4D, search 5D, sneak 5D

STRENGTH 3D

Brawling 6D

TECHNICAL 2D

Character Points: 10

Move: 10

Special Abilities:

Missing eye: All of Themog's vision-based *search* or *Perception* rolls are one difficulty level higher.

Equipment: Blast vest (+1D physical), heavy blaster pistol (5D), hold-out blaster (3D+2), vibroknife (STR+1D+2).

Capsule: Themog was once a CorSec officer who was forced to retire in disgrace after he was wounded during an argument with a suspect. Unfortunately, the suspect was in fact bribing Themog to "look the other way" and was angry at the corrupt officer's escalating prices. Ever since he was drummed out of CorSec, Themog has drifted around the Outer Rim Territories, engaging in all manner of shady (and often downright illegal) activities. But word of the characters' success has spread like a wave of ore-strike fever. Many come to Corestrike to join the fight. Mortis Gallorr has a new job now, busily handling new applicants as he turns the Protectors from a local to a planetary force.



Illustration by Steve Bryant

Adventure Rewards

The characters receive six to eight Character Points for surviving the adventure. At the discretion of the gamemaster, additional points may be awarded for heroic actions, inventively handling Themog and his gang, and adhering to the laws of Corestrike.

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IDOL INTENTIONS

by Patricia A. Jackson

Drake Paulsen leaned against the balcony railing that surrounded the upper level of Feyodor's Tavern and grinned into the swarming crowd below him. As a refreshing wind blew across the rooftop, the young Socorran brushed a stray hair from his handsome face and adjusted the golden hoop in his left ear.

"Nikaede, this was a great idea!" he shouted in a boyish voice. Pulling absently at the restraint over his blaster, he patted the Wookiee on the shoulder and sat back down at their corner table.

The Wookiee carefully settled herself into the modified dining chair, and laid her bowcaster at the foot of the table for easy access. Suffering from a voracious appetite, she howled with great pleasure at the banquet of food before them and commended Feyodor, their cook and host, on his work. From the bar, the rotund human chef bowed dramatically to the Wookiee's emphatic praises and instructed his serving boys to pay extra-special attention to the private booth in the far corner or face severe consequences.

"Hmmm, you said it, partner," Drake chuckled. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, savoring the delicious aroma until his eyes watered and his lungs could no longer stand the pressure.

There was stuffed Uln bird, glazed with a light mist of Zsajhira berry juice and served with a generous portion of deep-fried Issori blowfish snouts. Sauteed in spices and pepper fettles, Junobian soft-shell sand fliers were served in a diminutive black kettle of Corellian wine, still boiling from the oven fryers, and topped with genuine Corellian seed poppers to bring out the robust flavor.

Draping the napkin over his thigh, Drake shook his head at the exquisite feast, which was rounded out with a basket full of Rishi honeystix, each dipped in sweet powder and fried to a light crispness. The Socorran bit into the end of the tender stick and groaned in ecstasy as the batter melted against his tongue. "Nik, you've got

to try one of these honeystix. Fabulous! Feyodor's outdone himself this time."

Drake stared into the skies. Exploding against the lower atmosphere of the planet, compacted phosphorous shells burst open in vibrant shades of green, red, and orange flames. The decorative fireworks were detonated in pairs and quads, and lit the entire canopy of the sky with a dazzling exhibition of colors and patterned designs, each more magnificent than the one before. Omman's Capital City was crowded with thousands of inquisitive natives and tourists eager to watch the spectacle. As a steady succession of blaster fire and small arms discharge signaled the centennial celebration of the Moon Festival, citizens both young and old took to the streets and alleys where the real celebration would begin.

Drake was at home in Feyodor's Tavern, which was decorated in a dramatic arrangement of lights and jewels that simulated the constellations and star clusters of Omman's surrounding night sky. Organized behind the bar, an intricate grid of lights and fluorescent tubing created the illusion of waterfalls as the tiny bulbs faded and slowly returned to life in a seemingly endless mosaic of motion.

Drake grinned, using the table cloth to wipe the corner of his mouth. The biggest illusion was the grid itself and the clandestine innocence of its arrangement. Besides being one of the most unique pieces of artistry within several light years of the planet, it was in and of itself a work of masterful deception. Behind each of the winking lights was a carefully guarded code to signify a potential job offer or a contact with any number of smugglers, pirates, or bounty hunters, even corrupt Imperial liaisons that frequented the establishment. When a bulb was lit, it meant the individual was currently in the area and looking for work or that a potential client was in search of persons to enlist for a business venture.

Color-coded according to occupation, status, and need, the grid was an infamous galactic map of jobs and employers for the discriminating smuggler. Drake snorted softly, wiping the sweet powder from his lips. Synchronized within the diagram of the grid, in plain view, were thirty tables on the rooftop of the restaurant. Below were 100 or more booths inside the bar, each equipped with a centerpiece lamp or glass sculpture that was an ingenious part of the elaborate scheme.

For those too nervous to boast of their presence on the grid or for those too unknown to qualify, the centerpiece acted as a beacon for potential clients. Blue indicated a veteran talent, exclusive and

expensive. Red was a warning signal, meaning the individuals at the table were a risk and Feyodor, the proprietor, would take no responsibility for their actions, faults, or failings.

There were other qualifying colors to cover the immense span of talent found at the tavern and in the local area. Feyodor controlled each centerpiece from his remote access panel behind the bar, changing colors as he saw fit to suit the situation. Yellow indicated that the party at the table was already hired, but the deal could be broken accordingly because a contract had not been agreed on. Green meant a clear go—no job, no contract, just hope. White was a mark of distinction, even among the celestial stars: it was the sign of a legend.

Drake smiled, pleased to note that Feyodor had seated them at a relatively private table with a white beacon. Their booth was the farthest from all the others, yet closest to the open-air bar. It was here that his father had made some of the most infamous deals of his smuggling career. In the past, this table remained open to Kaine Paulsen and a very young Drake, long after the closing hour, when the spice shipment had been delivered, the sector authorities tricked or bribed, and the payment given in full. And four years after Kaine's death the tavern owner still kept this table and one other, in deference to the smuggler and other men like him.

Drake sipped reflectively at his raava, his heart swelling with pride. Toying with the centerpiece, he was pleased that he had given the Corellian a subtle wink to indicate that his first mate and he were not for hire tonight. After surviving the last spice run from Kessel, with a trio of Imperial Star Destroyers on their tails, the young Socorran was in no mood for another risky job. And the payoff from their cargo would keep Nikaede and him eating and living like royalty, at least for the next month, more or less, if they carefully weighed their luxuries.

"You know," Drake said suddenly, "it was a good idea to dock the *Steadfast* out of town in that abandoned junkyard. We might actually get some honest down time on this trip. If no one sees the ship, they can't ask for us, right?" He listened to the Wookiee's throaty reply and the suggestion that followed it. "Yeah, I could go for a nice, hot bath myself. And I was thinking, Nik, maybe we could—"

"Are you Drake Paulsen?" Clutching an oversized canvas shoulder bag, the woman tentatively approached the smuggler's table. "Captain Paulsen?" she whispered with an anxious smile, offering her hand to the Socorran.

Distracted by the alluring sway of fiery red curls, Drake stared over his shoulder at the intruding stranger. Reluctantly accepting her firm handshake, he shot a cautious glance across the table to his first mate. "Look, lady," he said, attempting to ignore her, "we're off the clock so to speak. We're not taking any new jobs at the moment."

Nikaede punctuated the statement with a firm growl and then returned to her rump of bantha meat, gnawing ferociously at the grizzle and bone. She stared at the stranger and grunted with satisfaction as the woman flinched under her intimidating gaze.

"I know. That's what the bartender told me," the woman replied. She brushed a length of long hair from her face, uncovering her flushed cheeks. Drake noticed the slight tremor in her hands as she clutched protectively at the shoulder bag. She was dressed in flight gear, the fashionable style, worn by the feminine side of the smuggling venue—a low-cut blouse beneath a black, tapered waistcoat and polished, long-neck boots. Tight-fitting, black pirate leggings with a flirtatious frock of fabric at the hips left no curves to a nineteen-year-old smuggler's imagination.

"Look, Captain Paulsen," she insisted, bending low over him to mask her husky voice from passersby. "I need a safe, sound ship and someone who knows how to fly her. I need special talent and I paid extra at the bar to find it." She glanced back at the bar where Feyodor was watching them. A large, heavily built man, the Corellian smiled at her, holding up the credit chit she had left on the counter and pocketing it in his apron. He nodded to her and Drake to signal all clear and then went quietly back to his bartending.

"Please, Captain Paulsen." Her blue eyes were alive and vibrant with the persistent flashing of fireworks arcing through the skies overhead. "I represent factions that will be more than happy to pay you upwards of 15,000 credits if you accept the offer. Half now and the other half due on completion—"

"We don't leave port for less than 25,000 creds," Drake mumbled, hoping the exorbitant price would send the young woman on her way. "And there's a 5,000-credit surcharge for the use of my first mate." The Socorran hid a clever grin as Nikaede grunted abruptly, commending him for his efficient evasive maneuvering.

"That's 30,000 credits?" she asked.

Drake pursed his lips and nodded. "That's 30,000 credits."

"Done!" Digging through her shoulder bag, she produced the necessary cred-stick and slammed it down on the table. "When can we leave?"

As the cred-stick rolled against his plate, Drake's eyes widened in shock. Picking it up, he read the scanner, startled to find it contained the full amount of the payment. He tossed it across the table to Nikaede, who took the small unit and toyed with the seal housing, convinced the monetary component was a fraud. After a moment, she shrugged, unable to find anything to support her suspicions.

"Now hold on, ah..." Drake started, stumbling as he realized he hadn't gotten the woman's name.

"Padia Anjeri." She took his hand and shook it again.

"What's the cargo?"

"Myself and two other passengers. The only stipulation is that we must leave immediately. Will that be a problem?"

"Problem?" Drake glared across the table to Nikaede and then took a bite of the stuffed Uln bird. As the savory meat went down his throat, he was beginning to share Nikaede's contempt for the human woman and her abrupt intrusion of an otherwise captive evening and peaceful meal.

But the money was simply too great a temptation. He could see it reflected in his first mate's eyes, too. It was just that his smuggler's sense was teeming with suspicion. "I'll ask you one more time," he whispered evenly, staring into his plate. "And either you start leveling with me about this gig or you can go right back to the bar and find yourself another *chumani*." He met her startled expression with uncharacteristic menace. "Now what's the cargo?"

The woman suddenly looked as if she might faint, so Drake pulled out the chair next to him and offered it to her. She sat without a word.

"Here, have a swallow. You look like you need it." He handed her his glass and watched her take a long sip. The Socorran sat back in the shadows, shielding the pleasure in his face as he watched her reaction to the powerful draught.

Wiping the tears from her eyes, Padia gasped as the bitter raava went down the back of her throat. "Guess, it's an acquired taste." She winced at the aftertaste, handing the glass back to him. "Thanks."

Across from her, Nikaede mumbled something around a hurried mouthful of bantha meat. The young woman listened intently to the melodic softness in the Wookiee's voice, apparently enthralled. *Don't get around much, I see*, Drake thought as she looked quizzically at him.

"What did she say?"

"She's wondering if this is your first time," he said.

"First time? First time for what?"

"Why don't you tell us, Padija Anjeri." Drake sat back in his chair and smiled. He made no effort to move or to leave the tavern, and indicated that reluctance with his slouched posture. To ensure she got his point, he crossed his legs and settled against the back of his chair, as if planning to hang around for a while.

Padija took a deep, shuddering breath. "I wasn't trying to trick you about the cargo," she began. "Myself, two other passengers, and—"

"And?" Drake interrupted.

"And this." Padija set the shoulder bag on her lap and opened the top slightly to allow what little light there was to fall on the crystalline object inside. Constructed of one mass globule of polished, white crystallite, the sculpted head of a Twi'lek emerged from the darkness of the canvas bag. It gleamed and brightened with each flicker of light, seeming to attract and retain the illumination deep within its core. Molded to the sides of the sculpture, the head tentacles fanned out and wrapped themselves about the neck of the crystal, forming an even base for it to sit upright.

"Nice rock," Drake whispered, feigning disinterest. "How much is it worth?"

Padija's face darkened, casting a pouting shadow over her attractive mouth and nose. "Can you put a price on the traditions and loyalty of a people? I think not." She quickly covered the sculpture and swung the bag over her shoulder.

"I could put a price on a lot of things," Drake whispered. "Including that rock of yours." Absently waving his cutting knife at her, he added, "Where'd you get it?"

"I was told you wouldn't ask too many questions." She folded her arms over her chest, glaring at the Socorran. "Do you want the job or not?"

Drake brushed a stray curl from his face. "I said, where'd you get it? And if I have to repeat myself again, I'll gladly give your money back and you can scratch gravel."

"I'm an anthropology student on sabbatical from my university on Issor. I came here because I suspected this artifact had been removed from a settlement on Ryloth without order of the museum curator for the purpose of selling it on the black market. I'm well within my rights," she said, "to appropriate its return to the museum immediately. Only," the tightness melted from her face,

"only I fear the men who originally stole it want it back." She eyed Drake sadly. "They want it quite badly. They might even kill to get it."

"Anthropology, huh? Is that a fancy word for stealing?"

"It's not stealing! It's the study of the origins of ancient species and cultures."

Drake continued to chew on his food, anxious to finish as much of it as he could before the insistent stranger pried him away from the gourmet meal. "Funny, you don't look like an anthropologist." He stared at the blaster pistol strapped at her thigh. It was a sporting blaster, an odd tool for an anthropology student to carry.

"In the course of my studies, Captain Paulsen, I often come across ignorant people." She straightened the gentle curvature of her spine, staring down her nose at the Socorran. "There are those who are so afraid of the truth, so fearful of the unknown that they would do anything to keep others, like me, from discovering it." She leaned against the table, her face only a few centimeters from Drake's. "Let's just say my blaster allows me to pursue my studies in peace."

Despite her naiveté, there was a vehement passion in her words that Drake was forced to admire. Dabbing at his mouth, he threw the napkin onto the table and stood up. "Well, I guess you got yourself a ship, Miss Anjeri."

"Call me Padija," she said, grinning, her whole demure changing before his eyes. She was again the innocent young woman who had walked into the bar looking for a way off the planet.

"All right," he sighed, "Padija. Where are your friends?"

"We're supposed to meet them on the corner of Bith and Kossh streets." She hurried toward the stairwell that led down into the bar. "Follow me."

Drake shrugged, staring at his food. He took one last bite of the Uln bird, savoring the taste. "Keep it warm, Feyo," he told the Corellian, "I'll be back for it."

"You got it, kid," Feyodor replied, waving them away. "It'll be here waiting for you."



It was well into the dawn hours. The last of the carnival fireworks had played themselves out, leaving behind a viscous ceiling of gray

Patricia A. Jackson

smoke. A thin drizzle of powdered debris fell from the skies, dusting the weary fair-goers. The fine ash covered their gaudy costumes and banners, signaling an end to the festivities. In segregated droves, the crowds broke into smaller segments and headed for the quiet shadows of their homes for continued celebration or peaceful slumber.

"I don't understand it," Padija whispered. Her nervous hands pulled at the canvas bag, wrinkling the shoulder of her flight jacket. "They should have been here by now. They're nearly an hour overdue."

Drake pursed his lips impatiently, offering her little comfort. Chewing on a mouthful of seed poppers, he winced as the sour aftertaste burned his overwhelmed tongue. Regretting the gourmet meal growing cold several blocks away, he frowned and tried to distract himself. The Socorran went to lean against the towering figure of his first mate. He stumbled backward a few steps as the Wookiee abruptly moved away from him. "What's with you?" he grumbled.

Nikaede's frantic voice was nearly drowned out in a renewed clatter of noise as a gang of youths galloped around the nearest



Illustration by Tom O'Neill

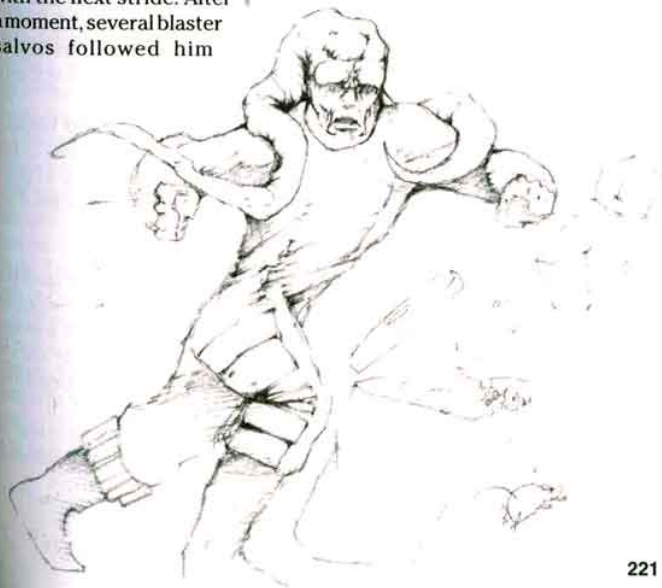
Idol Intentions

corner. They were dragging a string of popping firecrackers along the cobblestone. The resounding racket reverberated in the narrow streets and alcoves.

"Blaster fire?" Drake questioned his partner. As the rowdy children moved away and the din of the small shells faded, he heard it—the distinctive pulse of blaster rifles echoing in a nearby alleyway. Cautiously pulling loose the restraint over his heavy blaster, Drake stared into the night fog as the sound spread down into the street. He looked for signs of drunken moon worshippers, who might be continuing their celebration after hours by shooting randomly into the night sky. But the skies above and the streets below were clear.

He strained to see into the shadows of a narrow back-alley channel, where discarded trash and mounds of garbage had been thrown to either side of the deserted streets. Then momentarily, Drake saw a figure moving between the trash heaps. Head tentacles rebounding from his shoulders, the sprinting Twi'lek was dressed in an orange work tunic and flight leggings. In the shadows, the alien appeared to be a jester, prancing about in the dark for the pleasure of an unseen audience.

Hurdling the massive piles, the Twi'lek ran into the light again. His legs moved with heavy, exhausted steps as if he might collapse with the next stride. After a moment, several blaster salvos followed him



through the confined passage, scattering decomposing matter and incinerated garbage into the air around him.

"Halt!" came a filtered voice from the far shadows. The distant static of a comlink heightened Drake's apprehension. He froze instinctively, using the veil of darkness to his advantage as three Imperial stormtroopers emerged from the wall of smoke at the opposite end of the alley. In pursuit of their wearied quarry, they fired wild rounds into the empty streets. Their intentions were obvious, highlighted by their flagrant disregard for the personal safety of the Twi'lek or any other citizen who might accidentally step into harm's way.

As another round of blaster salvos lit the dark walls of the back city path, Drake heard the runner gasp softly as his body tensed with minute fits and convulsions. The stranger fell at Padija's feet, a blackened impact mark smoking from between his shoulders and the back of his tunic. Blood streaming from the corner of his mouth, the dying Twi'lek extended his arm toward Padija and pulled her down to him.

"Dr. Maa'cabe!" Padija said, quickly moving to his side. "Where's Colonel Renz?"

Maa'cabe shook his head and tried to raise himself up but failed, falling back into the collected trash. A strangled groan escaped his throat and his body convulsed violently, shuddering as if under a tremendous weight. After a moment, he was still.

"Dr. Maa'cabe!" Padija screamed. She squealed as a volley of blaster fire exploded around her. It forced her to jump back and away from the corpse.

Drake pulled Padija away from the Twi'lek's body and backed into another alley. He raised his hands, assuring the troopers of his intention to surrender. The Imperial soldiers slowed down to get a better look at the smuggler and his companions, then paused as they approached the Twi'lek's still form.

"What are you doing?" Padija whispered.

"Stalling," the smuggler replied behind a thin smile. He nodded to Nikaede, signaling the Wookiee to flank him on the left side. As the stormtroopers swung and leveled their blaster rifles toward them, the Socorran relaxed his shoulder, pivoting slightly on his right heel. Then abruptly, he dropped his shoulder and drew the heavy blaster from the holster with deadly accuracy.

As the first bolt exploded with green flame against the chest of the lead Imperial soldier, Drake was shoving Padija to the left side

against his first mate. He fired again. The impact from the blast knocked the second stormtrooper against the back wall and left him unconscious in a puddle of leaking sewage.

Dodging a wild ricochet from the remaining stormtrooper, Nikaede bumped Padija to the side and took a direct hit in the left shoulder. The Wookiee locked the bowcaster against her shoulder, bracing for the recoil, and bellowed a ferocious war cry as she fired. The bolt sprang from the modified trigger mechanism and shattered the stormtrooper's breastplate.

"There's going to be a lot of garbage today." Ducking into the alley, Drake pulled Padija into the shadows behind him. "Was that one of your passengers?" he asked, running farther into the narrow channel.

"Dr. Maa'cabe," she said, panting. She fumbled with the blaster at her thigh, drawing the weapon against her palm. As they continued their flight into the alley, Padija slipped and lost her footing on the damp surface of the cobblestone. Her blaster misfired as her finger reflexively pulled at the sensitive trigger.

Drake dropped to the ground, tucked, and rolled beneath the wild shot and the subsequent ricochet. "Watch what you're doing with that thing!" he shouted, pointing his blaster at her face.

As Padija started to say something back to him, her voice was cut off by renewed blaster fire. Nikaede pulled her to the side, allowing Drake a free shot at the Imperial stormtroopers pursuing them through the dark passage.

"You just watch what you're doing!" Padija screamed. She glared up at the Wookiee as Nikaede scooped her up and sprinted around a winding alley bend.

"Hey! Let me go. I can handle myself!" She struggled to free herself from the Wookiee's gentle but firm hold. Just then a blaster bolt exploded above her head, partially shattering the corner of the nearest building. It detonated with such a resounding force, Padija feared her eardrums were ruptured from the brunt of the explosion. Disoriented and confused, she slumped against Nikaede's warm body.

Outnumbered and outgunned, Drake took cover behind a mound of trash and fired nearly point-blank into the lead stormtrooper's chest. The Socorran raised his blaster and took several more random shots. As a barrage of return fire illuminated the alley, he lunged into the side passage and raced into the shadows after his partner, inadvertently bouncing off Nikaede.

"What are you just standing there for?" Drake snapped. He held his ground as a heated roar of vulgar Wookiee syllables brought the color to his cheeks.

Holding a swaying Padija in one hand and her bowcaster in the other, Nikaede stared up the four-meter high fence and bawled dejectedly, her melancholy voice echoing against the solid plasteel structure. Then, gently shaking Padija's shoulders, she howled in the young woman's face.

"This'll shake her out of it," Drake grunted. He pushed Padija against the wall, setting her hands out to each side of her. Then taking her leg, he gave her a boost toward the top of the fence.

"What are you..." her voice trailed off into a succession of disgruntled squeals as her body flipped over the top of the barrier.

Drake stood back, listening over the intrusive pounding of his heart. "Padija?" There was silence on the opposite side. "Padija? Are you all right?" Drake shouted, hearing the approaching footfalls of their pursuers.

"I'll get you for this, Drake Paulsen," a thin voice whispered. "Is this what you call 'special talent' at work?"

Drake grinned and put his blaster away. Nodding to Nikaede, he put his boot against the Wookiee's clasped hands and held on as she launched him over the side of the barrier. Careful to avoid the hunched shadow at the base of the fence, Drake dropped down to the other side. He again drew his blaster, scanning the streets for any sign of trouble. "Hurry up, Nik. It's clear."

Padija screamed as a loud clicking noise scrapped against the top of the plasteel wall, causing sparks to ignite. Climbing claws fully extended, Nikaede's snarling face appeared over the top of the wall, followed by her shoulders and then the rest of her body. The Wookiee threw her great bulk to the side and hopped down from the barrier. As she dropped to the ground and sank to her knees to absorb the concussion, a barrage of blaster bolts rained down on them, coming over the raised barrier. Several shots impacted with the wall itself, causing stress fractures to spiral out from the point of concussion.

"From the looks of that," Drake said, eyeing the shattered wall, "we can rule out being taken prisoner."

"What now?" Padija whispered as she followed the smuggler into the deserted street beyond the alley.

"Why don't you tell me, lady? You got us into this mess."

"Me? That's what I'm paying you for—"

Drake silenced her with a curt, dismissive gesture. Looking over her shoulders, he noticed a pair of Nightfalcon speeder bikes parked just inside a darkened overhang. The chain that once secured the entrance into the garage structure was blackened with blast scoring—evidence of a forced entry.

Dropping his blaster to thigh level to conceal it, Drake stepped out into the deserted street, sweeping his gaze from one end of the broad avenue to the other. "Get to it, Nikaede," he said, signaling her with a wave of his hand.

"Get to what?" Padija asked. Staring into the shadows as if something or someone might jump out at her, she clutched tightly at her shoulder bag. "What's she doing?"

The Wookiee disassembled the wire housing beneath the seat of the speeder bike. Sparks flew from the vehicle and the engine ignited with a loud clamor, prompting a snarl from the anxious Wookiee.

"She's getting us a ride out of here," Drake replied, testing the frame of the Aratech 74-Z speeder bike. He gunned the engine, toggling the sensitive throttle controls.

"Do you know how to ride one of these things?" she asked, warily climbing onto the seat behind him. "I've heard these things cause more fatalities every year—"

"Guess you'll just have to trust me," Drake smirked, the arrogance showing in his face.

"And just where are we going? The starport's probably swarming with Imperial troops by now."

"If my ship were docked in the port, I might be worried." He nodded as Nikaede brought the second speeder bike's engine online.

"I'm going to live to regret this," Padija whispered, her voice muffled against Drake's shoulders.

"Probably." He spun the throttle, holding onto the steering bar as the bike lurched into the streets.

Blaster bolts exploded over their heads, causing Nikaede to brake sharply to avoid being hit. The Wookiee's weight shifted without much warning, tipping the bike dangerously forward out of balance. She boosted the power to the repulsor engines to compensate and sped away after her partner.

"Keep your head down and do as I do," Drake yelled. "When I lean, you lean!" He felt her nodding her chin against his shoulder in reply. A ricochet danced across the pavement, showering molten

stone and debris across the tail section of their bikes. Drake leaned into the control panel and led the chase through the narrow, confining streets of the inner city. Dodging blaster fire, the Socorran swerved onto the main avenue and into the residential sections near the outskirts of the capital.

A pair of stormtroopers on repulsor sleds was waiting for them. Careening through the turn, Drake swore the worst of Socorran oaths as the Imperials opened fire on them. He gunned the throttle and accelerated around the next corner, struggling to keep control of the Aratech as it shifted wildly beneath their weight.

"What are you doing?" Padija shouted, ducking beneath the barrage of blaster fire. "This street is a dead end. Even I know that!"

"This calls for a little smuggler's sense," Drake yelled over the wind. "Hold on." He continued toward the looming barricade barring their escape. He grinned roguishly, feeling Padija's arms tightening at his waist. "This ought to shake them."

He adjusted the repulsorlift engine and hurdled the four-meter-tall barricade. Holding the bike controls steady, he dropped back to ground level and managed to turn in the air, leaving space for Nikaede to safely navigate the wall.

The leading Imperial rider miscalculated the maneuver. Drake winced as the stormtrooper slid through the dangerous turn and then crashed into the buildings on the opposite side of the barrier. The resulting explosion tripped up the next rider, sending him and his bike careening into the shadows at the base of the wall.

"Please tell me you have a plan," Padija buried her face against his shoulder.

"There's a smuggler's hideout in the woods. My father used to camp out there when the sector authorities got a little too close." Drake glanced over his shoulder to check on their pursuers. There were none. "We can make it to the hideout on foot, once we're clear of the city."

Slamming the brake mechanism, Drake skidded through an impromptu bootlegger's turn and into a main commons area and merchant square. Another squad of stormtroopers was waiting for them. Shielding his vehicle behind the blue spray of an elaborate fountain, Drake measured the distance he needed to cover between them and the city gate. He skirted the edge of the fountain and gunned the engines, tilting the bike to the side. The Aratech's engines bucked in protest, sending a wall of foam into the advancing squad. Momentarily blinding them, Drake took the advantage of



Illustration by Tom O'Neill

the temporary cease fire and accelerated toward the gates. He smiled as Nikaede kept tight formation on his right flank. Together, they hurdled the wall and accelerated into the open country beyond the capital.

Drake continued toward the forest, looming just ahead of them. The hidden entrance to the smuggler's alcove would be tucked away in the massive hollow of a fallen tree. And beneath it lay an intricate system of tunnel works that would lead them away to safety.

"Drake, we've got company!" Padija shouted. She pointed to a trio of Imperial stormtroopers, each mounted on a repulsorlift sled. They were firing randomly into the darkness, lured by the repulsor field emissions.

Near the entrance to the forest, a blaster bolt caught Drake's tail section and grounded the damaged bike. The Aratech shuddered, flipped forward, and somersaulted, leaving a trail of gray smoke behind it. Drake felt the nausea of sudden weightlessness as his body flew through the cold, night air. He heard Nikaede's distant, frantic screaming and a cacophony of renewed blaster fire.

With a splash, the bike landed in a small creek near the eastern edge of the forest. The wrecked vehicle then exploded with such force that Drake, even in his bewildered condition, struggled to cover his face and ears. He landed nearby in a thicket at the creek's edge. Rolling in the water reeds surrounding the shore, he came to a sudden halt as his head struck a rock. As the shallow water seeped into his jacket and pants, the young Socorran was still, pleasantly numbed by the blow to the head.

"Drake!" He heard Padija's panicked voice and then her hands on his face. Groaning miserably as the pain spiked at his temple, he rolled to his side.

"Drake, please snap out of it. They're coming!"

Drake heard the distinctive fire of a Wookiee bowcaster and recognized the boosted power modulation of Nikaede's modified weapon. The sound brought him back abruptly and he sat up, staring at Padija with a disconcerted expression on his face. There were a few scratch marks across her cheek, but she was no worse for wear. Then he felt the warm trickle of blood running from the corner of his temple.

"Drake?" Padija took a handkerchief from her pocket and quickly dabbed it into the cold water, wiping the blood from his face. "Drake, snap out of it."

Brushing her hand away, Drake shook the tangle of water reeds from his head and chest, then stood up. "I'll be fine," he slurred, still dazed from the fall. He swayed unsteadily, feeling her supporting hands at his shoulder. The explosion of a thrown grenade jump-started the Socorran's reflex. "Nikki! Let's go!" He jogged toward the interior of the forest, pulling Padija along beside him.

As Nikaede fell in stride behind them, he sped up the pace, searching the darkness for the hidden alcove. Drake took a glowrod from his belt and quickly scanned the nearby trees, searching for the opening that had brought Nikaede and him from the junkyard on the other side of the forest into the city limits. Abruptly, the beam of his light fell across a sudden splash of white-on-black armor. The Socorran threw himself and Padija to the side as the stormtrooper scouts opened fire. "Nikaede, get down!"

"How did they get here so fast?" Padija screamed as the troopers charged them.

"I don't know and I don't plan on asking them. Come on." He pulled her up from the ground, dodging a second barrage as Nikaede covered them.

They moved deeper into the shadowed woodland. As they circled a large tree, Padija stumbled over a snare of exposed roots and fell at Drake's heel. "Where is it? Where is this place?" she cried, her voice cracking.

"Back there," Drake grumbled. "The Boys In White were all but sitting on top of it. So much for losing them."

"What?" She slowly got to her feet, shaking the mud from her hands and wrists. "What are we going to do?"

Drake heard the fear in her voice. "Well, we can't stay out here." He drew his blaster and took a defensive position in the trees. Following Nikaede's instinctive gestures, he fired and brought down the leading scout. Across from him, standing in the branches of a nearby tree, Nikaede took cover and fired from the shadows, downing the second scout before he could retreat out of range.

"Are you crazy?" Padija hissed. "You can't fight them all off."

"Well, unless you've got a better idea," Drake retorted, "we're stuck here. There's no way we're going to outrun them on foot. And I don't know about you, but I certainly don't have any inclinations toward taking up mining in the Emperor's good name—"

His voice was cut short by a desperate scream beyond them. There was a peculiar pulsing sound ten meters beyond their position in the area where the alcove was hidden. As Drake stared through the skeletons of the trees, a slim, white shaft of light ripped through the darkness and struck down one of the advancing stormtroopers and then another before moving on to the next.

Padija recognized the distinctive sound of a lightsaber. "You're alive!" she cried. She started toward the figure, but Drake held her back. "It's okay," she whispered, gently brushing his hands away. "He's one of the passengers."

Drake slowly moved through the darkness toward the sound. He watched in spellbound fascination as the shadow wielding the lightsaber stepped directly into the field of fire, deflecting a barrage of blaster bolts. As the lightsaber traced a path of devastation through the darkness, its wielder converged on the next scout, slicing him through at the torso.

Through the thinning perimeter of trees, the five sister moons cast their brilliance on the surface below. Distracted by the sound of repulsor engines, Drake turned in time to see the stormtrooper who had followed them from the city. The Imperial's armor was still scuffed from his near miss at the base of the city-district barrier.

As the soldier raised his rifle to fire, Drake raised his blaster and

shot first. The bolt struck the undercarriage of the repulsorsled, detonating the engines. In a ball of orange and red flames, the stormtrooper's body was propelled several meters into the air. He smashed through a thick crosswork of tree branches before plummeting back to the ground.

Padija ran into the stranger's arms and embraced him. He was a handsome man in his early forties, wearing a brown cloak over the ruined garment of a carnival costume. There was a black scorch mark on his right shoulder, where he'd apparently been shot and wounded. As Padija held him, he slowly sank to his knees, dragging her to the ground with him. "Colonel Renz!" She brushed the grime from his face, struggling to support his weight against her slight frame. "I thought you were dead." Padija embraced him again, trembling.

"Dr. Maa'cabe?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Dead."

Renz nodded soberly, breathless from his injuries. "I felt the disturbance of his passing. A terrible loss, tragic. And the crystal skull?" He swayed unsteadily, bracing himself against a nearby tree.

"I still have it. You needn't worry. But what happened with you and Maa'cabe? I thought we were clear."

"Remember that Imperial captain we left for dead?" Renz smiled weakly. "Well he wasn't as dead as Maa'cabe thought. He identified us to the museum commissioner who put out an all-points-bulletin. They recognized Maa'cabe immediately."

"Well I got a smuggler to get us offworld. One of the best, the bartender assured me."

"Is he?" Renz managed to broaden his thin smile and glanced up at Drake. "I should think that I am indebted to you, Captain—"

"Drake," Padija interceded, "Captain Drake Paulsen. And that's his first mate, Nikaede."

"I owe you one, Captain Paulsen." Renz extended his hand, weakly shaking Drake's.

"Let's just call it even," Drake whispered, cautiously eyeing the cylindrical object in Renz's other hand. The Socorran quickly glanced about him, scanning the shadows. "I hate to break this up, but they'll be back. And I don't fancy staying on to greet them."

*** He scrambled up a small mound of underbrush, pulling himself up on a nearby tree branch. He examined the entrance to the underground hideout. The underbrush was in disarray, indicating where someone had fallen into the hidden channel below.

"I see you found my father's favorite hiding spot," Drake said. "Let's just say it was dumb luck." Renz groaned as he tried to sit up. Even with Padija's support, he could not get to his feet and slumped against her, exhausted from the effort.

"My ship's about five kilometers from here, eight once we work our way through the tunnels. I suggest we get back there and hide out until it's clear."

"Eight kilometers!" Padija quickly examined the wound using Drake's glowrod. "He'll never make it. It's too far."

"We'll all make it," Drake insisted. "Nik, get him up." He cautiously navigated the climb back down from the concealed entrance and helped the Wookiee hoist the injured man over her broad back. Taking a medpac from his first mate's waist pouch, he pulled Renz's ruined tunic aside and firmly pushed an emergency pressure bandage against his shoulder. Nikaede braced herself and held the man's arms as he flinched suddenly beneath the onslaught of pain that followed.

"That'll have to do for now. We can fix him up once we get farther into the tunnels."

"And what's to stop them from following us down?" Padija challenged.

"She's right," Renz said between clenched teeth. "This place is full of false corridors and forking passages. And unless you know the route—"

"And unless you know the route," Padija interrupted, "we could die in those tunnels. And no one would ever find our bodies."

"My father and I hid out here enough times that I could find my way in the dark." Winking at Padija, Drake picked up Nikaede's bowcaster and shouldered the heavy weapon. "Don't worry," he whispered, guiding her into the tunnel after his first mate. "We won't get lost, I promise."

He followed them into the alcove after securing the entrance, then led them down into the hidden passages below.



Dissipating into the upper atmosphere, the last thin covering of haze and smoke evaporated into the night skies above Omman. Twelve kilometers from the main starport, on the grounds of an abandoned repair facility, thirty or more exterior flight lots were

scattered haphazardly between dilapidated hangars, out-shelters, and the stripped, corroded remains of antiquated spacecraft left in the docks for scrap. Above the vacant docking moors and ghostly platforms, the five sister moons of Omman cast a rare, blue brilliance over the haunted phantoms of the junkyard and the hull of the *Steadfast*.

Padija stared despondently into the distant lights of the Capital City and frowned. From the top of the *Steadfast*, they had a clear view of the highest city structures, including the starport. A frenzy of activity encompassed the night skies above the port and the adjoining Meril Power Station. "Have you seen anything like it?" she asked distractedly.

"Like what?"

"The moons, silly," she replied, staring into the striking brilliance of the port and the backdrop of Omman's moons in the distance.

Leaning against the communications disk, Drake straightened his tall frame. "Nothing like it within a hundred light years or more."

Padija took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Do you think the Imperials will come looking for us here?"

"I doubt if they'll come out this far. The Empire's known for its single-mindedness. They'll concentrate their troops and ships on the starport, hoping that we'll try to sneak back into the city and then into the port." Drake followed her gaze to the lights of the Omman capital, sensing her anxiety and need for distraction. "How's the old man?"

"He's sleeping peacefully now. Nikaede offered to watch him for me." She turned her head slightly so as to hide the tear streaming down her cheek. "I needed to get some fresh air."

After a moment she mustered a thin smile. "Ouch," she whispered, noting the discoloration around his eye. "Did you do that falling off the speeder bike? I told you those things were dangerous. Let me have a look at that." She took the glowrod from Drake's belt and covered the light with her hand to shield them from discovery.

Squinting into the abrupt glare, Drake flinched at the gentle prodding of her fingers. Nearly a head taller than her, he tilted his chin upward in protest to the examination and tolerated her impatient glare with an impish grin.

"Be still!" she insisted, observing the bruise swelling at his temple and around his left eye. "That's going to swell shut in another hour. Do you have any chill packs?"

"In the medkit." He pointed to the small satchel laying beneath the laser turret. A bundle of bloody antiseptic wipes was laying beside it from where he had cleaned the superficial cuts suffered in the fall from the speeder bike. He winced as he gently ran his fingertips over the bruise.

Padija retrieved the chill pac and gave it a firm shake. The motion and a slap against her thigh activated the cooling solution inside. "So tell me something, Drake Paulsen." She pressed the pac gently against his face and held it there. "How did you know about that tunnel system and this abandoned repair port? Feyodor said you were a special talent. But I never suspected anyone could be this good."

Drake laughed, gasping sharply as the small cut in the corner of his mouth pulled. "When I was a kid, my father used to bring me along on his smuggling runs. Educational excursions, he used call them. He taught me everything I know, including when not to dock your ship in the main starport." The Socorran smiled down at her. "Especially if you're not looking to get hired for a job."

His humor was infectious, causing Padija to chuckle along with him. "He must be proud, your father."

"He would be, if he were alive."

Padija's face darkened abruptly. "Drake, I am so sorry. I had no intention to pry."

Drake tightened his smile and shook his head to lay her fears to rest. He took her hand gently in his, feeling a warm flush spread through his body when she did not pull away. "You needn't be sorry," he whispered. "The people responsible—they're the ones who should be sorry."

"Is that what put a price on your head?" Padija shivered as a night wind swept across the top of the freighter. She used that moment to move closer to the smuggler, encircling his thin waist with her arms.

"How do you know about that?"

"Told you," she giggled, "I paid good money to find some special talent. Feyodor volunteered that information. He was trying to scare me off, I think."

"Obviously it didn't work." Drake laughed, breathing in the sweet scent rising from her spiraled curls. "Well," he sighed, thinking of an explanation. "I happened to stumble onto one of the people responsible for killing my father. And let's just say Socorran edicts of retribution are quite strict about that sort of thing."

"Gylif fho ihn gylif."

"A life for a life. That's pretty good, where'd you learn that?"

"I took Old Corellian as a minor at the Issori university. But my professor," she shook her head dubiously, "could never have prepared me for this little side adventure. He'd have a coronary if he ever set foot down here and relived our escape from the city. This is the real history, Drake, not what you read about in those white-washed historical recordings."

"So what happened with your studies?"

"Professor Arner said I had a future, if I dropped all of my major courses and followed him across the galaxy to do field research." Laying her head against Drake's shoulder, she sighed. "I turned him down because it sounded too dangerous. Now look at me. I'm no better off." Padija laughed quietly. "I've had enough excitement in the last two weeks to last me three lifetimes. But no more, I'm going back to Issor as soon as this whole affair is over, dropping my courses, and finding myself a rich husband."

Drake grinned, running his hand through her hair. "What about your work with the museum?"

"What about it?" she replied curtly. "I never did like playing in the dirt. And I never ever want to see another dead body as long as I live. I don't care if it is 5,000 years old."

Adjusting the chill pac, Drake leaned his head against her forehead and laughed. "How will you know when you've met the right man? I mean, who knows? He might be waiting for you on some exotic excavation on the Outer Rim. And I'm sure if he's one of those anthropologist types, he won't have a whole lot of money. He might just be a smuggler—"

Padija gently put her finger to his lips, silencing him. "Aanor ishiia zals. That's what Professor Arner used to always say—love conquers all." Staring into his eyes, she wondered at the little boy hidden away in the Omman scrapyards with his smuggler father. Now a man and a smuggler himself, he held her in his arms beneath five full moons.

Padija stood on tiptoe and brushed her lips against his, kissing him gently at first, then with growing passion. As they parted, Padija leaned into her warm body against his. "Tell me about Socorro, Drake. What's it like?"

Drake closed his eyes, recovering from the intimate contact. He hesitated before replying, listening to the gentle whisper of her breathing. "Hot."

"How hot?"

"Very, very hot."

"And what do you do there...to get away from the heat?"

"Oh, we have ways," Drake whispered hoarsely, "to keep cool."

Nikaede's voice abruptly broke the rush of emotion between them. The Wookiee started to climb through the access hatch, then saw the two humans standing so closely together in the moonlight. She paused in shock, cut herself short, and quickly retreated into the shadows inside the ship, grumbling under her breath.

"What did she say?" Padija asked, still cradling her head against Drake.

The Socorran shook his head, forcing his knees to remain solid beneath him. "I wasn't listening." He bowed his head against Padija's, then gently moved away from her. "I have a feeling she's anxious to leave and I agree with her. We better not hang around any longer than we have to. Come on, let's see what they're up to above the starport."

Leading Padija by the hand, he stepped down into the *Steadfast's* access tunnel, helping her down the ladder and into lower corridor. Nikaede's hulking shadow was waiting in the wing. The Wookiee shook her head dubiously, looking from Drake to Padija, and then handed the lightsaber to her blushing captain. She bawled an abrupt insult that only Drake could understand and then returned to her station on the bridge.

Staring at the peculiar weapon, Drake asked, "Is Renz for real? A Jedi like in those cheap holo-comics?" He handed her the lightsaber, dodging her elbow as she retaliated for the imprudent comment.

"Of course he's for real! Before Senator Palpatine declared all the Jedi traitors of the New Order, the Jedi Knights were the most revered people in the society." She followed the smuggler into the corridor, holding his hand as he gently led her through the darkened passages. "My father fought in the Clone wars, you know? He was a hero. That's how he got his rank."

"Father?" Drake spat, turning on her. "Renz is your father? But your last name—"

"In Alderaan tradition, it's not unusual for the only daughter to take her mother's maiden name. Out of respect for the maternal side of the family." She paused as he just stared inanely at her. "What! Why are you looking at me like that?"

"You're just full of surprises, aren't you," he taunted, continuing through the passage.

Padija grinned astutely. "Helps keep the folks around me on their toes." She winked mischievously and proceeded to the end of the hall.

On the flight bridge, Drake paused at the navigation system, bringing the astrogation computer online. "Where do you need to go?"

"Derora. It's a small moon in the Birjis system."

"Derora it is." He punched in the coordinates. "It's going to take a while for the computer to coordinate a precise path into that system. We've never been there before and we want to make certain, right?" Drake winked at her. Seeing her smile, he sat down in his acceleration chair. "So tell us about this artifact you pinched. Why's the Empire so intent on getting it back."

Nikaede bawled her own curious questions about the idol. Resetting her control panel for pre-flight preparations, she craned her neck around to stare at Padija and the canvas bag sitting beneath her chair.

"Nikaede wants to know, too. She asked if having it was worth the life of your companion and the trouble we've been through." Glaring at the Wookiee, he pointed his finger at her, "Be nice," he gruffed in Socorran.

"It was very much worth it, Nikaede, and for reasons you will well appreciate." Padija said. "If Dr. Maa'cabe were here now, he'd tell you the same. The idol belongs to a very primitive, very old, militaristic clan of the Twi'lek people. They inhabit the darkest region of the planet, living in much the same manner as they existed 3,000 years ago. Supposedly," Padija shrugged, adding her own doubts to the statement, "the 1,000-year old ashes of an ancient Twi'lek hero were crystallized and the crystal itself sculpted in his likeness to honor him. According to Dr. Maa'cabe's research, there are two others that exist; and each skull presides over a certain ceremony of clan life—the Jasshi'rr, the Waala, and the Keysshi."

"Marriage, Law, and History," Drake translated.

Padija's smile widened. "Now who's full of surprises? In any case, Waala is the most important, being the law. Every major political decision is conferred on, agreed on, and enacted—but only in the presence of the skull."

"Why would that make the idol so important to the Empire?"

"Not just the Empire, but rather the Emperor himself. There were rumors the Rebel Alliance was pushing for an allegiance with the Twi'leks. Somehow the Empire heard about it and took action to



Illustration by Tom O'Neill

prevent the allegiance from happening."

"If the Emperor wanted to quell any possible dissension, he could have sent a fleet of Star Destroyers to Ryloth and decimated the entire Twi'lek population."

"But Ryloth is one of the Empire's biggest sources for slave labor, even though their Intelligence reports deny it. Why plunder the herd and the best stock when there's still work to be done. The Emperor sought to disunite the clans, causing civil unrest, not to destroy them."

"That's not hard to do with Twi'leks unfortunately."

"But without the idol, the Nercathi clan would be helpless, unable to act or agree among themselves or their neighbors. Their more industrial relatives don't care. When the Empire, or more likely the Hutts, come looking for slaves, the Nercathi are the logical choice because they have no guidance or leadership to defend themselves."

"So then what happened?"

"Well, six months ago the Rebel Alliance began holding secret meetings with the Twi'lek delegation in the hopes of reviving the chances of an allegiance. The Alliance negotiators were desperate and prepared to do anything to win over the Twi'leks, even if it meant finding this idol and stealing it back from the Empire."

"So they hired you?"

"And Dr. Maa'cabe and my father. The Emperor suspected the Alliance might make a move to recapture the idol, sealing the contract between the Twi'leks and Rebel factions. Several frauds were created to throw any agents off the trail. Only a trained archaeologist would know the difference, so it was a trained archaeologist they sent, in fact three, including myself."

"The Rebel Alliance, huh?"

Padija's face paled in the instrument lights flashing from the command module. "I failed to mention that, didn't I?" She shrugged apologetically.

Powering the *Steadfast's* engines, Drake toggled the individual flight switches and guided the ship up from the flight pad. Carefully monitoring the sensors, he set the astrogation computer as the freighter accelerated through Omman's upper atmosphere. The Socorran shook his head warily. Rebel Alliance? He and his first mate were lucky to even be alive. "So tell me, do you have any other surprises I should know about?"

Padija kissed him quickly on the cheek and then returned to her

chair to strap herself in. "Not yet, but if I think of any, I'll let you know."



Seated on a platform above the enormous sand-rock caverns of Derora, Drake stared out from the observation deck into the Rebel garrison and hangar bays. Eyeing the immense assortment of medium transports in the crowded docking arena, he shook his head in quiet fascination. Three bulk freighters and several slightly blast-scored Corellian Gunships were situated at the back of the docking facility near the fighter bays. Perched within the shadows of the massive ships, on a small platform, the *Steadfast* was a thin sliver of off-white metal. The Ghtroc freighter appeared to be a sand flea in the presence of its more formidable docking partners.

Drake closed his eyes and sat back, his belly warm and full of Rishi honeystix and roasted nerf meat. "Padija, that was delicious." Taking the napkin from his thigh, he dabbed at the corners of his mouth and tossed it onto his plate. He winked at Nikaede, laughing as the lethargic Wookiee gruffed a brief comment about the food. Drake could see the pain in her eyes, the agony of being completely and totally satiated.

Abruptly, the Wookiee belched, turning heads in the mess hall area. She rubbed her belly, soothing the ache of her distended stomach and belched again, this time more quietly.

"You need to take a nap," Drake teased. He turned to Padija and winked at her. "She always gets this way when she eats too much. Think she'd learn her lesson by now—"

The Socorran ducked a slow swat that brushed past his ears. Playfully, he blocked Nikaede's second attempt to strike him.

"I figured I owed you both a decent dinner," Padija said over a glass of Corellian mist wine. Dressed in a stunning red gown that complemented the flushed drink, she smiled warmly. "Oh look, they've arrived safely." She stood up, taking Drake's hand, and together they went to the extended pier over the flight deck.

Staring from the observation deck, they watched as a crowd of Alliance officers, dressed in full regalia, arrived at the garrison entrance, flanked by their escorts. Within moments, a delegation of Twi'leks walked into the bay. Colonel Renz appeared from the rank of Rebel officers, dressed in the traditional robes of a Jedi Knight.

His arm was in a sling, but that did not prevent him from carrying the felt red bag containing the crystal skull. With a bow, Renz presented the idol to the leading representative.

"So what now?" Drake asked. "They have their relic back. What does the Alliance gain for all its trouble?"

"Some loyal allies—"

"Twi'leks?" He laughed. "I've heard them called many things, but never loyal, Padija. They sell their own families into slavery."

"The spark of unification must start somewhere, Drake." She took his arm and leaned against him. "Today, it's one clan. Tomorrow, a city. In time, we might count on the Twi'lek homeworld as our ally."

"I wouldn't hold your breath."

Drake watched the formal ceremony with interest. While trying to maintain some semblance of calm, the Twi'lek delegate fumbled anxiously with the seals to open the carrier, nearly dropping the entire package in his haste. Renz deftly caught the bag, steadying the anxious Twi'lek. There was a moment of nervous laughter as the felt carrier was opened and the skull presented to the delegation for formal inspection.

A look of serenity spread across the faces of the lead Twi'lek representative and his associates. Each bowed in turn to the Alliance officers and Renz. Drake was certain that the thanks of an entire clan was being given at that illustrious moment.

Colonel Renz pointed to the observation deck inside the garrison. The Rebel officers and Twi'lek delegation followed his hand to where Padija and Drake stood above the hangar bays. It was not hard to make them out in the brilliant interior, particularly with Nikaede's towering silhouette standing at their side. With the same utter respect, each Twi'lek bowed in turn to them. Padija held Drake's hand tightly and curtsied as the Socorran inclined his head.

Then with ceremonious order, the Twi'lek delegation, at the invitation of the Alliance officers, paraded into the hangar and disappeared into a docking tunnel beneath the main flight bay.

"Where are they going?" Drake asked, bending over the rail to follow their shadows.

Padija playful brushed a curl from his forehead. "They're going to sign the first of several allegiances between the Twi'lek people and the Rebel Alliance." Her face was glowing with pride as she rocked back and forth on her heels and toes. "One more ally in the struggle against the Emperor. One more bright star to light the way

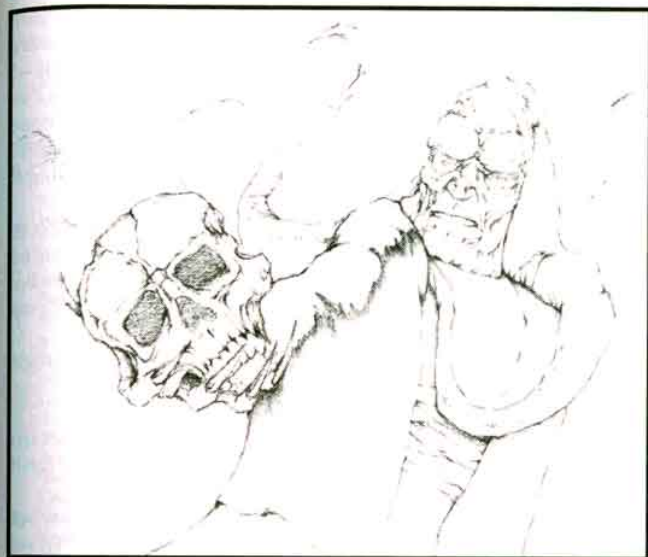


Illustration by Tom O'Neill

for others who wish to join us."

"Why weren't you down there? You're as much responsible for getting that idol off the planet as your father."

"I could have been there," she grinned mischievously, embracing him. "But I wanted to be with you. That was more important, at least to me. And my father agreed." Running her hands along the slope of his shoulders, she whispered, "General Cracken asked that you be there to meet the delegation as well, he thinks that you two," she smiled up at Nikaede, "are the true heroes. But," Padija coiled one his curls about her finger and tugged gently, "I read in one of my classes that Socorrans are a notoriously practical people who relish simplicity and avoid ceremony. I didn't think it would be appropriate to put you in a position where you might be uncomfortable."

Nikaede bawled a caustic response to the explanation, causing Drake to laugh outright. "Nikki says, you didn't ask her. Wookiees have no problem with ceremonies of that sort."

"Next time, Nikaede. I promise." As the smile faded from her lips, Padija stared into Drake's eyes. "The Alliance could use someone

like you, Drake. It's not often the Rebellion can afford to pay these kinds of fees, but General Cracken was ecstatic. He says you were worth every single credit. He's willing to pay you an additional—"

Drake kissed her suddenly, cutting off her appeal. "I think I've had enough idle intentions for one day, Padija. Besides, if you need me, you know where to find me. And tell Feyodor that you don't have to pay any extra creds next time." He signaled Nikaede that it was time to go.

Padija laid her head against his shoulder, forcing the smuggler to hesitate. Clearing the blur of tears from her eyes, she straightened and reluctantly stepped away from him. "Drake?" She bit her lip, fighting back tears as he moved past her to the stairs leading down into the bay. "How do Socorran's say good-bye?"

"Ol'val, that's Old Corellian. It's what smugglers use among their friends."

"But in Socorran, what do they say?"

"They don't." Drake smiled. "There are no such words. Socorrans believe that once you've met a person, you're destined to meet them again. No point in saying good-bye."

Padija nodded her understanding. She attempted to wave, but quickly put her hand down, lips trembling with emotion. "Ol'val then, Drake. Nikaede."

Nikaede barked a succinct farewell, but Drake was silent, staring at Padija. Then following the Wookiee's lead, he trotted down the stairs and into the bay toward his ship. At the ramp of the *Steadfast*, he turned to stare across the bay to the observation deck. She was still standing there, watching him.

Drake stepped into the interior corridor, lingering at the sight of her. The ramp closed with resounding finality, sealing her off from his vision. As Nikaede lumbered toward the flight bridge, Drake remained a moment longer in the passage. "Good-bye, Padija," he whispered. With a smile, the Socorran sauntered into the flight bridge to prep the *Steadfast* for lift off.

Roleplaying Game Statistics

■ Nikaede Celso

Type: Wookiee First Officer

DEXTERITY 2D+2

Bowcaster 5D, brawl parry 4D, dodge 3D+1, melee combat 3D, melee parry 3D, running 3D

KNOWLEDGE 2D+1

Alien species 3D+2, intimidation 4D, planetary systems 4D+1, streetwise 3D

MECHANICAL 3D

Astrogation 4D, beast riding 5D, communications 3D+2, sensors 4D+1, space transports 5D, starship gunnery 4D+1, starship shields 4D

PERCEPTION 2D+1

Con 3D+1, persuasion 3D+1, search 3D+2

STRENGTH 5D

Brawling 6D+1, lifting 6D, stamina 6D

TECHNICAL 2D+2

Blaster repair 4D+1, droid programming 4D, droid repair 4D, first aid 3D+2, space transports repair 6D+1, space transport repair: drive systems 7D

Special Abilities:

Berserker Rage: An enraged Wookiee gets a +2D bonus to *Strength* for causing damage while *brawling*, and suffers a -2D penalty to all non-*Strength* rolls.

Climbing Claws: Wookiees' claws give them a +2D bonus to their *climbing* skill.

This character is Force-sensitive.

Force Points: 2

Dark Side Points: 1

Character Points: 15

Move: 13

Equipment: Bowcaster (4D), miscellaneous repair tools, leather satchel

Capsule: A formidable 2.4 meters tall, large even by Wookiee definitions, Nikaede is a giant among her species. Despite her size, however, the Wookiee is an extremely clever and talented technician, working easily with numerous drive systems and small engine components. Her diligence and patience make her a primary candidate as first mate aboard the *Steadfast*. However, when pressed, the young Wookiee female has a tendency to whine and bemoan each crisis.

Born of a noble family on Kashyyyk, Nikaede was smuggled from her homeworld through the selfless sacrifice of her parents. An exile, she knows nothing of what happened to her family and friends on her homeworld. As a result, she has a tendency to bond with down-on-their-luck types. Usually cool and reserved, the sensitive Wookiee angers easily and shows little tolerance to those foolish enough to provoke her rage.

■ Drake Paulsen

Type: Young Pirate

DEXTERITY 3D+1

Blaster 4D, dodge 3D+2, melee combat 3D+2, pick pocket 4D, running 4D

KNOWLEDGE 2D+1

Alien species 3D, languages 4D+2, planetary systems 4D, streetwise 3D+2, survival 3D, survival: desert 3D+2

MECHANICAL 3D+2

Astrogation 4D+1, beast riding 4D+1, communications 3D+1, sensors 4D, space transports 4D, space transports: Ghtroc freighter 5D+2, starship



Illustration by Mike Viard

shields 4D+1, swoop operation 5D

PERCEPTION 3D

Bargain 3D+2, con 3D+1, forgery 3D+1, search 3D+1, sneak 3D+1

STRENGTH 3D

Brawling 4D+2, stamina 3D+1

TECHNICAL 2D+2

Blaster repair 3D, first aid 3D, space transport repair 4D+2, starship weapon repair 3D

Special Abilities:

Languages: Drake gets +1D to understand and interpret unfamiliar alien dialects.

This character is Force-sensitive.

Force Points: 4

Character Points: 15

Move: 10

Equipment: Heavy blaster pistol (5D), comlink

Capsule: Two years have passed since Drake Paulsen put the shadowy face of Socorro and the death of his father behind him. At 17, the tenacious smuggler has exploded onto the freelance commercial scene, gaining prominent recognition from legitimate, as well as underworld elements.

Drake is exotically handsome, with deeply tanned skin and haunted blue eyes. Having an innate talent for language acquisition, he had been smuggling with his father, Kaine "Chu'la" Paulsen, since he was five years old. Drake is modest in the face of his recent success, and shows a rare reluctance to delve too deeply into the dark underworld that fostered him through most of his childhood.

■ Padija Anjeri

Type: Rebel operative

DEXTERITY 3D+2

Blaster 4D, dodge 4D+1, running 5D

KNOWLEDGE 2D+3

Alien species 4D+1, cultures 5D, languages 4D+2, planetary systems 4D+1, streetwise 4D, value 5D, willpower 5D+1

MECHANICAL 3D

Beast riding 4D+2, communications 4D, sensors 4D, repulsorlift operation 4D+1

PERCEPTION 3D+2

Bargain 4D, con 4D, hide 4D, persuasion 5D+1, search 4D, sneak 4D

STRENGTH 2D+1

Brawling 3D+1, climbing/jumping 3D, security 4D+1, stamina 3D, swimming 4D

TECHNICAL 2D+2

Computer programming/repair 5D, droid programming 5D+1, first aid 4D

This character is Force-sensitive

Force Points: 3

Character Points: 11

Move: 10



Illustration by Mike Vilardi

Equipment: Sporting blaster (3D+1), anthropology tools for expeditions, datapad with detailed studies of excavations and historic facts, comlink

Capsule: Like many students at the Alderaan University, Padija Anjeri dreamed of danger and adventures beyond the claustrophobic walls of academia. Unfortunately, life as an anthropology student seemed devoid of such thrills. Unwilling to live out her days as a humble researcher, Padija jumped at the chance offered to her by her primary teacher, Dr. Oll Maccabe: the professor recruited her as an operative for the Rebel Alliance.

Horried by the galaxy-wide theft and destruction of historical sites and relics by the Galactic Empire, Padija put her studies to good use as a recovery agent. Despite her lack of experience in military matters, Padija's early efforts were successful, largely due to the seemingly endless supply of courage and effort she possesses.

■ Colonel Tyneir Renz

Type: Jedi Knight

DEXTERITY 2D+2

Blaster 6D+1, dodge 6D, lightsaber 8D+2, melee parry 6D, running 5D+2

KNOWLEDGE 3D+1

Alien species 7D, intimidation 6D+2, languages 6D, planetary systems 5D+2, survival 5D, willpower 7D+1

MECHANICAL 2D

Astrogation 5D+2, beast riding 5D, repulsorlift operation 6D, space transports 4D+2, starship shields 5D

PERCEPTION 3D+1

Bargain 4D, command 6D+2, investigation 6D, persuasion 5D+2, search 5D, sneak 5D+1

STRENGTH 2D+2

Brawling 5D+2, climbing/jumping 5D, stamina 6D, swimming 4D+2

TECHNICAL 2D

Computer programming/repair 5D+2, droid programming 4D, droid repair 3D+2, first aid 5D, security 6D+2

Special Abilities:

Force Skills: Control 2D+1, sense 2D, alter 2D+2

Control: Absorb/dissipate energy, control pain, emptiness, hibernation trance, remain conscious

Sense: Life detection, life sense, receptive telepathy, sense Force, sense path

Control and Sense: Lightsaber combat, projective telepathy

Control, Sense, and Alter: Affect mind

This character is Force-sensitive

Force Points: 3



Illustration by Tom O'Neill

Character Points: 15

Move: 10

Equipment: Lightsaber (5D), comlink

Capsule: Colonel Tyneir Renz became a part of the early resistance long before the Alliance had cohesively formed. As a hunted member of the Jedi Knights, his life was forfeit when the Emperor declared the Jedi traitors and ordered their extermination. While Renz was able to elude capture and execution, his homeworld of Jiaan was overrun and decimated. The attack claimed the lives of his wife and eldest son. Fortunately, Renz was able to arrive in time to save his baby daughter, Padija.

A student of archaeology and anthropology, Renz insisted that his daughter share his joy of ancient history. He sent her to live with his wife's family on Alderaan to complete her studies at the university. He never imagined that her studies would reunite them as Rebel field operatives.

Quelling his initial consternation, he welcomed his daughter into the ranks. Together, they work to recover relics that have been stolen by the Empire, often winning new allies for the Alliance in the process.



Illustration by Tom O'Neill

By Tom Pixley

Illustrations by Doug Shuler

The macrobinocular image shifted in and out of focus as the auto-ranging system futilely attempted to take an accurate reading through the blowing sands. Jax switched off the auto-focus and adjusted the controls himself as the Imperial landing pad came into view.

A squad of sandtroopers formed up outside the ship as the hatch dropped open. The first shackled prisoner stepped out and stumbled briefly as he took a dizzying breath of the spice-tainted air. Jax never understood the reaction of some off-worlders to Sevarcos atmosphere. To him the air always seemed sweet and invigorating after the cold, stale air of the off-worlder ships.

The prisoner regained his balance and moved forward as more prisoners were marched off the shuttle toward the underground mine entrance. Jax focused on each of the faces briefly, comparing them to the datapad at his side. Then he recognized one of them; a black-haired, broad-shouldered human who moved with steady steps toward the mine entrance, his head slowly turning as he took in his brief glimpse of Sevarcos's barren landscape before disappearing into the mine.

FESTIVAL OF THE HIGH WINDS

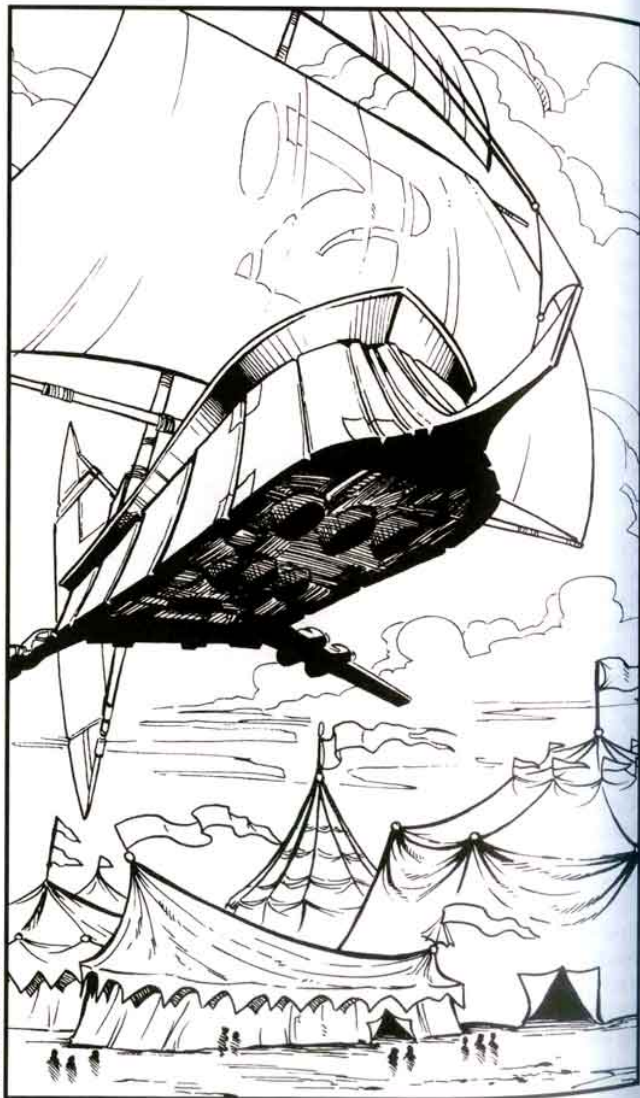


Illustration by Doug Shuler

At least the Rebel information was accurate this time.

Jax crawled back from the ridgeline as he thought about the last time he had helped the Rebels. The information they had relayed to him then had been completely faulty. But Jax knew the desert and he knew the Imperials. With some help from another nomad clan tracker he had located the target and almost saved the mission before the Rebel Ops team had arrived.

The blasted off-worlders with their "superior" technology and "superior" intellect—they certainly didn't need the help of a stupid desert-dweller so primitive he still used a slugthrower. Of course, who had saved them when their ship was shot down for flying in restricted airspace and their blasters overloaded from the sand storm?

Jax reached a small sand dune and grabbed at one side of it, revealing a small wind rider covered by a dust-coated tarp. As he raised the small mast and set out across the desert, he pondered who the Rebels might send after the last disastrous mission. Whoever it was, he hoped they'd be better able to adapt to Sevarcos than the last had.

This adventure takes place during the Festival of the High Winds, a yearly gathering of spice merchants, slavers, and crimelords on the Imperial prison and spice-mining planet of Sevarcos. All necessary information on Sevarcos is provided in this adventure; however, gamemasters wishing to expand on the adventure or provide additional background can refer to "The Free-Trader's Guide to Sevarcos" in *The Official Star Wars Adventure Journal* Issue #2.

The mission is best suited for four to six players. The *repulsorlift* operation and *repulsorlift repair* skills will both be very useful to the team. No other special skills are required, although characters should be skilled enough to defend themselves. Characters may use their own starship for this adventure—but if their ship has developed a notorious reputation, they may wish to use another.

The Imperial presence during this mission is tightly defined. It is unlikely characters will have previously met any of the Imperials. However, any underworld smuggling contacts the characters might possess can be incorporated in the scenes at the festival. Gamemasters may also wish to add both friendly and hostile elements from their campaigns, making the characters' cover harder to maintain.

As the adventure begins, the characters are gathered in the back room of a seedy bar on the planet Marotan. They have been

instructed to meet a Rebel contact here, pick up some information, and return it to Rebel Command. Their contact informs them that the agent providing the data has been captured and sent to Sevarcos. The characters are charged with the rescue of the operative and the vital information he carries.

Episode One: The Festival Begins

The characters have come to the spartan back room of the Dark Nova, a low-price, low-class bar on the southern continent of Marotan. A lone human seated at a large table glances at them with a look of recognition, and motions them to sit.

Read aloud:

"All right, sit down and listen up. We don't have a lot of time. The information you were supposed to pick up has been lost with the agent who was carrying it. The agent, Carter Escalon, was caught while attempting to leave Coruscant with the data. The Imperials didn't find the information, but they sent him to Sevarcos, a high-security prison and spice-mining planet. Since getting in and out of Sevarcos unnoticed is next to impossible, I've done some quick work and arranged a cover for you.

"Every year the Spice Lords of Sevarcos and the merchants they deal with get together on Sevarcos for the Festival of the High Winds. Information is exchanged and deals are made, but more importantly for you, one of the events is a wind rider race. Wind riders are pretty much wind-propelled repulsorlifts and they're big tradition with the locals there. Whoever wins the race earns high respect—and fat deals—from the Spice Lords.

"A local, small-time smuggler by the name of Ray Carantar has been invited to attend. He's hoping to win in the race, so hired a heavy team to crew his wind rider. I detained the real crew. You're the new team. I built you up a lot, so I hope you can live up to it.

"We've got a man on Sevarcos, a nomad called Jax Seldam. He'll find you during the race and show you where Escalon is being held. He'll help you if he can, but don't expect much—the natives aren't very advanced. They haven't even gotten past slugthrowers.

"By the way, Carantar couldn't afford a crew and servants, so you're pulling double duty. Just keep him happy, whatever he wants. He doesn't have any sympathy for the Alliance, and he'll

likely turn you in if he figures out who you are. So stick to your cover.

"Now get going. Carantar's waiting for you at your docking bay—and you're late."

The contact slides a datapad across the table and gets up to leave. The datapad contains the Alliance Intelligence file on Sevarcos. Characters making a Difficult *planetary systems* roll can find out additional information on military strength and the political situation on Sevarcos. The contact answers any quick questions as he leaves, but does not know much beyond the information in the datapad file.

The characters hurry to their docking bay, where they find a fuming Ray Carantar waiting for them with a lot of baggage.

Read aloud:

"Forty minutes late! I've half a mind to dock your pay. Well, never mind, just get my things aboard. I don't want to be the last one to arrive at the festival. I've made arrangements for the use of a wind rider on-planet so we'll not be wasting time loading one now.

"Now, if you'll escort me to my cabin I'd like to get some rest. I'll expect my dinner served promptly at eight."

If the characters do not promptly obey his commands, Carantar begins ranting at them again. He expects nothing less than top-of-the-line service from his hirelings. His expectations for the trip to and from Sevarcos include a spotless single cabin, gourmet food, a personal bodyguard on planet, and entertainment during the journey. If any of these do not meet with his satisfaction, the characters hear about it in detail, as does anyone else with whom Carantar speaks.

The jump to Sevarcos is only three days, but to the characters it should seem like a very long three days. They can attempt to actually provide what Carantar wishes or con him into believing they're doing their best to serve his needs. The characters need the smuggler both to act as their cover and to give the proper clearance codes for entry and exit from the Sevarcos system. He has memorized the codes and does not divulge them willingly. If Carantar begins to suspect that the characters are Rebels, he attempts to hide his doubts until he can talk to Imperial forces on Sevarcos.

Alliance Intelligence File #61428

Subject: Sevarcos, System Summary

Environment: Sevarcos is a desert-like planet. It has both flowing dunes and high rock escarpments. Spice is present in trace amounts in both the air and water. While not harmful, it affects off-worlders in small ways such as dizziness, nausea, and euphoria. A native population was found on planet, though it is suspected they might be descendants of an ancient Old Republic mission and not truly indigenous. Wild lifeforms include large spice worms that dwell in tunnels beneath the surface, causing a danger to many of the mining operations.

Government: The Sevari have a clan-based social structure. The most noted of these clans are those of the three Spice Lords: Lord Rha, Lady Trevael, and Lord Quintas. The Spice Lords are the main planetary government. However, a number of other clans exist, including some small nomadic tribes who roam the desert hunting the spice worms and salvaging ships and machinery. Due to a prevailing attitude of resentment for Imperial interference, many of the clans, including Lady Trevael's, may be sympathetic to the Alliance cause.

Imperial Presence: The Imperial presence on Sevarcos is economic and military, but not openly political. There is no Imperial Governor, only an Imperial Commandant. However, the Imperials control the spice trade, including availability, permits, and quantity—and that is how they maintain their power.

Sevarcos is also the largest prison in the sector. Due to the prison and the spice trade, the system is classified as highly restricted and has a large starfighter force to patrol and defend the system.

Exports: There are two types of spice on Sevarcos: andris and carsunum. Andris is fairly mild and often used in food preparation, while carsunum is a heavy drug with strange properties. Carsunum is very hard to come by. To own it is a symbol of wealth and power. It is mined deep in the spice tunnels by slave laborers generally acquired from the Empire. The life expectancy in the mines is very short—only a few months—due to the fact that prolonged exposure to spice is generally fatal.

Transportation: The primary form of native transportation on Sevarcos is the wind rider—a repulsorlift vehicle without a powered drive system. It relies on sails and wind for propulsion. Wind riders are often equipped with primitive weapons such as ballistae and flashgun cannons for use in fighting enemies on the open deserts. Imperial forces on the planet use modern repulsorcraft, giving them a military advantage over the natives.

Weapons: The main weapon on the planet is the flashpistol, an archaic slugthrower. Far inferior to our blasters, the flashpistol takes at least five seconds to reload and has a very limited range. However, the natives choose the flashpistol over the blaster because blasters are unreliable in the sandy environment. During a sand storm, the charged sand particles have been known to cause short circuits and even explosions.

The Festival of the High Winds: The influential and the hopeful gather together to talk and deal once a year. Politics and sport abound during the three-day festival. The major event, however, is the wind rider race.

Addendum #8798A7F42: The race has been won for the past three years, as well as many times in years before, by Lord Rha. He is the favorite again this year.

■ Ray Carantar

Type: Minor Crime Lord

DEXTERITY 3D

Blaster 4D, dodge 5D

KNOWLEDGE 3D+2

Bureaucracy 5D, planetary systems:

Marotan 5D, streetwise 6D+2, willpower

5D

MECHANICAL 2D+2

Repulsorlift operation 3D+2

PERCEPTION 4D

Bargain 5D, con 4D+2

STRENGTH 2D+2

TECHNICAL 2D

Character Points: 2

Move: 10

Equipment: Comlink, hold-out blaster (3D)

Capsule: A major player in the small Marotan crime scene, Ray Carantar has grand plans and schemes in the works. It took many favors and many more credits to get himself invited to the festival on Sevarcos, but it will all be worth it in the end. As far as he's concerned, *he* should be in charge of the spice trade in his sector anyway. He just has to convince the Spice Lords of that.

Carantar tries to look the part of the typical crime lord, wearing clothing and jewelry considered by many to be gaudy and ostentatious. He likes the finer things in life, and is quick to complain and demand when they are not available. But those dealing with him rarely take him for the fool. He may not be as powerful as his other criminal peers, but the greedy look in his eyes belies his greater ambitions.

Arriving at the Festival Site

Upon arriving in the Sevarcos system, the characters immediately see the large Imperial force stationed in the vicinity. An asteroid belt surrounds the system, providing the only real hiding place for smugglers. Farther in-system, a number of frigates and a Star Destroyer are on patrol. As soon as the ship arrives in the system, its clearance code is requested. If the characters respond with Carantar's code, they receive a course vector and are allowed to proceed.

As they pass over the asteroid belt, they occasionally see within it groups of TIE interceptors playing a dangerous game of follow-the-mynock-through-the-asteroid-field at high speeds. A few Skipray blastboats watch from nearby. If in relatively good spirits, Carantar mentions that these pilots are known as Fate's Judges, members of an elite TIE squadron.

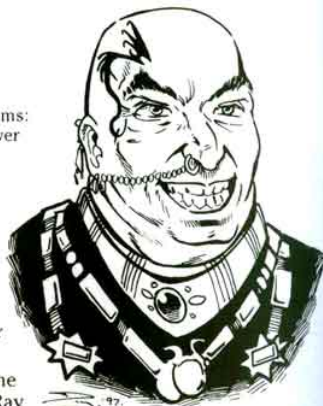


Illustration by Doug Struier

As the ship approaches the planet, a second communication with planetary traffic control provides the characters with a new course vector for a landing area near the festival site. They are warned that only a three-degree deviation is permitted from the vector. As they fly down to the surface, any character near a viewport can see TIE patrols in groups of four moving through the upper atmosphere.

The landing site is a crude and obviously temporary facility near a large tent-city erected for the festival. The festival area itself is a rush of dozens of colors. The wind coming off the desert whips through the many banners and tents, creating the impression that the whole city is moving with the wind. Upon stepping out of the ship, the characters are assaulted by the pungent scent of spice. Some may feel a momentary dizziness or nausea, but it passes quickly. The ship is greeted by a Sevarcos native who escorts them to their tent.

In leaving the temporary starport, the characters pass through an Imperial checkpoint before reaching the main festival compound. The officer only glances at them before waving them on—but to one side another spacer entering the starport area is being searched thoroughly.

The city is every bit as colorful up close as from far away. However, while characters walk through the city, they notice that the colors are carefully divided. Groups of people are generally found to be wearing the same color scheme. Characters making Moderate *Perception* checks note that some of the groups seem to be purposely avoiding each other.

As their guide leads them through the center of the tent city, they pass the amphitheater, apparently formed from a natural rock formation. A stage has been erected at one end of the large, bowl-shaped depression.

Carantar has been assigned a modestly sized tent on the outskirts of the city. The tent is sparsely furnished, with a curtained side containing a single bed. On the other side sit a number of sleeping pallets for the characters.

Six tents away, characters can see the bright colors turn suddenly to stark sands leading off into the desert—the edge of the festival encampment. Characters making a Moderate *Perception* roll also see occasional sandtrooper patrols watching the edge of the city.

Before leaving, their escort gives the characters a datapad containing a map and the rules for the race. The race course consists of four legs with the start and finish at the tent city. The racers must round three checkpoints before returning to the encampment. Completion of each leg is monitored visually by representatives of each of the Spice Lords. Racers must return to the city by sundown to complete the race. The winner is the *owner* of the first wind rider to pass all the checkpoints and return to the city. Although wind riders use repulsors to stay "afloat," they must rely on wind power to race—no repulsorlift propulsion systems are allowed for thrust. Opponents' wind riders may not be attacked before the race begins. No other rules apply. A final note is added that the Imperials have donated a number of hover-cams this year which will be scattered through the race course. They will transmit highlights of the race back to the Festival site for everyone to enjoy.

Characters wishing to wander the tent city may do so. Their wind rider is being transported from the south by a group of natives and will not arrive until tomorrow morning. Ray insists that two of them accompany him to the Opening Ceremony in the evening. Until that time they are free to do as they please.

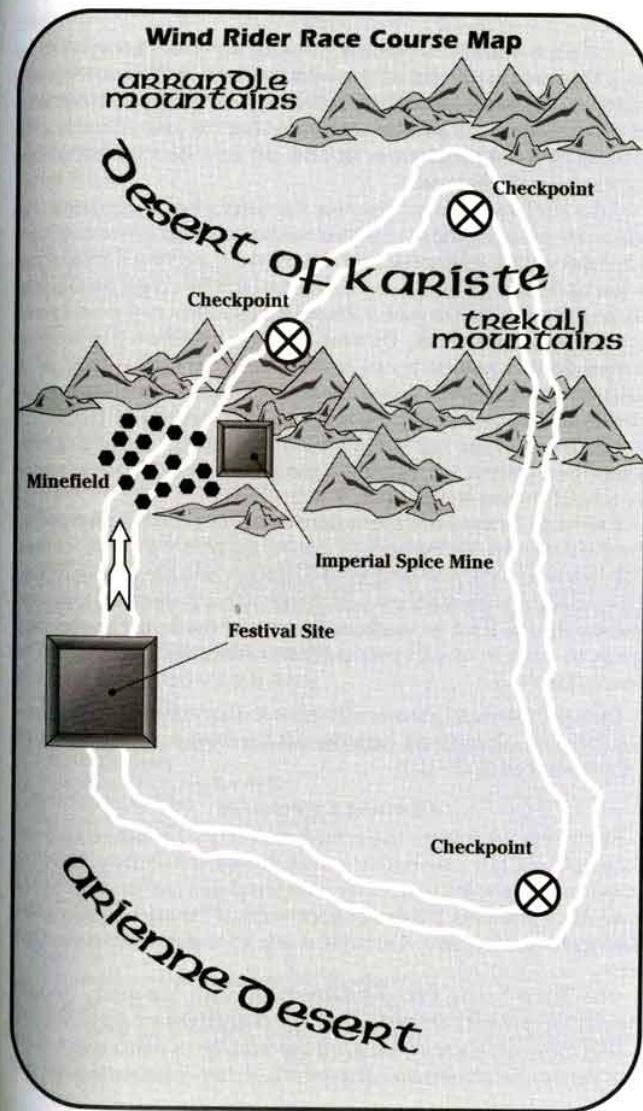
Possible encounters:

Vendors and Merchants

The tent city is littered with merchants hawking their wares. Stalls selling local garb can be found alongside small fire pits offering local cuisine. Natives can also be found selling desert survival gear to spacers, though much of it is not really necessary. There are no flashpistols being displayed, but characters making a Moderate *streetwise* roll will find them being offered at about double normal cost.

The Opposition

Each of the other wind rider teams can be found at their assigned tents. Many of them are making last minute adjustments and repairs to their wind riders. Most react coldly to the characters if approached. Attempts to gain access to their wind riders are met with physical opposition. Although the rules prohibit any tampering with opponents' ships before the race begins, the natives do not trust off-worlders and take measures to ensure the security of their vessels.



Bars

There are a number of tents in the city which are being used as bars. However, if the characters wish to go out carousing they will find that only one is allowing spacers to enter. There is no name or identification on the outside of the tent, but the characters notice spacers and natives coming in and out and hear laughter and conversation from inside.

If the characters enter, they see the interior of a large tent. No tables are present, those inside are sitting on rugs. On the left are a number of tapped barrels and a 'bartender' serving the patrons. In the back, a large board can be seen which has team names and odds posted on it. Current odds start at 1:1 for Lord Rha. Listed second is Lady Trevael. Quintas and the Imperials are slightly farther down. Carantar is not listed. A native stands in front of it, apparently taking bets. If the characters ask about their team, the bookie laughs, takes their money, and lists Carantar at 100:1.

The mood in the bar is loud, but calm, except for one corner where two natives are playing a game with Curva-blades, small, circular throwing weapons.

If any characters have spent time examining the competition at the Festival, they recognize the men as Quintas's by their colors. The two men have just beaten two spacers and are loudly letting everyone know. They accept a challenge if the characters offer one. Quintas's men tend to laugh under their breath at spacers and speak to them in condescending tones. They fight if attacked or greatly insulted.

Quintas's Men. All stats are 2D except: *Dexterity 4D, curva-blade 5D, dodge 5D, Strength 3D, brawling 4D, brawling parry 4D.* Move 10. 3 Curva-Blades (STR+1D).

Opening Ceremonies

Ray leaves on time for the ceremonies. If none of the characters accompanies him, he raises a commotion, eventually bringing guards to investigate. A number of entertainers are on stage at the opening ceremonies, but more importantly all the main gamemaster characters are present. Carantar wants to mingle and make contacts.

The Spice Lords talk disinterestedly with Carantar, quickly moving on to other conversations. The characters are also ignored, unless they somehow distinguish themselves as being more than servants or wind sailors. Any or all of the information in the

biographies can be gleaned from conversation at the ceremonies.

After the ceremony, Carantar is a bit crestfallen at the lack of note given to him. After returning to his tent he announces to the characters that he will personally ride aboard the wind rider during the race in order to boost his standing with the Spice Lords. The characters can try to talk Carantar out of going, but he is quite determined.

Planetary Commandant Raftin

Type: Imperial Planetary Commandant

DEXTERITY 2D+2

Blaster 3D+2, dodge 4D+2

KNOWLEDGE 4D

Bureaucracy 6D, culture 5D, law enforcement 5D

MECHANICAL 3D+1

Repulsorlift operation 4D+1

PERCEPTION 3D

Command 5D, persuasion 5D

STRENGTH 2D+2

TECHNICAL 2D+1

Character Points: 6

Move: 10

Equipment: Blaster pistol (4D), comlink

Capsule: Raftin is an arrogant man, secure in the might of the Empire and its power over the galaxy. He would like to see himself put fully in charge of Sevarcos instead of allowing the Spice Lords the power they currently possess. He has been working toward that end since being appointed planetary commandant fairly recently. Since that time he has implemented numerous new security measures, including the erection of several new Imperial garrisons.

Lord Cassius Nolath Rha

Type: Spice Lord

DEXTERITY 3D

Archaic guns: flashpistol 7D, dodge 7D, melee combat 6D+2, melee parry 6D

KNOWLEDGE 4D

Business 6D, cultures: Sevari 9D

MECHANICAL 2D+2

Repulsorlift operation: wind rider 6D+1

PERCEPTION 3D+1

Command 6D+2, Persuasion 5D+1

STRENGTH 3D

Brawling 5D+2

TECHNICAL 2D

Character Points: 10

Move: 10

Equipment: Comlink, flashpistol (4D+2), vibroblade (STR+3D).

Capsule: The most vicious of the three Spice Lords, Lord Rha is also unarguably the strongest. Both Lady Trevael and Lord Quintas guardedly plot to bring him down. He is loyal to the Empire but only as long as the spice continues to flow. His entry in the festival is favored to win

the race. He travels in a large galley manned by hundreds of prisoners and guarded by a fanatically loyal group of bodyguards called the Spice Blades.

■ Lord Quintas of the Southern Deserts

Type: Spice Lord

DEXTERITY 3D

Archaic guns: flashpistol 5D, dodge 5D, melee combat 4D, thrown weapons: curva blade 5D

KNOWLEDGE 3D+2

Business 5D+2, cultures: Sevari 6D+2

MECHANICAL 2D+1

Repulsorlift operation: wind rider 4D+1

PERCEPTION 4D

Bargain 6D, command 5D, con 5D, gambling 6D

STRENGTH 3D+1

Brawling 4D

TECHNICAL 1D+2

Character Points: 7

Move: 10

Equipment: Curva blade (STR+1D)

Special abilities:

Curva Blade Skill: Quintas and those of his clan gain +1D when using this weapon.

Capsule: Lord Quintas's jolly outward appearance belies his underhanded nature. He often hides his ploys and propositions under his laughter. He switches sides often while attempting to advance his interests.

Quintas's clans roam the Southern Deserts mining spice with Imperial labor. The nomads in the south claim he is allowing huge desert areas to be devastated by the Empire is his lust for wealth, and a feud has developed between them.

This year he is allowing his son to lead the clan in the Festival race as a sign of his coming of age.

■ Lady Trevaal of the Northern Frontier

Type: Spice Lord

DEXTERITY 3D

Archaic guns: flashpistol 6D+2, dodge 6D, melee combat 5D+1, melee parry 5D

KNOWLEDGE 2D+2

Business 5D+2, cultures: Sevari 5D+2,

MECHANICAL 3D

Repulsorlift operation: wind rider 6D

PERCEPTION 3D

Bargain 5D, command 5D+2, persuasion 5D

STRENGTH 2D+2

Brawling 4D

TECHNICAL 2D

Character Points: 8

Move: 10

Equipment: Flashpistol (4D+2), vibroblade (STR+3D)

Capsule: Lady Trevaal and her people are a rugged group who live in the Northern Mountains. Her clan is one of the few that has remained reasonably free of Imperial control, largely due to her own fierce and

unbending manner. Hers is the only clan not to use slave labor in its mining.

Though she usually chooses to personally pilot her clan's wind rider, this year she has chosen to stay at the ceremonies to oppose the growing Imperial control of the planet's spice resources.

Episode Two: Soaring the Deserts of Sevarcos

The night passes uneventfully for the characters after the day's encounters. Their wind rider arrives about half an hour before the race and is rushed to its position on the starting line. Ray hurries off toward the wind rider, calling the characters after him.

Read aloud:

As you move toward the starting area, the crowds and clamor increase. Pushing through the throng, you finally break free onto the starting line. Arrayed out from the city is a line of wind riders, sails flapping in the morning breeze. Clustered nearby are the majestic wind riders of the Spice Lords, their owners standing nearby. The line continues off into the desert, with the wind riders decreasing in size.

Ray explains. "The teams are arranged by order of importance. My rider should be just a little ways down," he says as he begins to walk down the line.

It's a long walk.

The wind riders need a crew of at least two to fly. The lead operator is strapped into a harness from which he controls the sails and attempts to keep them filled by catching the strongest winds. The assistant operator stands at the back and operates the tiller which controls the direction of flight via large air rudders underneath the craft. The lead operator's *repulsorlift operation* skill plus the die code of the assistant operator's *repulsorlift operation* skill gives the total crew skill. This is rolled throughout the race to judge how the characters are doing.

Each wind rider is required to make a *repulsorlift operation* roll at the beginning of each leg. The gamemaster should keep track of the positions of the Spice Lords and the Imperial craft in addition to the characters' wind rider. These positions are determined based on the performance of each crew.

The race has 80 participants. As the characters look at the ships they pass, they notice a number of ballistae on the opponents' ships. The occasional wind rider even has a catapult. The ships of

the three Spice Lords are all quite well armed and carry a number of troops. The Imperial vehicle has a number of sandtroopers on board armed with blaster rifles and a large tarp covering something mounted on the raised aft-deck.

Opponent's Wind Riders and Crew

Note: Repulsorlift operation skills given include both lead and assistant operator's skills.

Lord Rha's Wind Rider. Speeder, crew skill: *repulsorlift operation* 6D+5, archaic weapons: flashcannon 6D, maneuverability 1D+2, move 45, body strength 4D. Weapons: 2 flash cannons (fire control 0D, 3-50/150/300, damage 4D)

12 Lord Rha's Spice Blades. All stats are 2D except: *Dexterity* 4D, archaic guns: flashpistol 5D, *dodge* 7D, *melee combat* 7D, *melee parry* 6D, *Strength* 4D+2, *brawling* 6D+2, *climbing/jumping* 6D. Move 10. Flashrifle (5D), heavy vibroblade (STR+3D+2, maximum damage 6D+2), 4 throwing knives (STR+1D), spice respiratory apparatus (gives +1D to Strength and Dexterity for one round).

Lady Trevael's Wind Rider. Speeder, crew skill: *repulsorlift operation* 6D+5, archaic weapons: crossbows 5D+1, maneuverability 2D, move 45, body strength 4D. Weapons: 2 heavy ballistae (fire control 0D, 3-30/100/200, damage 3D+1)

8 Lady Trevael's Warriors. All stats are 2D except: *Dexterity* 4D, archaic guns: flashpistol 5D+2, *dodge* 6D+2, *melee combat* 6D, *melee parry* 5D+2, *Strength* 4D, *brawling* 6D, *climbing/jumping* 5D. Move 10. Flashpistol (4D), vibroblade (STR+3D).

Lord Quintas's Wind Rider. Speeder, crew skill: *repulsorlift operation* 5D+5, archaic weapons: crossbows 5D, maneuverability 1D+2, move 40, body strength 3D+2. Weapons: 2 medium ballistae (fire control 0D, 3-25/75/125, damage 2D+2)

10 Lord Quintas's Troops. All stats are 2D except: *Dexterity* 3D, *curva-blade* 5D, archaic guns: flashpistol 4D+2, *dodge* 6D, *melee combat* 5D+2, *melee parry* 5D, *Strength* 4D, *brawling* 5D. Move 10. Flashpistol (4D), 3 curva-blades (STR+1D), vibroblade (STR+3D).

Imperial Wind Rider. Speeder, crew skill: *repulsorlift operation* 4D+5, *vehicle blasters* 4D, maneuverability 1D, move 40, body strength 4D+2. Weapons: medium repeating blaster (fire control 1D, 3-75/200/500 damage 4D)

10 Imperial Sand Troopers. All stats are 2D except: *Dexterity* 3D,

blaster 4D, *dodge* 4D, *Strength* 3D, *brawling* 4D. Move 10. Blaster rifle (5D), sandtrooper armor (+1D Strength for damage purposes only).

Unless the character's have talked him out of it, Ray still seems quite determined to ride in the race. He feels that the honor he can gain with the Spice Lords is worth the risk. His enthusiasm, however, turns to anxiety at the sight of the wind rider.

■ Falko's Spear

Craft: Personal Wind Rider
Type: Wind-propelled repulsorlift vehicle
Scale: Speeder
Length: 10 meters
Skill: Repulsorlift operation: wind rider
Crew: 2
Passengers: 4-8
Cargo Capacity: 0.5 metric tons
Cover: 1/4
Altitude Range: Ground level-10 meters
Cost: 2600 credits
Maneuverability: None
Move: 35; 100 kmh
Body Strength: 2D
Weapons: None

Capsule: *Falko's Spear* seems hardly deserving of its name upon even the most casual inspection. The large patches holding together its hull and the shattered remains of a ballista-mount speak badly for *Falko's* fate. However, it seems flight-worthy and has now apparently been converted for cargo hauling. The ship has been loaded with water and rations. In addition, various compartments on the ship contain basic supplies such as hull patches, an extra sail, a grounding anchor, grappling hooks and other such materials.

Carantar suggests that the characters make as quick a start as possible once the race begins. He mentions that a number of ships each year start fighting right at the beginning and are disabled before leaving the start line. The smart racers, he says, leave their fighting until there is more room to maneuver. An important piece of advice, since it should be remembered the race in won by the *wind rider* that finishes the race, not the crew. The player characters cannot change ships in the middle of the race, although they can raid other wind riders for parts if theirs is damaged.

Carantar gets a sly smile on his face and mentions that he made a substantial wager on the race. If the characters win, he'll throwing in a ten thousand credit bonus for them.

Read aloud:

An unseen signal at the top of the line ripples through the racers, bringing a tense silence to the crews. The racers to either

side stand rigid at the controls of their vessels. The sound of a ballista cranking in firing position is heard a few ships over. The morning quiet extends over the wind riders when suddenly a bright flash erupts near the front of the line. A moment later the thunder of the starting cannon echoes through the area and the teams rush into action raising their sails.

The beginning of the race is a dangerous time. Although the teams of real importance do not start fighting immediately, many of the lower-ranking teams do. Unfortunately for the characters, these are the wind riders near them. If they can outdistance them, the characters only have to dodge a few shots. If not, they have to fight their way free. Sevari wind riders that get in range attempt to board the ship.

■ Sevari Flash Pistol

Model: Custom-made Sevari flashpistol

Type: Archaic projectile weapon

Scale: Character

Skill: Archaic guns: flashpistol

Ammo: 1

Cost: 50 to 500, depending on model, number of barrels, etc.

Availability: Available only on Sevarcos

Fire Rate: 1/2

Range: 3-10/30/60

Damage: 4D+2

Game Notes: If a 1 is rolled on the Wild Die, a premature detonation has occurred. Roll 1D. On 1 or 2, the gun misfires and must be reloaded. On 3 or 4, the weapon is damaged and must be repaired. On 5 or 6, the weapon explodes, causing 4D+2 damage to the user.

Average Sevari Wind Rider. Speeder, maneuverability 0D, move 35; 100, body strength 2D. Weapons: 1 light ballistae (fire control 0D, 3-20/50/80, damage 2D).

6 Average Sevari Boarding Party. All stats are 2D except: *Dexterity* 3D, *archaic guns: flashpistol* 4D, *dodge* 4D, *melee combat* 4D, *melee parry* 4D, *Strength* 3D, *brawling* 4D. Move 10. Flashpistol (3D), long knife (STR+2D).

Assuming the characters get away from the starting line they should make their *repulsorlift operation* roll to determine their progress on the first leg. The teams of the Spice Lords and the Imperials must also roll at this time. During this first race segment, the characters see and have a chance to interact with any other teams that make the same *repulsorlift operation* roll (Very Easy, Easy, etc.). When two wind riders are close together (i.e., they roll the same number) they should race round by round until one passes the other.



Illustration by Doug Snyder

Since there are no real rules in the race, the characters have the freedom to do whatever they wish. However, if they attempt to pass the wind riders belonging to the Spice Lords, the Imperials, or any of the other high-ranking clans, they are fired upon. This remains true throughout the entire race.

If the characters fall behind the main teams, they become mixed in with the wind riders belonging to the lower clans. If they are doing poorly, use the average Sevari wind rider stats given at the start of the race. If they are doing well, but are still behind the Spice Lords, add 1D to the stats of the average Sevari wind rider and boarding party. After the wind riders have settled into their places, make a note of their respective positions.

Imperial Mines

Read aloud:

Your wind rider swoops over a hilltop to reveal a large flat plain. Thrusting from the ground at the far edge of the plain is the beginning of the Trekali mountain range. Gleaming within the foothills of the range off to your right are the white walls of an

Expansion Ideas

If gamemasters wish to make the outcome of the race more exciting, the legs of the race can be divided into multiple *repulsorlift operation* tests instead of just one. It requires more rolling and keeping track of race positions, but allows ships to pass each other and interact much more often.

Imperial prison mine. A trail cuts down from the facility to a fenced in loading and storage area which exits onto the plain. And directly in front of you is a large sign:

"WARNING! Imperial mining facility. Do not enter. This area protected by repulsor mines."

You glance at your course map and find this area marked with a note stating that a safe path will be marked through the mine field. You look out over the field but you don't see any markers...wait...there are a few sandtroopers standing near the facility with a bunch of signs at their feet. You're not really sure at this distance, but they seem to be laughing.

The mines in the field are SoroSuub XG anti-gravity field bombs (as described on page 78 of *Cracken's Rebel Field Guide*). To traverse the mine field the characters near the front of the wind rider can make a Very Difficult *Perception* or search check the round before hitting a mine, followed by an Easy repulsor operation roll to avoid the mine. If they don't spot the mine they can make a Moderate *Perception* or search check the round they will hit the mine and then a Difficult repulsor operation roll to avoid it. If the characters don't see the mine they will hit it head on. The damage is 6D Speeder scale at point blank. If any of the repulsorlift operation rolls are missed the mine explodes. The ship takes 1D to 6D of damage based on how badly the roll failed. Any roll missed by more than 10 is assumed to hit the mine head on.

The characters must fly past eight mines to exit the field. Each round the gamemaster should roll a die. If the result is a five or a six, there is a mine one round away. If the characters wish to play it safe they can navigate the field slowly but they will fall behind in the race. However the difficulty in both spotting and avoiding the mines will drop by a level. Optionally they may fly completely around the mine field but it should be noted that all the rival wind

rider teams will go through the minefield and those that survive will gain a lot of time on the characters.

If any other teams reach the mine field at the same time as the characters they will have to follow the same rules to traverse the mine field. The Imperial team, of course, does not have to follow this rule. In addition, however, the teams of Lord Rha and Lady Trevaal also know the locations of the mines and are not slowed in passing through the minefield.

Cutaway Tips

The vid-cams donated to the race by the Imperials provide the perfect opportunity for cutaways. Particularly exciting or disastrous events look even better as viewed from the perspective of those back on the Festival grounds—especially when the owner of the wind rider in question sees the instant replay of the characters destroying his ship.

Sand Storm

After passing the minefield, the characters round the checkpoint and begin the second leg of the race. Have the characters and gamemaster characters make another *repulsorlift operation* roll. Adjust the race positions based on the result.

During the second leg of the race the wind begins picking up. Within half an hour it whips itself up into a pounding force, blasting the characters exposed skin with stinging sand. Character's making an Easy *survival* roll can tell that the storm will pass quickly but will be extremely severe. In order to keep moving the pilot will have to make four Very Difficult *repulsorlift operation* rolls. Each roll that the team fails will drop them back by one position in the race. If they fail any roll by 10 or more, roll 3D damage versus the wind rider's body. The character's can elect to take down the sail and weather the storm if they wish but they will lose a lot of ground.

While in the sandstorm one of the rival teams near the characters attacks, thinking the spacers will be weaker during the sand storm. Make sure to use the Modified Blaster Rules given for sand storms and increase the difficulty of any wind rider maneuvers by 10.

Modified Blaster Rules

During Sevarcos's violent sandstorms, the following limitations are imposed on blaster weapons:

Damage is halved at medium range.

Blasters are ineffective at long range.

If a one is rolled on the Wild Die, roll 1D and consult the following chart:

Die Result	Blaster Mishap
1-2	Weapon shorts, power pack completely drained.
3-4	Power pack overloads and destroys weapon.
5-6	Power pack explodes and inflicts its normal damage within a six-meter radius.

Lookout Point

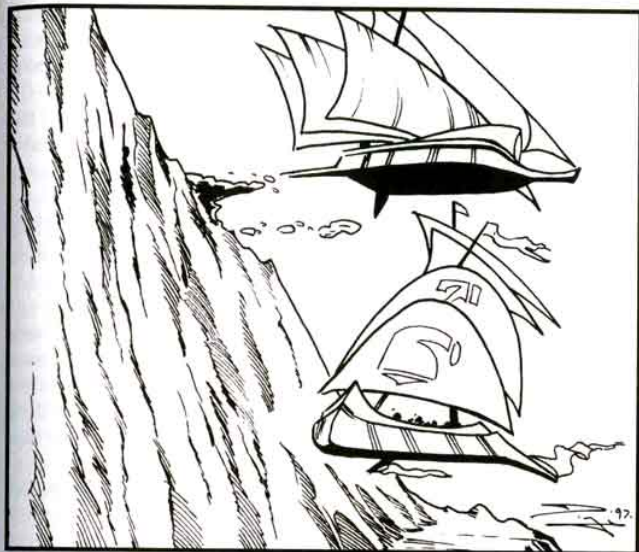
Have the characters make their *repulsorlift* operation checks again as they begin the third leg. Ahead of them they see that the course leads up into the mountains. As they approach the wall of peaks, they notice that the mountains are split by numerous passes, most of which come to dead ends. The course map indicates which pass they should follow.

As the characters reach the end of the pass, the ground drops away sharply to form an 800-meter-tall cliff. A narrow switch-back pass leads down the cliff and seems navigable but very dangerous.

A short distance from the base of the cliff lie the wrecks of two wind riders. Characters making an Easy *Mechanical* roll know that the wrecks are too far out to have fallen, and must have tried to jump the cliff. Characters making a Moderate *Perception* roll see that the next pass over exits cleanly from the mountain. Characters making a Difficult *Perception* check see Quintas's wind rider exiting the pass, having gained a great deal of time. Any wind riders not too far ahead of the characters are probably somewhere below the characters, navigating the cliff face.

If the characters choose to go back and take the easy pass through the mountain they will lose a number of places and have to fight past at least one wind rider coming up the pass toward them as they backtrack.

Navigating down the face will require five Moderate *repulsorlift* operation rolls. If the characters fail any roll they may attempt a



Difficult *repulsorlift* operation roll to keep from falling. If the second roll is missed the ship will fall taking 4D of damage. Each character in the ship that doesn't make an Easy *climbing/jumping* roll before the ship falls will take 5D damage.

If the characters attempt to jump they will have to make two Very Difficult *repulsorlift* repair rolls, one before jumping and one during the landing. In addition, the pilot must make two Heroic *repulsorlift* operation rolls, one to take off and one to land. If any of the rolls are missed the wind rider will take damage. The amount of damage varies from 1D to 8D and depends on how many rolls were missed and by how much. If the characters succeed in reaching the bottom they will have overtaken all of the wind riders on the cliff face.

Damage and Repairs

Nearly any wind rider damage should be fixable. *Light damage* can be fixed by an Easy *repulsorlift* repair roll with no ship penalties and a drop of one place due to lost time. *Heavy damage* requires a Moderate *repulsorlift* repair roll and yields no ship penalties, but drops the characters down two or three notches in the ratings. *Severe damage* cannot be fixed without a Difficult *repulsorlift* repair

roll and replacement parts. If successful the ship is pilottable although permanently impaired (crew skill -2 pips due to negative maneuverability). The repair time allows five other teams to pass by.

A damage result of *destroyed* leaves the ship as a wreck on the sand. If this happens, let the characters attempt to figure out a solution on their own. If they cannot, they wander the desert long enough to take them out of race contention and then let Jax show up in a nomad wind rider. He had been keeping track of their progress and came to find them when they dropped out of sight.

Episode Three: The Simple Rescue

Shortly after beginning the fourth leg of the race, the characters see a pillar of smoke snaking up through the sky from the race course ahead. If the characters alter their vector to avoid it, they lose two places and run into a group of nomads. The nomads tell the characters someone is waiting for them, ask them to follow, and head off toward the smoke.

If the characters followed the course or were led by the nomads, read the following aloud:

As the smoke looms over the next hill, it is clear that its source is reasonably large. The sound of flashpistols echoes over the ridge.

You vault over the crest to find Lord Quintas's wind rider besieged by half a dozen small nomad wind riders. Quintas's vessel has rolled onto its side, two of its repulsors destroyed and burning. The flames licking up from the engines threaten to engulf the entire ship.

Nearly a dozen of Quintas's crew lie dead, but only one nomad seems to have succumbed to his injuries. Quintas's son himself, back against his ship, is making his stand with one wounded crew member at his side. Six nomad warriors are closing in around them in a semi-circle, vibroblades flashing wickedly in the sun.

One of the nomad warriors is Jax Seldam, the Rebel's contact. If the characters do not interfere, the fight ends quickly. Jax then comes over to the characters and introduces himself. If instead the characters choose to fly by the site, Jax follows them in his wind rider. If fired upon, he attempts to identify himself and then leaves if hostilities persist.

Jax Seldam. All stats 3D except: *Dexterity* 4D, *archaic guns*:

flashpistol 8D, *blaster* 5D, *dodge* 7D, *melee combat* 7D+2, *melee parry* 6D+2, *thrown weapons* 5D+2, *Mechanical* 4D, *repulsorlift operation: wind rider* 9D+1, *sneak* 6D, *Strength* 4D, *brawling* 6D, *brawling parry* 5D+2, *climbing/jumping* 6D, *repulsorlift repair: wind rider* 6D. Move 10, *Flashrifle* (5D), 2 *throwing knives* (STR+1D), *vibroblade* (STR+3D), *macrobinoculars*.

Jax begins by explaining the ambush on Quintas's wind rider. Quintas, with help from the Imperials, has been destroying the deserts the nomads live on through spice strip-mining. Having voiced their opinions to no avail, the nomads decided to send a clearer message to Quintas. Jax does not seem overly affected by the killing of Quintas's son and crew, although if asked he reveals that he would rather have avoided it.

Jax quickly shakes off the battle and gets down to business. He informs the characters that Carter Escalon has been sold to Lord Rha for work in his spice mines and is being transported at this moment from the Imperial prison. The nomads have set up an ambush point, but await the Rebels arrival to spring it. The characters must leave immediately to reach the ambush site before the Imperials. In addition, they must go aboard the nomad's wind riders since theirs is not fast enough to reach the ambush in time. The ambush point is to the south while the race continues to the west.

If Ray is still along, the characters have to deal with him since he won't take kindly to their abandoning the race. In addition, if he realizes they are Rebels, he attempts to betray them once they return to the Festival.

If the characters choose not to proceed to the ambush, they may continue the race. They should roll their *repulsorlift operation* skill for the fourth leg and interact with the other wind riders normally. By the time they get back to the Festival site, however, the prisoner convoy has reached Lord Rha's mines. Without the characters' assistance the nomads do not attack. Gamemasters should refer to "Lord Rha's Mines" if the characters select this course of action.

Lord Rha's Mines

The convoy's destination is one of Lord Rha's spice mines in his northern territories. If the characters either fail to stop the convoy or choose not to proceed with the ambush, it arrives safely. The mine stands in a valley at the base of the Arrandle mountain range. A cluster of buildings which operate as both spice storage and

prisoner cells stand inside the valley, huddled against its sheer walls. The front of the valley is blocked by a single large building that spans the gap between the two cliffs. Further defenses include flashcannons, heavy wind riders, and a twenty-four hour guard schedule.

Even if Escalon ends up here, the characters have not yet lost him. A number of options remain open at this point. The nomads know where the mine is and take the characters to it if asked. With the nomads' assistance, the characters might be able to sneak the prisoner out. In addition, the mine does not have good air defenses, so the characters could possibly rescue the prisoner using their ship. It should be remembered, however, that Imperial air control is tight and by the time the characters land and take off again a number of TIEs will have arrived.

Another alternative is a political or monetary solution. Lord Rha has no particular attachment to one slave and might be willing to give him up if properly motivated or tempted. The political sway of the other notable Spice Lords could also serve to gain the prisoner's freedom if the characters can make the right friends. The player characters should feel free to explore any of these options.

The Imperial Convoy

The nomads prepare their wind riders—smaller ships that only require a single sailor—to leave for the ambush site. Each wind rider holds only two additional people, so the characters must divide into pairs for the trip. If for any reason not all of the characters proceed to the ambush, do not change the difficulty of the encounter. The characters should not earn any breaks by splitting up.

Jax describes the structure of the Imperial forces as the wind riders soar across the desert. The Imperial convoys generally consist of a forward unit of two speeder bikes, a middle unit consisting of a speeder with a mounted gun and a transport full of prisoners, and a rear unit of two more speeder bikes. The nomads are willing to use their wind riders to occupy the front and rear guards, but do not wish to engage the Imperials directly. Jax explains that most of the nomads, having never been off-world, are unsure of the Rebels' goals and are hesitant to involve themselves. Many protest that the Empire claimed to have honorable goals when it came to Sevarcos as well. The Rebels can attempt to sway the nomads (using normal *persuasion* rules) if they want more assistance.



Since the characters must catch up to the repulsor vehicles to attack them, two Imperial repulsor craft have been stolen by the nomads for the characters' use: one speeder bike and one four-man speeder. The vehicles are being held at the ambush site. Jax mentions that the nomads generally do not use such craft. Although they are faster than wind riders they also put out a huge power signal that is easy for the Imperials to track against the bleak desert surface.

The characters should not have too much time to plan the attack. The Imperial convoy will pass through a 300-meter-wide valley. The ridges are tall enough to hide behind, yet gradual enough to ride down. The Imperial convoy enters the valley five minutes after the Rebels arrive.

Read aloud:

The dust the convoy raises is visible long before the vehicles can be seen. Finally the hum of repulsors echoes faintly through the canyon and two speeder bikes come into view at the far end of the defile. A large cloud of dust and sand follows about fifty

meters behind them. A very large cloud, you note with some surprise as it draws nearer.

The haze around the vehicle clears just as a deafening rumble bombards your ears, and the Floating Fortress enters the valley followed by its armored escort vehicle.

Jax turns to you and shrugs nonchalantly. "It seems the Empire finally wised up. You guys ready?"

The convoy is the same as detailed before except that a Floating Fortress has replaced the transport and the escort vehicle is armored and slightly larger. The prisoners are locked into the rear section of the Floating Fortress. The stats for the Imperial speeder bikes are the same as those of the Rebel bike. The nomads take care of the four Imperial speeder bikes unless the characters ask them not to or convince them to do more.

Any Imperials not busy crewing a repulsorlift vehicle fight the Rebels with hand weapons. There are three Imperials on the speeder including a pilot and a gunner, and six in the Floating Fortress—a pilot, a gunner, and four guards (use the sandtrooper stats for close combat).

Once the characters get into the back of the Floating Fortress, they find fifteen prisoners: Escalon, four captured Rebels, five political dissidents, and five criminals.

Nomad Wind Rider. Speeder, crew skill: *repulsorlift operation* 6D+2, maneuverability 3D, move 60, body strength 1D+2.

Armored Speeder. Speeder, crew 2, passengers 2, maneuverability 2D, move 70; 200 kmh, body strength 3D+2. Weapons: 1 medium blaster cannon (arc: turret, fire control 1D, 100/150/300, damage 4D).

Speeder Bike. Speeder, crew 1, passengers 1, maneuverability 3D+2, move 175; 500 kmh, body strength 2D. Weapons: 1 laser cannon (arc: forward, fire control 2D, 50/100/200, damage 3D).

Floating Fortress. Walker, crew: 1, gunner 1, crew skill: *repulsorlift operation* 5D, *vehicle blasters* 3D, passengers 15, maneuverability 0D, move 35; 100 kmh, body strength 5D. Weapons: 2 heavy blaster cannons (arc: 1 forward, 1 aft, fire control 1D, 200/500/750, damage 5D).

Armored Speeder. Speeder, crew: 2, gunner 1, crew skill: *repulsorlift operation* 4D, *vehicle blasters* 4D, maneuverability 1D, move 70; 200 kmh, body strength 3D+2. Weapons: 1 medium blaster cannon (arc: turret, fire control 1D, 100/150/300, damage 4D).

Imperial Sandtroopers. All stats are 2D except: *Dexterity* 3D, *blaster* 4D, *dodge* 4D, *Strength* 3D, *brawling* 4D. Move 10. Blaster rifle (5D), sandtrooper armor (+1D *Strength* for damage purposes only).

If the characters fail to rescue the prisoners, the Imperials call for reinforcements. The convoy does not follow the Rebels if they run, although it relays their location to other Imperial forces.

After the battle the nomads take the characters wherever they wish to go. If the characters continue to use the stolen speeders, TIE fighters attempt to find them in the desert. If the characters decide to hide the prisoners, the nomads are willing to put them up for a short time.

The information Escalon is carrying is stored in a vessel courier system implanted in his skull (as shown on page 30 of *Cracken's Rebel Field Guide*). He cannot interact with the data mentally but he can download it into a computer with sufficient storage space. The vessel currently contains 5D worth of data. Gamemasters are encouraged to make the data something pertinent to their own campaigns.

Episode Four: "You're not actually flying into an asteroid field!"

With the news of the attack on the transfer convoy and the escape of the prisoners, security at the Festival has increased. Patrols around the tent city have been stepped up, making it nearly impossible to sneak past them during the day. Small groups at night stand a better chance, but it is difficult nonetheless. Once inside the city, however, security is fairly lax among the tents.

Starport security has been increased as well. Hurriedly erected flood lights form a circle around the entire site and small motion detecting sensor pods have been placed at intervals of 30 meters. The Imperial Commandant can be seen around the Festival from time to time yelling at his subordinates, obviously furious.

Four squads of stormtroopers have been transported from one of the Star Destroyers above to guard the starport. The port is shut down until the Festival ends the next day. At that time the Festival guests are allowed to leave. Each person is checked off against the list of those who arrived two days earlier. Any discrepancies cause immediate suspicion and those involved are detained for further questioning.

All persons matching the previous list are escorted to their ship which is then opened and searched. Pilots must contact flight command for permission to take off. The proper clearance codes must be given for exit from the Sevarcos system. The code is known to Carantar, but unless the characters have taken steps ahead of time they should not have it themselves. If Carantar is still with the characters and oblivious to their real identity he gives the proper code. Otherwise he does not release the code unless persuaded or intimidated into doing so.

Clearance is then given to take off along an assigned flight vector. Upon any deviation, the ship is contacted and warned. If the vessel sets down anywhere, they are told to return to the Festival site for another search. Ships failing to obey are fired upon by the TIE patrols. This is standard procedure for ships leaving Sevarcos and as such cannot be avoided except under extremely unusual circumstances.

The characters still have the option of devising a non-confrontational way to smuggle the prisoners into the city and get them off-planet—a difficult task at best. Otherwise, they must fight their way out.

Ships that simply make a break for it are set upon by a patrol of three TIE/In fighters. Any ship which lands and then takes off again picks up three additional TIEs during that period. The TIEs follow the ship to the edge of the asteroid field, but do not enter.

TIE/In Fighter. Starfighter, *starfighter piloting 4D+2, starship gunnery 4D, maneuverability 2D, space 10, hull 2D. Weapons: 2 laser cannons (fire-linked; fire control 2D, damage 5D).*

Once a ship breaks out of the atmosphere it must reach a safe distance from the planet before entering hyperspace. If the characters head toward empty space, the Star Destroyers easily reach them before they can enter hyperspace. If they head into the asteroid belt, the Star Destroyers cannot reach them before they clear the gravity well. Instead the characters must deal with Fate's Judges.

The asteroid belt is 250 space units wide. At the end of each round the gamemaster should determine how difficult the terrain will be the following round by rolling 1D and consulting the Asteroid Field Navigation Chart.

Asteroid Field Navigation Chart

Die Roll	Terrain Difficulty
1	Very Difficult
2	Difficult
3-4	Moderate
5	Easy
6	Very Easy

If the pilot misses a roll, use the appropriate collision rules based on the number of moves taken that round. Eight TIE Interceptors and two Skipray Blastboats fire at the characters' ship. The Interceptors follow the characters closely, firing upon them but also attempting to steer them toward the Skipray Blastboats. The Blastboats hide within clear spots in the asteroid field waiting to ambush the characters as they pass.

Fate's Judges TIE Interceptor. Starfighter, *starfighter piloting 6D, starship gunnery 5D+2, maneuverability 3D+2, space 11, hull 3D. Weapons: 4 laser cannons (fire-linked; fire control 3D, damage 6D).*

Fate's Judges Skipray Blastboat. Capital (due to power output), *capital ship gunnery 4D, capital ship piloting 4D, capital ship shields 4D, sensors 4D, maneuverability 1D+2, space 8, hull 2D+1, shields 2D. Weapons: 3 medium ion cannons (fire-linked; fire control 3D, damage 4D), twin laser cannon turret (fire control 1D, damage 5D), proton torpedo launcher (fire control 2D, damage 9D), concussion missile launcher (fire control 1D, damage 6D).*

When the ship reaches the edge of the asteroid field the characters may begin astrogation rolls. If the ship does not enter hyperspace quickly, more enemy vessels arrive at their position and attempt to capture or destroy them. Once the ship enters hyperspace, it has safely escaped from Sevarcos.

Adventure Awards

Give each character two Character Points for participating in the adventure. If they managed to rescue Escalon, award an additional three Character Points.

Continuing the Adventure

Several issues may remain unresolved at the conclusion of the adventure. These plot strands may provide impetus for further scenarios:

- Carantar: the characters' "benefactor," may vow revenge against them or the Rebel Alliance in general for destroying his chances of winning the Festival race.
- The Imperials may continue to hunt for Escalon, posting bounties and death marks on him and the characters in every neighboring system.
- Escalon himself may turn out to be a double-agent commissioned with discovering the location of Rebel bases. After rescuing him from Sevarcos, the characters may find themselves tracking him down in another system or another sector altogether.
- If the characters somehow manage to win the Festival race, the Spice Lords may take particular interest in them, supplying them (and the Rebel Alliance) with funds or other expensive, illegal, or rare commodities (weapons, starships, and so forth).

About the Authors...

WANTED FOR CRIMES AGAINST THE EMPIRE: Paul Danner. *Species:* Human. *Gender:* Male. *Age:* 23. *Homeworld:* Earth. *Bounty:* 17,873 credits. *Crimes:* Production of Unlawfully Creative Short Stories (five counts in *The Official Star Wars Adventure Journal* alone!), Conspiracy to Entertain the Public (forthcoming *Star Wars Roleplaying Game* supplement, *Hives of Scum and Villainy*), and Wanton Disregard for Deadlines (additional 5,000 credits posted by West End Games Editors). If you spot this individual, contact the proper authorities immediately. He is armed and considered humorous.

Pablo Hidalgo is a freelance artist from Winnipeg, Manitoba, who specializes in illustration and animation. He is a member of the Manitoba Society of Independent Animators, and co-instructs animation courses for young people. He has a disturbing amount of *Star Wars* trivia kicking around in his head, and does a mean Lobot Impersonation.

Patricia A. Jackson continues to work as an administrative assistant at Jackson Elementary School. When not training her half-wampa/half-dinko dow horse, Nicholai Socorro (Orneriness: 20D), she enjoys augmenting her personal dictionary of Old Corellian words. Her favorite pastimes are harassing West End staff members (because they deserve it) and collecting Dark Side Points for a rainy day.

Via Holonet, **Charlene Newcomb** reports she finally graduated with her Jedi Master's Degree in Library and Information Science from the University of South Florida (not too far from the swamps of Dagobah). She has relocated to the Mid Rim (though her Florida friends tend to view her new home as an Outer Rim backwater world) and now works as a Serials Cataloger at Kansas State University. Go Wildcats!

Little did **Timothy Squire O'Brien** realize that his first roleplaying game was actually an accidentally irradiated copy! A simple paper cut energized his cells, and now, in times of creative stress, he transforms into Freelance Gamer! Using his amazing Super System-Insight, fantastic Implication Computer, and extensive library, he battles the forces of inconsistency and dullness! His latest book for West End is *Pirates and Privateers*, due in bookstores this February.

A long-time *Star Wars* fan, **Tom Pixley** has enjoyed *The Star Wars Roleplaying Game* for years. "Festival of High Winds" is his first

publication in the *Adventure Journal*, and he hopes to follow that up with more exciting articles set in the *Star Wars* universe!

Anthony P. Russo is a technical writer and graphics specialist for a computer consultant in northern Virginia. Besides trying to branch out into other areas of fiction (including comic book and novels), he has developed and written *Star Wars Live-Action Adventures* for West End Games, and continues to run live-action events at conventions throughout the country.

Michael A. Stackpole is an award-winning roleplaying and computer game designer who has done work for Flying Buffalo, Inc., Interplay Productions, TSR, Inc., West End Games, Hero Games, Wizards of the Coast, FASA Corp., Game Designers Workshop, and Steve Jackson Games. He has more than eighteen published novels to his credit, the most recent of which is *The Bacta War*, the last in his four-part *Star Wars X-Wing* series.

Paul Sudlow maintains a full schedule of freelance and full-time game design and editing for West End Games. Between bouts of writing, he files regular newsnet reports on Imperial activities in this sector for *Imperial Defense Daily*.

Eric S. Trautmann began his professional writing career on such projects as *The Politics of Contraband* and *GG9: Fragments From The Rim* and has worked as an on-staff editor and designer for West End Games since mid-1995. A native of Malone, New York (not the end of the world, but you can see it from there), Eric has recently completed *Endgame* (the capstone to West End's critically acclaimed *DarkStryder Campaign*) and is rather excited not to be working in retail anymore.

Timothy Zahn is the author of *Heir to the Empire*, *Dark Force Rising*, and *The Last Command*, all *New York Times* best-selling *Star Wars* novels. His most recent book is *Conquerors' Legacy*, the final chapter in his *Conquerors Trilogy*.

About the Artists...

New Jersey native **Tim Bobko** has drawn hundreds of illustrations for all of West End Games' lines during his three years as an on-staff graphic artist. He prefers green when engaging his fellow artists in sessions of Marathon, saying that the color seems to give him a psychological advantage.

Matt Busch began drawing "stick" TIE fighters at the age of four. Aside from *The Official Star Wars Adventure Journal*, Matt has contributed to other *Star Wars* sourcebooks for West End Games. As an entertainment illustrator in Los Angeles, he has worked on many television commercials, books, magazines, comics, and trading cards. He has also worked on many advertising campaigns for motion pictures, including the recent film *The Devil's Own*. When asked where he gets his talent, Matt claims that "the Force runs strong in his family..."

Steve Bryant is a long-time science-fiction fan who never imagined that one day he would be let loose in both the *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* universes. He got his start as art director/staff artist at GDW and later moved on to the art department at FASA Corporation. Since leaving FASA in early 1996, Steve has had the opportunity to work for TSR, White Wolf, New Millennium, Pinnacle, Last Unicorn, and, of course, West End Games. Steve currently makes his home in the suburban wilds of Chicago with his wife and four companion animals.

Ever since she can remember, **Mary Lee Bryning** has wanted to be an artist. She enjoys creating illustrations for the *Star Wars* universe as well as fine-art painting. This is the first appearance of her work in the *Adventure Journal*.

A veteran artist in the roleplaying and card game industry, **Liz Danforth** has produced artwork for dozens of companies over the past twenty years. Her latest work has appeared in expansions for *Magic: The Gathering*, *Middle-Earth: The Wizards*, and the *Battletech CCG*.

In his spare time **Robert Duchlinski** enjoys illustrating and escaping into the *Star Wars* and TSR realms through various roleplaying games and novels. He is a graduate of the duCret School of Art and Design, and hopes to someday become a special effects artist for Industrial Light and Magic.

1968-model **Tom O'Neill**. Mint condition. Will produce stunning illustrations upon command (must provide paints). Rebuilt engine, low mileage. Best offer.

Doug Shuler has been a freelance artist for eight years and has done work for many prominent game companies, including GDW, Steve Jackson Games, ICE, White Wolf, FASA, and West End Games. His illustrations continue to appear on new cards for *Magic: The Gathering* and *NetRunner* by Wizards of the Coast. A *Star Wars* fanatic, he lives in Boulder, Colorado, with his wife Jordi, their young daughter, Brianna, and five maniac cats.

VEHICLE COUNTERS

In order to simulate the fast-paced action of the *Star Wars* films, a gamemaster must juggle a great deal of information at one time during starship and vehicle battles. Remembering each ship's position relative to the others can become a daunting task when dealing with even a half-dozen combatants. So, to help alleviate confusion, you can use the vehicle counters on the following pages to keep track of the vessels' locations during a battle.

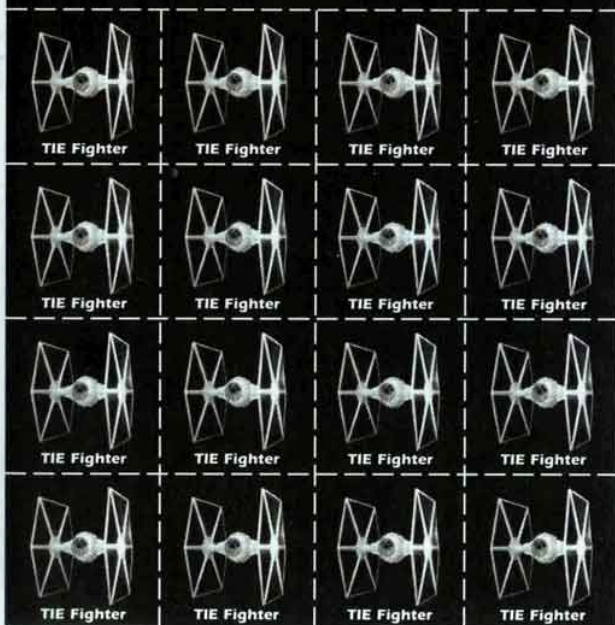
Permission has been granted to photocopy the counters, so you don't have to cut up your copy of the *Journal*. We recommend that you adhere each entire page to a thin piece of cardboard and then carefully cut out the counters.

When you run a battle, you can put the counters on a large sheet of hex paper for movement calculations (one hex = one unit of space), or you can simply place them on a table and wing it. Remember, *Star Wars* adventures—especially battles—should be fast and furious. Don't get mired in rules and mathematics.

(Note that the vehicles are not in scale with one another—you should rely on them for position only.)



Star Destroyer



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Corellian Corvette



Corellian Corvette



YT-1300



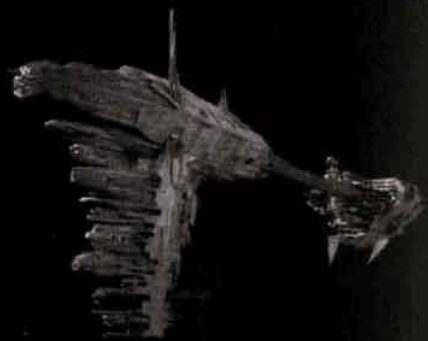
YT-1300



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Escort Frigate

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Lambda Class Shuttle



Lambda Class Shuttle



Lambda Class Shuttle



TIE Interceptor



TIE Interceptor



TIE Interceptor



TIE Interceptor



TIE Interceptor



TIE Interceptor



X-Wing



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Mon Calamari Cruiser



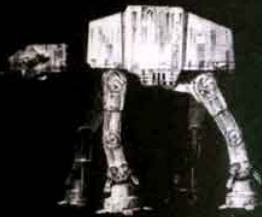
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Transport



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AT-AT



Slave-1



Slave-1



Y-wing



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