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For the first time in years, Harkness couldn’t stand the silence.

He had two options: he could lie with his good eye open and think, or he could lie with his good eye shut and think. It didn’t matter either way, because the cell was pitch black and the only indication that he wasn’t having a strange dream was the smell of something dead or dying in the same room.

Maybe it was him. All during the interrogation, Harkness had kept his focus away from the pain and the questions, and where he had put his focus he could not remember, but he wasn’t required to do it anymore. It hurt to breathe; it hurt to be wearing clothes; it hurt to swallow. The nicest thing the Imperials had done for him was not to put his boots back on his stinging feet.
Moreover, there was a humming sound in his head. It could have been something to do with where he had placed his focus, or it could have been an after-effect of the drugs. Which brought to mind the image of the round, black interrogator droid that had administered them. Which, in turn, had left him with a vision of sickly colors, distorted sounds, and a sensation similar to that of having needles in his brain and his eyes and the whole inside of his head. That thought, coupled with the humming sound, sent him into a near panic, and he decided to drown both elements out entirely.

"Hey!" he said. His voice was hoarse and thick, but it echoed and that made him feel better. At least he wasn't floating in some infinite vacuum. "Hey, yeah. This is great. Way to be, Harkness."

He thought about all the stories he had heard about prisoners who had been locked up alone for decades and gone insane. He had expected that any time in solitary confinement would be paradise, but now he could see himself in two years, drooling, talking to himself all the time. People would look at him funny and whisper about him. On the other hand, wasn't that their normal practice anyway? Harkness decided he would probably be fine as long as he never answered himself.

"Well," he said. "Maybe it could be worse."

"I doubt it."

Harkness froze. He had been answered by a female voice a short distance away.

"Hello?" he said tentatively.

"Yeah?" said the woman. Her voice was raw, and its thick, nasal quality suggested that she had a broken nose; but her tone was steady. The sound of a person in the comfortable situation of things not being able to become worse.

"Who's there?" he asked.

She slurried her words together, and it took a moment for Harkness to extrapolate what she had actually said: "Master Sergeant Jai Raventhorn, Alliance Infiltrators."

Harkness absorbed that. "I thought High Command dissolved the Infiltrators," he said.

"Rub it in, why don't you," said the woman.

"Hah!" said Harkness. It wasn't a real laugh, but it was the only positive response he could come up with. Raventhorn's voice
carried the depth of the numbness, the pain, the humiliation, and
the relief that was in Harkness right then, and he dismissed the
automatic assumption that she was some COMPNOR agent planted
in the cell to get him to talk casually.

It also sounded as though she were shivering, as Harkness was.
Most likely she had been done exactly the same way he had, and
that made him furious. But he didn’t want to tell her that because
she might think he was being patronizing.

“So what do you do now instead, Sergeant Raventhorn?” he
asked.

“Who wants to know?”

“Harkness.”

“Harkness what?”

It suddenly occurred to him that he couldn’t recall his first name.
If he had one at all.

“Harkness what?” Jai asked again.

“I...think it’s just Harkness,” he said. More enthusiastically, he
added, “I’m a mercenary.”

“A merc. Really. I don’t think that’s what I am.”

“Try to remember. We’re just experiencing the after-effects of
the mind-probe.”

This was just a guess on Harkness’ part. But it made him feel
better, and Jai evidently believed it because she took a few mo-
ments to think. Finally she said, “Oh, wait—I work in Intel now.”

“Intel? Were you with Red Team Five?”

“I think so. Yeah, I was,” she said, and there was no trace of pride
in her voice on admitting that. But then came a sudden spark of
interest. “Are you one of the mercs who tipped us off about this
place?”

“No, but guess what?”

“What?”

“I think there might be an Imperial garrison here on Zelos.”
She gave a half-amused snort. “You think?”

“Is the rest of your team around here?”

“They’re dead,” said Jai.

“Oh,” Harkness said. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not.” She gave a heavy sigh. “I don’t suppose you told them
anything.”

“Who?” asked Harkness. He was feeling confused. His lips had
started to feel numb.

“The Imperials.”
"No," said Harkness, and then he was struck anew. "Hey—"
"What?"

"I didn’t tell them anything!" He had completely shut it out of his mind, but his interrogators had realized that mind-probing him was useless and therefore the interrogation was a failure, and they had tortured him just to make themselves feel better. Suddenly Harkness felt positively warm inside. It was the ultimate test and he had passed it. He could actually feel himself grinning. There was not a lower place that could possibly exist, and his situation could only improve if they had him killed now. He didn’t remember ever feeling so secure in his life.

"Yeah," said Raventhorn, "I heard you the first time."

"How about you?" he asked. "You tell them anything?"
“No. Nothing.”
“Good for you.”
“Yeah, good for me,” she said unenthusiastically.
“Doesn’t that make you feel great?”
“Not especially.”
“You know how many people can’t make it through interrogations like that? If they don’t talk, they usually just die from the physical punishment.”
“I know.”
“My point is, the Imperials could have done worse things. They could have run a catheter straight up your nasal cavity into your brain. If you didn’t die you’d be jelly.”
“You’re a lot of fun to have around,” said Jai.
“I’m serious!” Harkness said, although he didn’t know what exactly he was feeling. It was almost giddiness. “Listen, you can go back home and tell everyone you didn’t crack, and they’ll give you a medal or something.”
“Yeah, they would,” Jai said in complete disgust. “That’s what’s wrong with the New Republic.”
“What is?”
“Medals. Glory. You know. These days they give stuff out if you remember not to wipe your nose on your sleeve in front of General Madine.”
Jai’s voice was fading and Harkness’ vision seemed to narrow to a pinhole. There was a sensation of a cool, gray fog beginning to permeate his body from underneath him.
“I can’t feel my hands,” said Jai.
“Me neither,” said Harkness. He didn’t want to talk anymore, but he knew the silence would seep into the fog, into his body. And the humming! Why wouldn’t it stop? “Do you know him?” Harkness asked.
“Who?”
“General Madine?”
“Do I?” asked Jai.
“I don’t know,” said Harkness.
It got quiet again. Harkness was finding himself less panic-stricken about it. He was cold all over, but he was getting comfortable. He knew he should have tried to stay awake, but he hadn’t been so relaxed in a very, very long time. He felt free. He wanted to savor it, even if it meant dying. Especially if it meant dying.
In fact, he would have let himself drift off entirely, except that Jai
said, "I wish they would have."
Her voice seemed to ring, not off the walls but all through Harkness' head. "Would...what?" he asked.
"I wish they would have turned my brain to jelly."
Silence. Harkness' mind immediately cleared itself out.
"Wait a second. What's that mean?" he asked
"I just have this feeling," Jai said.
"Like what?"
"Like there's nobody waiting for me to come back."

“What is up with this place?” said Platt for what was about the third time in fifteen minutes.
Tru’eb glanced up from the information console. “I said I don’t know,” he told her irritably, although he could understand what Platt was talking about. Passengers and flight crews were roaming throughout the starport, checking their cargo specs at public maintenance terminals, slumped in chairs still waiting for their ships to pass muster, rushing to catch the next shuttle. Perfectly normal. But the locals—the maintenance people, the desk personnel, and the green-eyed humans—all had a raw, shaky look about them. Tru’eb usually associated expressions like those, and the scent they gave off, with sheer terror barely held in check.
"I mean we’ve been waiting for four hours now and nobody knows anything. Dirk could be dead somewhere."
"Harkness strikes me as rather resilient," said Tru’eb. "I doubt he ran into any serious opposition."
"Like what? That Imperial garrison nobody knows anything about?"

Tru’eb didn’t answer. The whole point of the mission had been relatively simple; there was a stash of Imperial-issue weapons being transported in, disguised as ship parts. Platt, Tru’eb, and Harkness had planned on liberating the weapons for their own personal use. Platt had a couple of smuggler friends who were only
too happy to provide a distraction. At a place like this, with the starport personnel totally clouded over by fear or whatever, nobody saw Tru’eb and his friends take custody of the alleged ship parts. Or nobody cared.

The hitch in the plan came with Harkness, after they had the weapons. Platt and Tru’eb hadn’t worked with Harkness for very long, but it wasn’t hard to gather that he had some sort of personal vendetta against the Empire. Where Platt and Tru’eb would not have bothered to ask where the weapons came from (as long as they turned a fair profit), Harkness had to know. Which had led them to some of his contacts within New Republic Intel, and somebody leaked him the information that there was currently a team investigating a probable hidden Imperial garrison on Zelos. While Platt and Tru’eb were discussing terms with an arms dealer at the south end of town, Harkness had rented a repulsorlift vehicle and told them he would be right back. That was four days ago.

“He’s crazy, but he’s a good man,” Platt said. “I like working with him. Despite the vendetta thing.”

“I agree, but I was hoping this trip wouldn’t be—”

“Excuse me, folks?” somebody said. Tru’eb and Platt turned around; standing behind Platt was a green-eyed starport official in a light-green uniform, holding a datapad.

“I’ve got the—right here, here’s the—” He held out the datapad.

“Oh, right, you’re the guy I talked to earlier,” said Platt.

“Yes...about the information you requested? First of all, I’m sorry that took so long.”

“Don’t worry about it. Although I wouldn’t have thought skiff rentals would be that hard to track down,” said Platt.

“Well, we’ve had security problems before...there was a shipjacking about four years ago, and some crime lords got involved—”

“What did you find?” asked Tru’eb.

The man swallowed and held his datapad close to his chest. “I don’t know how to tell you this,” he said.


“No, but there’s been a....”

“A what? Tell us!”


“What do you mean?” asked Tru’eb, reaching up and putting a
hand on Platt’s shoulder.

“Well, it says here that the gentleman you’re looking for rented a starport skiff which he took out past the badlands... all the way north, into the mountains.”

“So what?” said Platt.


“Why not?”

He hesitated. After looking over his shoulder a couple of times, he drew himself in close toward Platt and Tru’eb, who drew in close toward him. Their heads were almost touching.

“There,” he said in a low voice, “is where the dead can walk.”

A week earlier, Jai had been sitting in the communications tent at a flimsy metal table, with the comm unit placed in front of her, when her C.O.’s voice came over the channel.

“Raventhorn?” he said. “We’re in Sector Three now. Looks like there’s a couple of scout troopers guarding a bunker.”

Jai put down her protein stick and swallowed: “Well, whatever you do, sir, don’t—”

“Moving in to attack.”

She put a hand over her face. Her C.O. was a Rodian lieutenant who had somehow slipped past Officer’s Candidate School during the New Republic’s post-Endor barrage of promotions. The rest of her teammates had little or no field experience—just training. Great. Three hundred and twenty-seven combat missions, and I never got a splinter. I move to Intel and these idiots are going to get me killed on the first day. “Sir, Negative! You shouldn’t compromise your position, is that clear? It’s probably an—”

A shout came over the comm channel, but it wasn’t directed at Jai. “This one’s for Mon Mothma, guys!”

There were faint rallying shouts from the other team members. Jai could actually hear the blaster-fire, quick little shots being fired off somewhere off in the distance. Then there was a louder shot, followed by an explosion.

After that, the exploding never stopped; within minutes, the Imperials had moved in and surrounded the command post.

Jai ran outside into the cold, wet mountain air. A flickering glow lit up the sky in the distance.
—ambush.

Seconds later a massive blaster bolt, artillery-grade, slammed into the tent where Jai’s remaining team members were sleeping. The whole thing was immediately swept into flames and took the munitions tent with it.

Jai didn’t hear the explosion. She just felt herself rising up in the air, and then a numb sensation shot through her body. She never remembered hitting the ground, but suddenly she was lying on her stomach, blinking furiously and spitting out dirt. When she looked up again, there was a bright, artificial light shining into her streaming eyes.

“Get up.”

A gray shape stood over her. His voice was muffled, and the rest of what he said was lost to the ringing in Jai’s ears. She could feel an unbearable heat coming from the burning tents, but the gray-clad person stayed where he was. Several moments later there were about twenty of him all around her. She was jerked to her feet.

“Hands over your head. Do it now.”

Jai had never been cornered before. She should have lunged for somebody, should have made them kill her right then and there—because if there was one cardinal rule about being an Infiltrator, if there was one thing you made absolutely sure that you did, it was to die before you got taken into custody.

But a face flashed into her memory, and she hesitated. Before she had a chance to register who she was thinking of, or to change her mind, one of her captors took a fast step toward her, the butt of his blaster rifle swinging at her face.

Suddenly Harkness shouted her name, and she started.

“What?” she cried. “What is it?”

“Are you still there?” Harkness said.

“Where would I go, idiot?” she said, annoyed.

“I’ve been calling your name for twenty minutes here!”

“Really?”

“Yes! What happened to you?”

“I was just thinking.”

“Well, you could have answered me!” Harkness sounded almost furious.

“Hey, look, I didn’t do it to spite you! I just got to thinking. I’m trying to remember stuff.”

Harkness backed off. “Well...but...I was just—” He floundered for a second. “Okay. As long as you’re not dying of shock over there.”
“Only when you yell real loud like that.”
“What were you thinking about?” Harkness asked.
“Just stuff,” said Jai. “Did it get warmer in here?”
“No,” he said. “Listen—mind if I ask you something?”
“Yeah?”
“You don’t care about your team. You don’t seem to care about
the Rebellion anymore.”
“I do care about the Rebellion. It’s the New Republic I hate.”
“And you say you can’t remember if you have any family.”
“Are you taking notes or something?”
“I’m just curious as to what made you resist interrogation.”
“Look, just because I don’t like what happened to the Alliance
doesn’t mean I’m willing to turn on it.”
“That’s not what I mean,” he said. “What did you focus on?”
“I focused on not telling anybody anything.”
Harkness gave a terse sigh. “Sarge—”
“What is your problem?”
“You are not listening to me.” Harkness slowed his voice down.
“In that moment...in the interrogation room...when the drugs had
worn off...and you tried to feel sorry for your interrogators...and you tried
to hyperventilate yourself into a trance...and you realized that it didn’t matter what
you did, because those Imperials were living out their life-
long dream of making an Infiltrator scream, and they were having so much fun they might never stop....”

Jai stared at where she thought Dirk’s face probably was.
“Yeah,” she said.
“What was it that you focused on? What image came to your
mind?”
“I don’t know.”
“Then think! Come on! Was it a person?”
“Yeah, it....” Jai stopped herself. “Yeah!” she said. “It was my
little sister.”
Harkness shifted around. “You’re somebody’s older sister?”
“You sound like you think that’s funny.”
“No, no. I can just imagine you ordering some six-year-old around.”
“Well, she’s a little older than that. She’s a major in Special Ops.”
“So she gets to order you around.”
“She wouldn’t dare.”

“Course it does,” she said.
“When’s the last time you saw her?”
“I don’t know.” Jai’s brain clouded up as easily as it had cleared, and she felt a throbbing tightness all the way from her shoulders up into the back of her head. “I thought I hadn’t seen her since she was about twelve. But I can see her with an adult’s face...I thought I just talked to her a few months ago...or last week...”

“Keep thinking,” said Harkness.
“What about you?”
“Me?”
“No, the other beat-up merc across the room. How come you didn’t talk?”
“I don’t know.”
“Keep thinking,” Jai said, with more than a trace of sarcasm.
“No, really, I can’t...but I feel like I knew a minute ago....”
“I’d love to know what they did with our heads,” Jai said irritably. She found that she could lift her arms now, and kept trying to massage the tension out of her shoulders with one hand. After a while she began to notice that the pain wasn’t just in the muscles but in the skin, and her hand came away wet. She forgot all about the tension and felt the burning all across her shoulders and her back.

Suddenly Harkness yelled, “Dirk!”
Jai felt her whole body tighten. If she could have sprung to her feet, she would have. “Who? What? Who?”
“Dirk! That’s my first name!”
Jai’s body relaxed, and her limbs shook from the tension release.

“Will you quit screaming out like that?”
“Dirk Harkness,” he said. “I’m Dirk Harkness.”
“Dirk Harkness?” Jai finally said, primarily to get him to stop chanting it. “What kind of name is that? You don’t sound like a Dirk.”
“So don’t call me Dirk.” He made some shuffling noises again; Jai imagined that he was lying on his side now.

“Fine, Harkness,” she said. “If you remember your first name, then tell me what kept you from talking.”
Dirk was silent.
"Well?"

"I think," he said, "it has something to do with this humming in my head."

"Well, well, well," Platt said, peering over the ridge. "Our boy Harkness certainly knows how to sniff out Imperials."

"How many?" Tru'eb asked. He was a short distance below her in the gully.

Platt slid down the steep rock wall and handed him the macrobinoculars. "Look for yourself. I make it about two, maybe three. See them?"

Tru'eb got a foothold in the crags and hoisted himself up into the thick, tufted grass on top of the ridge. "I can't see anything," he said. "The fog is even worse over there."

"The yellow switch polarizes the lenses. See the hill directly across from us? It runs into that cliff, you can't miss it. Now look at the a ledge sticking out of the cliff, out over the hill. You see the Imperials?"

"No...just trees and plants...."

"They're sitting in a dugout under a camouflaged lean-to."

"Ah, yes," Tru'eb said after a moment. "Army scouts. But I don't see a garrison."

"I don't even see any valley," Platt said.

Nonetheless, Platt's chrono indicated they were some 1,200 meters above sea level. This neck of the mountains was permeated by rocky ground and sheer cliffs topped with conifer trees. The Bare Forest, the locals called it. Or at least that was what their guide had called it before he had bolted with the repulsorlift a day earlier. At least he had left them some supplies and a one-person emergency inflation shelter, the latter of which had been an awfully tight fit last night.

Still, Harkness had left a trail of blaster-charred trees and discarded rations. Those clues led Platt and Tru'eb straight into the remains of the Rebel camp—a flat, razed area with scattered ashes, melted tent frames, and smashed comm equipment. The trees were bent and broken, probably crushed by AT-ATs. Platt was hard-pressed to imagine where one of those would have come from. All around was the acrid smell of burned flesh and spent blaster packs;
Platt had to avert her eyes from the scattered bodies. Most of them had been shot in the back, Tru’eb told her. The rest were charred beyond recognition.

"Those scouts have an E-Web, did you notice?” Tru’eb said, adjusting the sights. “But there are, let’s see, 130 meters between us and them. I doubt they would be able to see us from there.”

"They wouldn’t, if I wasn’t wearing red. Duck back down.”

"You really ought to re-think your wardrobe one of these days, Platt," Tru’eb said dryly.

Platt grinned. “I thought you appreciated my keen fashion sense.”

“I do. It’s my whole reason for living.”

Platt took back the macros. Then she looked up at the murky sky.

“Say, Tru’eb...”

“Yes?”

“Did everything around here just go really quiet, or is it me?”

They listened, and looked at each other. All morning there had been a constant chattering and hissing of birds, which had suddenly stopped. Platt pulled out her blaster.

“Did our Green Boys notice us?” she whispered.

“Let me have a look—”

Something came crashing through the underbrush behind them. Platt and Tru’eb spun around, but when the thing came out of the mist, they just stood where they were, frozen.

It was a Sullustan in New Republic military fatigues. But something about him was not quite right, and horribly surreal: his eyes were a milky gray and his head tilted at a grotesque angle. His arms hung at his sides, waving around slightly at each step as the head jarred and bobbed.

“Walking Dead!” Tru’eb hissed, backing away from the Sullustan, who seemed to be headed purposefully toward him.

Platt fired a blue stun-bolt into the Sullustan’s chest. He gave a wild spasm and then flopped to the ground.

Silence. Platt and Tru’eb looked at each other.

“Was that real?” she whispered, and looked at the ground again. The Sullustan still lay there with his face in a mud puddle. In his back was a week-old blaster wound.

Platt scrambled up the ridge again. One of the guards was situated at the front of the dugout, leisurely wiping down the barrel of the E-Web; the other sat off to the side, staring into space, waggling his foot. Occasionally he would lean out and look up at the gray afternoon sky.
“Doesn’t look like they heard,” Platt said.
Tru’eb gingerly approached the Sullustan. He fumbled for a pulse, and then stepped back.
“Come look at this, Platt. It’s incredible.”
Platt gave the guards a final look before sliding back down.
“What?” she asked.
“Look,” he said, pointing.
The Sullustan lay twitching, but not breathing. On closer inspection he turned out to be completely immobile; the appearance of twitching was caused by the presence of hundreds of tiny wormlike creatures swarming around the hole in his back.
Platt felt her gorge rise. She backed away, but there was no escaping the stench of the body or the memory of the worms; she leaned against a tree and vomited.
Then she stood up and coughed a couple of times. “Thank you,
Tru'eb. Thank you for sharing that with me. I'm just going to go far away from you right now."

She ventured a little ways into the woods, until the smell dissipated somewhat. Tru'eb followed her. "But don't you see?" he said. "This is the source of the Walking Dead illusion. Some parasites can release enzymes which provide electrical stimulation to the brain of a dead host. So this fellow may be biologically deceased, but there are artificial signals going out to his body."

Platt turned around. "Get outta here."
"Do you have a better explanation?"
"Worms operating a complex bio-electrical system? You're making that up."

"All right, so I'm just guessing. But you know," said Tru'eb, studying a worm perched on the tip of his index finger, "I have actually heard about a similar incident. Do you remember when I was working on Big Quince's ship?"

Platt rolled her eyes. "You think I could ever forget?"
"This was before I met you. I was not privy to a great deal of information, of course, but I recall a story that was going around. Apparently some Imperial friends of Big Quince's were quite traumatized after seeing a squadron of dead stormtroopers stagger across a battlefield. At the time I assumed that the storytellers were spiced. Now I wonder."

Worms inside your armor. Platt felt her entire body start to pucker.
"Supposedly," Tru'eb went on, "each corpse walked around aimlessly for a while, then went back to the place where it had been killed."

"And this guy here was walking toward the Green Boys over there."
"That does not necessarily mean he died there."
"No, but something's definitely up with those guys," Platt said. "I mean, look at them. If it weren't for the fog, they'd have the best vantage point in the whole mountain range. You wanna tell me they're just sitting around guarding nothing?"

Tru'eb held up his hands. "Furthest thing from my mind."

Platt looked at the Sullustan again. For a moment she thought
she was going to vomit again. But instead, she stopped herself and
broke into a slow grin.

"Hold on just a second," she said. "I have an idea."

When Harkness opened his eyes this time, it was still dark, but
his body felt almost weightless. Not dizzy and thick, not drugged;
just light. It was because there was less pain in his body now.

He didn’t feel as though he could sit up yet, but at least the
possibility of moving didn’t fill him with trepidation anymore. And
the humming sound lingered at the back of his head in a muted,
almost pleasant way. He entertained the idea that it might be a
fraction of a song Chessa used to sing; she had been on his mind for
what seemed like hours now, although he couldn’t remember her
ever singing in front of him.

"Hey," he said. His voice was stronger, clearer. "Hey, Sarge."

"What," said Jai, still across the room.

"How you feeling?"

"Better, I guess," she said.

"Me, too. I don’t know why."

"How long have we been here?"

"Dunno. A few days. Maybe a week."

"Maybe an hour."

"Maybe."

"Has this...uh...ever happened to you before?" she asked.

"Getting captured? Yes," he said. The memory of it appeared out
of nowhere and surprised him; nothing about his current ordeal
had seemed familiar until now.

"Oh," she said.

He expected her to ask if that was how he had lost his eye, and
then remembered that she still couldn’t see his face. In all the time
they had been there, their eyes still had not adjusted to the
darkness.

"Did they work you over that time?" she asked.

"Yeah. Worse than this."

"Can’t imagine that."

"Well, maybe not by much," he said. "Is that what you were
thinking about over there? My prison record?"

Suddenly he recalled something he had said earlier, regarding
the gray boys in the interrogation room. Living their lifelong dream of making an Infiltrator scream. Maybe Jai had been done the same way as he had, and then again—

"Jai?" he said tentatively. "Do you—still have both eyes?"

"Huh?"

"I mean...did they put your eyes out?"

Jai laughed, a surprising, loud, sardonic cackle. It took her a couple of minutes to rein it in, and then she said, "Hey, Dirk—who can tell?"

Harkness felt his lips twitch slightly.

Then he heard more laughter, both of their voices, ringing off the walls, choking through the pain, and eventually dying down to a few stuttering gasps. When it was over, his ribs ached and his throat hurt, but he felt an unfamiliar satisfaction.

"Why'd you ask me that, anyway?" asked Jai around a final chuckle.

"Forget it. Long story."

"Oh, well, you better not get started. I have to be somewhere in ten minutes."

"Yeah, I have a date myself."

It occurred to Harkness that he did have someplace to be, and people to be with. But where, and whom? When the walls stopped ringing, the humming came back.

"Is that what you’ve been thinking about?" asked Jai. "My eyes? If it makes you feel better, Harkness, I’m told they’re stunning."

"No," said Harkness, and he sobered. "I was actually thinking about Chessa."

"Who’s that?"

"My girl." Harkness thought about her face the last time he had seen her. It was a nice, normal day, full of routines, loading the ship, the two of them flirting over the cargo load. But he had known, somewhere on the odd fringes of his mind, that she was about to die. He always knew when somebody was about to die. There was a softness to his or her features on those days. He would see it all through his stint in the Alliance, and he saw it for the first time in Chessa, standing there in the docking bay.

"Do you think about her a lot?" Jai asked.

"She’s dead," said Harkness in his usual blunt, conversation-ending tone. Dirk, how’s Chessa doing these days? She’s dead. Oh. They always changed the subject after that.

But not Jai. "I know," she said.
“No, you didn’t.”
“Yes, I did. It’s the way you said her name.”
Harkness didn’t know how to respond to that. Jai had spoken with such confidence, and he hated it when people thought they could dissect him. Like all those Alliance counselors he never wanted to go to.
“How did I say her name?”
“Like it was sacred.”
“So what? That’s how you said your sister’s name.”
“Yeah, but—”
Jai broke off, so abruptly that Harkness thought she had disappeared altogether. In her place Harkness imagined a deep black hole generating silence, threatening to suck him through, too. Harkness could actually hear it, ringing, clouding his ears.
Then his mind cleared out and he realized what he had said. And what it had meant.
“Sarge?” he said.
“Yeah.” Her voice took on a heavy, listless resignation that was very familiar to Harkness. He wished that she had the energy to crawl across the floor and smack him across the face. Or that he had the energy to do it for her.
“When?” he asked.
“Two months ago.”

Endor. No wonder the name had sounded familiar. Harkness remembered briefly meeting a tall, dark-haired officer named Morgan Raventhorn shortly before the battle. A kid, really. He imagined that girl lying on the floor across from him, with a slightly older face.
Jai remained quiet, but her breathing hadn’t changed. She wasn’t crying. He wondered whether she had cried over her sister at all, and if not, whether she would anytime soon. That idea puzzled him; up until that moment, he had guessed that Jai’s mind worked much the way his did, and that their experiences were similar. But he had never been so numb he couldn’t mourn.

Harkness’ usual course, as a practiced loner, was to give other loners a fairly wide berth. If they wanted to be left alone, he knew it, and he would honor it. But Jai was different. Certainly Harkness had lost his faith in the New Republic, had lost his faith in love, and sometimes had lost faith in himself and his purpose. But he couldn’t imagine what you did when you lost your faith in everything all at once.

“Chessa was killed by a bunch of stormtroopers,” he told her.
“All she was doing was loading crates, but they started a firefight with her. They knew she was a Rebel sympathizer.”

Jai was silent. Harkness went on, “I had been thinking about marriage at the time. I was an idiot, you know, I was young. I thought I could have everything.”

“I had a fiancé myself,” she said.

“What was his name?”

“Krül.”

She said it the way she had said Morgan’s name.

Harkness didn’t think he should say anything else after that. He felt embarrassed at having told Jai so much about himself. Even after four years in the Alliance, among people he trusted without question, he had not told anyone about Chessa. To those who had known her, he never talked about what she meant to him.

The silence seemed to fill up all around him like some invisible snow, and he thought about the absolute last time he had seen Chessa. Pasty, bleeding. Not even a person, really. Some dead people looked like they were sleeping; Chessa’s expression was frozen, her eyes staring up at the docking bay ceiling, surprised and horrified. He shook that image away and pictured her alive and healthy. Then he pictured her lying in a dark cell with a bloody nose and nothing to live for.

At that moment, Harkness came across a part of himself that he did not like to acknowledge, and his stomach tightened. It was the part that had already begun to dissolve the security of his prison, and his sense of unparalleled freedom. It was the entire reason the interrogation officers had seen fit to beat him. He had yet again discovered, to his dismay, the part of himself that wanted to survive. Whole. Undefeated.

Harkness sighed heavily. Well, it was cozy while it lasted. He shut his eyes and took a few deep breaths, willing his body to heal itself, willing the pain to stop. It wasn’t that he had any flair for manipulating the Force or anything like that; he just knew that the reason he had survived all the injuries and setbacks and impossible missions that had marked his military career was because he had willed it. And that was why he wasn’t going to die in this cold, rank little cell. Just by wanting to heal, willing himself to live, he’d find some way to save himself from whatever the Imperials had planned for him.

Saving Jai, on the other hand—that was the part he feared he
couldn’t do anything about.

“Radlin?” said the taller of the guards, thoughtfully giving the E-Web a final wipe and sticking the rag in his back pocket. His voice echoed off the mountainside. “Radlin, I’m bored.”

“I guessed,” said Radlin, still sitting and waggling his foot.

“I mean really bored. Really really. What are we even here for? There’s no more Rebels.”

Radlin said, “It’s procedure. Procedure is this thing you do where you follow orders so you get that promotion thing we talked about?”

“I’m just saying we should think up something to do.”

“You’re just all antsy ’cause that merc guy showed up looking for the Rebels.”

“You’re just all mad ’cause we weren’t the ones who caught him. Look, Rad, let’s just go hunting or something. Pick off some more of those Walking Dead Rebels.”

Behind a nearby tree, Tru’eb caught his breath when he heard them mention the Walking Dead. But it was too late—right on cue, Platt came stumbling up the hill toward the guards. She was trying to imitate the Sullustan’s jerky walk and his glazed expression, but her steps were exaggerated and her tongue was hanging out of her mouth. Tru’eb put a hand to his face and shook his head.

Nevertheless, Radlin leaped up, knocked over his chair and stumbled backwards. When the tall one turned around and saw Platt, he visibly tensed, but he gave a terse, macho laugh. “Radlin, you want this one?”

Platt stopped when the guards’ ledge was at her chest-level. “Excuse me, gentlemen,” she said, clasping her hands behind her back. “Is this the way to the spice mines of Kessel?”

Radlin gave a shriek and opened fire.
“Honestly, Platt,” Tru’eb said, as Platt put on Radlin’s camouflage jacket, “I don’t know how you talked me into that. You know there’s nothing more dangerous than a blaster being handled by someone in a panic.”

“Yeah, but there’s nobody more fun to pick off than somebody in a panic, either.” Platt surveyed the area. “You think there’s any more patrols roaming around?”

“Yes. So let’s be quick about this.”

The dugout was actually situated in front of a deep, man-made fissure that ran straight through the cliff and out the other side. Tru’eb and Platt were pleased to discover that this end of the fissure gave way to a relatively flat area of the forest.

For twenty minutes they made their way over fallen trees and scrub and large rocks. Platt was becoming increasingly nervous. From what she had seen, this end of Zelos didn’t really have dusk; the sun just seemed to wink out in the evening. Moreover, the fog was still thick enough that she could see no more than two meters in front of her at a time.

“What are we even going to do,” she said, stepping in front of Tru’eb and walking backwards. “If we don’t find the garrison before nightfall? I don’t think that cheap survival shelter has another night’s worth of—”

“Tru’eb stopped. “Just a moment,” he said. “Do you hear that?”

“No. What?”

“Almost a rumbling noise.”

“I didn’t—” Platt said, and then the ground underneath her disappeared.

She felt herself falling, tried to scream through a dry mouth and clenched lungs, felt a violent surge of blind panic shooting through her entire body—and then a yanking sensation through her right arm as she stopped and dangled where she was. Tru’eb had her by the wrist.

“What... what was... what just happened?” she said when Tru’eb had hauled her back up and she was on her knees on solid ground. “Did I just fall off the... how come I didn’t see... Tru’eb, what happened?”

Tru’eb didn’t answer; he was staring over her shoulder, awed. Platt turned around just in time to see a black TIE fighter come
whooshing up out of the ground about four meters in front of them.

Both of them fell back in a shower of dirt and leaves, the deafening sound of the TIE roaring overhead, and Platt thought the sheer momentum of the thing might blast her into the mountainside. Then, just as abruptly, everything went quiet.

They looked up. The TIE fighter sailed just above tree-level and then disappeared.

When the pounding in Platt's head subsided, she looked at what she had stepped off of. The ground ahead looked like an overgrown clearing. But now Platt saw that she had walked right off the edge of a sheer rock face that descended hundreds, perhaps even thousands of meters.

Tru'eb was next to her, staring into the gorge. It was impossible to make out the bottom of the valley, a dark well with layers of fog drifting above it. Plunging down into the darkness, the cliff wall was a marbled gray with steplike ridges naturally chiseled into it. There were also outcroppings along the way, so heavily overgrown that the plants and trees hung precariously out over the valley; and waterfalls poured out of the rock face in a number of places. After several dozen meters everything disappeared into a bluish-gray soup.

Far below, winking on and off through the fog, there was a small blue light. And another, and another, and a hundred, neatly lined up. Platt shut her eyes and then looked again.

"Running lights," she said, amazed. "But it's too dark to make out the garrison."

"Hence, the Valley of Umbra," Tru'eb said.

"Yeah, I get it. Look at the waterfalls. Twenty credits says that's a leaky aqueduct."

"Look there," Tru'eb said. "Do you see that? There, and over there—all around."

Platt looked. Weaving in and out of the cliff was a series of metal ladders and walkways, probably leading to maintenance ducts hidden in the rock face.

Tru'eb took her macros. "Six hundred meters down." He looked up. "And the distance across is twice that. I suppose we can safely say we know where Harkness is."

Mist oozed up over the edge of the valley. Platt wasn't sure whether she should be excited or appalled at knowing where Harkness was.

"There must be a turbolift or a flatbed loader leading down,"
Tru’eb said. “You have code cylinders in that uniform, correct?”
“Yes, but I’m not keen on explaining why we’re not at our post. Or why one of us grew head-tails and fangs and the other decided he was much freer as a woman.”
Tru’eb shrugged. “Then it’s straight down.”
“How?”
“We’ll take the maintenance ladder wells. They must eventually lead all the way to the bottom.”
“Suppose somebody’s working on them, genius?”
“Why would they? They have repulsors.”
“Yes, but I’m trying to delay this as long as possible.” She looked at him. “I really don’t want to go down there.”
“But you will.”
“But I will.” She sighed and slid down on her belly, wedged her foot into the cliff face and hoisted herself down. The nearest ladder was about five meters below, according to the macros, but it wasn’t hard to get a foothold on the crags. Before long the two smugglers were standing on a solid, grassy boulder that jutted out over the valley. One of the rusty maintenance ladders, dripping with moisture, stuck out of the rock face nearby.
“I’ll go first,” said Tru’eb, dusting up his hands with dirt and taking a step toward the ladder.
Platt grabbed his shoulder. “Tru’eb.”
“Yes, Platt.”
“Why are we doing this?”
“Harkness is our friend.”
“So what? We have lots of friends.”
Tru’eb stepped onto the ladder. “No, we don’t.”

Before Morgan had died, Jai had experienced several incidents in which she had forgotten who she was.
The most prominent of them had happened about eighteen months ago, when she led a five-man Infiltrator team to Bevell Three on a supposedly well-planned assignment. They were supposed to capture four Imperial agents, but somebody had tipped off the Empire; a squadron of TIE bombers appeared out of nowhere and razed the area. Everybody fell, except for Jai, who walked away without even a bruise. As usual, she got everybody out. But for the
first and only time in her SpecForces career, she didn’t get somebody out alive; Leong, the team’s comm specialist, died en route to the medical frigate.

Jai went through the next week completely numb, not responding much to anything or having any sort of recognizable emotion. High Command promoted her to master sergeant and she didn’t object, even though she knew it was a propaganda tool. No Infiltrator assignment should ever have garnered that much attention, but this one had, and on her watch. Still, she accepted the promotion and went on about her routine business.

Then, one day, rummaging through her locker, she found one of Leong’s gloves and her heart shattered into a million pieces.

Now, lying on the floor in the dark, Jai recalled that moment with a great deal of distance. As if it had happened to somebody else. The memory was vivid, and she could access the sounds and smells and visions of the time with clarity. No matter how hard she tried, however, she couldn’t access the emotion.

What would Leong say if he could see that Jai had let the Imperials take her? Surely he’d be disappointed. But after two months of feeling nothing, suddenly there had been an onslaught of pain, rage, fear, shame—every bit of which was preferable to numbness. For a couple of blissful days, her brain had been so ravaged by the interrogation that she had forgotten to be numb. And now she was back in the same old rut, wishing the pain across her back, the dried blood on her face, the memory of the Imperial soldier swinging the butt of his blaster rifle at her face, any of it would jar her back into emotion.

“I’m starting to wonder if we’ve been forgotten. Personally I’m kind of hungry.”

Harkness’ voice, coming out of another world. Jai had to mentally adjust herself. “Huh?”

“I said I’m kind of hungry,” he said.

“Hmm,” she said dully.

“And that maybe they forgot about us.”

That got Jai’s attention. “What—you think they left us to rot?”

Rotting away, that was something that wouldn’t grant any real emotion, either. Her thoughts drifted back to Bevell Three.

Several minutes later, there was a scraping sound next to Jai’s head. Harkness let out a quick, pained gasp.

“What?” asked Jai.

“Sorry. That hurt my eye,” he said.
"I don’t get what you—"
"Didn’t you see the light?"
Jai hadn’t seen anything.
"The hatch by the door, it opened for a second—" said Harkness.
"I’m not facing the door," Jai told him.
"But you’re near the door?"
"Yeah."
"I think somebody slid something in here," he said.
Jai lifted a sore arm and felt around where she thought she had heard the scraping noise. After a moment she touched something soft and wet. Burrowing her finger down into it, she touched metal.
"I think it’s food," said Jai. "On a tray."
"Taste it," said Harkness.
Jai licked her lips; they were metallic and salty with dried blood.
"I won’t be able to. Anyway, I bet it’s drugged."
"You think?"
"You’re the prison veteran here. Maybe they want us doped up for some reason."
"For what—another interrogation? They don’t need to sneak us drugs for that, not in our condition. They could just come in and—" Harkness stopped.
"And what?"
"Is it me, or did that food come awfully quickly?"
He was right. It came as if he’d asked for it.
"Oh, great," said Jai. "We’ve been monitored."
How could they have overlooked that? She tried to think whether she had told Harkness anything about her past missions, or where she was stationed, or anything at all that could be of use to the Imperials. While she was still racking her brains, she heard the door open, and then footsteps vibrating through the floor, right next to her head. Light flooded into the room, and Jai shut her eyes.
Somebody grabbed her by the hair, hoisted her under her arms to a near-standing position.
"Get up, Rebels," said a man’s voice.
It was familiar, but Jai couldn’t place it, even as she was dragged from the room, even as Harkness began shouting, and his voice trailed off behind her.
Platt and Tru’eb came straggling across the valley floor sometime close to 0600 Standard, Tru’eb estimated. Somewhere beyond the fog and the overhangs he thought he could see the sky turning pink.

Working their way down the cliff had taken the entire night, although everything had blended together in the end; Tru’eb didn’t really remember what the journey had felt like or even looked like. They had just pressed on and on, barely speaking to each other, and when they thought they just couldn’t take another step, they’d do it anyway. Then one more. And one after that. And another. Most of the night had been eaten up in that fashion, and now that the climb was over, Tru’eb felt dazed and dreamy.

He looked to Platt, clambering unsteadily over the rocky ground in her oversized Imperial Army boots; she was covered in dirt and white rock dust, and her face was almost gray with exhaustion. Getting across the valley floor was no less difficult than the trip down, as the ground was covered with small, wet rocky crags.

Platt caught him looking and gave him a wink. Tru’eb smiled back; Platt’s eyes were tired, but clear. The approach of morning was making both of them feel sharper. Moreover, they were both filled with wonder and a sense of brilliant accomplishment. If they didn’t have a greater mission in mind, they would have considered the climb alone to be story fodder for years to come.

Right, let’s not blow it now, Tru’eb thought as he heard a loud, raw voice echoing across the valley. He grabbed Platt’s sleeve and pulled her behind a boulder. A few minutes later the yelling got louder; a squadron of drilling Imperial soldiers came crunching by, the sergeant screaming out cadence. His voice rang off the canyon walls and floor and disappeared way, way overhead.

His men marched on, yelling back in unison. They clambered easily over the rocks, past Tru’eb and Platt, across the deep stream where the waterfalls let out, and finally the troops jogged underneath a landing platform and disappeared around a corner. On a distant cliff wall, a massive flatbed lift sat with an AT-AT on top of it. Two army grunts stood off to the side giving hand-signals to the pilots. Standing in the base’s weak spotlights, they were a sickly yellow color.

“Small operation,” Tru’eb said.
“Pathetic operation.” Platt indicated the landing platform. “If this is a standard garrison, there should be a droid maintenance hatch near there.”

“Will the droids give us any trouble?”
“No. They’re maintenance droids.”
“And the humans?”
“We shouldn’t have any real trouble finding an unmanned security station. This Sergeant Radlin guy should have enough clearance to at least get a look at a prison roster.”
“And then?”
“No idea.”
Tru’eb sighed.
“Don’t fade out on me now, Tru’eb. You’re the one who made us start down the cliff.”
“I know. Come along.”
They made their way over the rocks and across the stream with considerably less grace than the soldiers had done. But it wasn’t long before the landing platform glowed blue over their heads, and Platt struggled to get a code cylinder out of her jacket sleeve with her numb fingers.

The only light source they had had throughout the journey down the mountain was one glow rod, which had gone out shortly before dawn. With the platform overhead, it was almost pitch-black where they were. Platt felt around the wall for what seemed like an incredibly long time before she found a slot and inserted the code cylinder.

As Tru’eb’s eyes adjusted to the dark, he began to see a weak seam of light where the door was located.

Something suddenly occurred to him. “I say, Platt—”
“Oh, yessss,” Platt said happily, as a swishing noise heralded their way into the garrison. “Let’s hear it for the servants’ entrance.”

“—Don’t you think this door is a bit large for just a—”

Both of them winced as the garrison’s blinding light shot out of the doorway; Tru’eb was just starting to see again when he heard somebody yell, “Hey! Who’s out there?”

Tru’eb’s entire body tightened. There was a long silence as he focused on who was speaking: a man in a green Imperial uniform, like Platt’s. Beyond him, there were two rows of what looked like a patrol, maybe ten or twelve men, standing in a small docking bay. Beyond them were speeder bikes, neatly lined up and resting on
maintenance cradles.

"Um...coming through," Platt said, stepping inside and pushing past the soldier nearest to the door. Tru’eb followed, his head down. He knew that was completely pointless. There was no way they hadn’t been made already, and yet the troopers were shocked into indecision for a moment as Platt made her way past them with stunning audacity.

Finally one of them grabbed her by the arm and said, "I don’t think so."

"Run!" Tru’eb shouted, charging ahead. The Imperials around him were still confused, but the ones by Platt were already drawing their blasters. Platt jerked free, right out of Radlin’s jacket, and stumbled forward. When she had gotten her bearings enough to run at a decent clip, she started kicking the speeder bikes off their perches.
Tru'eb followed suit. Blaster-fire spattered behind them, over their heads, into the speeder bikes. The soldiers who had gathered enough sense to run after Tru'eb and Platt came roaring blindly across the docking bay and tripped over the vehicles in their paths. This really is a pathetic operation, Tru'eb thought as he ducked behind a bike and fired a couple of shots.

Still, the Imperials had numbers on their side, and he could see some of them digging comlinks out of their belts. In a few seconds the whole station would know what was going on.

Tru'eb looked over at Platt, who had situated herself at a computer terminal near the turbolift. He squatted down, got one fist around the handlebar controls of the nearest bike and his other hand on the footpedal. Then he pressed the activation button, and set a random automatic course. The bike lifted off of its maintenance cradle, shook for a second, and plowed straight into a pile of its brethren strewn around the floor. There was a loud popping noise as the whole mess burst into flames.

The blaster-fire stopped for a moment. Tru'eb ran over to Platt and ducked behind the terminal.

A voice over the intercom announced to the entire station that there was a fire in docking bay three.

"Droid maintenance hatch, indeed!" Tru'eb shouted, reaching around and firing at those troopers who weren't busy running for an extinguisher. "Where did you get that one from, Platt? 'Palpatine's Military Guide for the Recently-Lobotomized?'" "All right, so they changed a few things!"
"A few, yes!"
"Calm down!" Platt shouted. "I found out that there's only one detention level at this place!"
"Where?"
"Level eight! I already called the turbolift!"

Tru'eb glanced behind them; several meters away the turbolift door was open and waiting. Ahead of them, some of the troops were still trying to return fire and the rest were shouting orders at each other or into their headsets.

"You know it says here that the whole station only outnumbers us a hundred to one? They must have captured Dirk out of sheer paranoia! What do you wanna bet they don't even have a shield generator?"

"Just keep your head down and think up some other grand plan," Tru'eb said, and ran into the turbolift.
Behind him, Platt called, "I already thought of one."

"Fight back! Fight back! Fight back!"

The interrogator's voice came through between waves of dull pain across Jai's stomach. Her hands were free, but she didn't try to stop him.

"In the face of the Empire, you are nothing. The Infiltrators were nothing, and you were a noncommissioned nothing because you didn't have enough brain power to become an officer of nothing."

The pain stopped. Jai heard the interrogator step back and then begin pacing by her head. "Well, I guess this is getting us nowhere," he said loudly to somebody else. Jai lifted her head enough to see the reflections of several gray-suited people across the polished floor. The room wasn't very big; there was a massive desk against the far wall, and most of the rest of the space was taken up by computer terminals. The lighting was soft, almost relaxing. An atmosphere of both utility and comfort. Somebody's office.

The interrogator pushed her head back down with his boot and stood there for a moment. "I am taking my blaster out and setting it on 'kill,'" he announced. "Now I am aiming it at your head, Sergeant Raventhorn."

A moment or two passed.

"I said I'm aiming this blaster set on 'kill' at your head."

Another moment passed.

"Here it goes!"

Pause.

"It's on kill!"

"I heard," Jai said.

He lifted his boot from her head. "Okay, I've decided not to kill you," he said in a tight voice. "But I will when I feel like it."

Another moment passed.

"Oh, get on with the interrogation," said another, exasperated voice. A woman's voice. "I haven't got my whole life to spend watching you annoy her into submission."

"This is how you conduct an interrogation, Major. You show them who's got the power."

"Currently it doesn't appear to be you," the major said. "Interrogation takes control and skill. Which means you're hopeless for
starters."

"Oh, aren't you hilarious. Look, I don't care if this is your garrison—interrogations are my forte. Why are we even doing this in here? I say we take her downstairs and do this properly."

Footsteps across the floor, coming closer to Jai. "This isn't the same as before," the major said. "I've got a different plan. Did you not read the mind-probe data results?"

"Who needed to? Take one look at her! She doesn't care about anything!" the interrogator said. "You could set her on fire and she wouldn't care!"

"Of course she wouldn't care, idiot. You could set her planet on fire, you could blow up the New Republic and she wouldn't care."

Jai was curled up in the fetal position. The voices of the Imperials disappeared into a loud ringing, which Jai thought was in her head; but then there was a deep, tinny voice in the room announcing a fire
in one of the docking bays, and she recognized the sound of a fire alarm.

After a few moments, the alarm died down. The major was finishing off a sentence.

"...See what happens when we bring her mercenary friend in."

Jai focused on the floor again. There were a few drops of blood near her head, a couple more now, a blemish on the spotless Imperial war machine. It made Jai’s head clear out a little bit. In fact, she suddenly felt lucid.

*Bring her mercenary friend in.*

Jai looked up, past the face of the interrogator and into the face of the major. Their eyes locked for a second, and Jai saw the major’s face register that a fatal mistake had been made. In that instant, it was no longer a question of whether Jai was going to talk. It was now a question of who was going to reach the major’s blaster first.

At that moment, Dirk’s world was the mezzanine across from him and the ground floor eight stories below him, the view divided by vertical black metal bars. One of the Imperials was trying to bang Dirk’s head on the rails in a vain attempt to get him to keep still. Apparently Jai’s indifference had led the guards to believe that her cellmate would be just as easy to drag to the interrogation chamber; as a result, several blasters lay scattered across the corridor, two officers lay unconscious by the cell block door, and somebody was screaming for reinforcements over his comlink. Harkness wasn’t sure how many there had been to start with or how many were left. He just knew that he couldn’t manage to get hold of anybody’s blaster, not with his burning, slippery feet sliding out from underneath him anytime he tried to stand on his own, and not with a terrified, unarmed guard shaking him by the collar. Harkness wasn’t sure he could prevent his head from being shoved right through the bars. But then it got worse: the guard gave up on the bars and started ramming Harkness’ head against the floor. There was a resounding pain through Harkness’ skull, a blinding ache that shot through his temples, his teeth, his neck.

Then there was the sound of a blaster being fired—no, several blasters—and some shouts. The guard hesitated. That was all Harkness needed. He reached back, got his fingers underneath the
guard's helmet, and yanked the guard's helmet clean off.

Now Harkness had something better than a blaster. The guard turned out to be a stocky, blond kid, whose face took on an expression of unadulterated panic as Harkness got up on his knees and started bashing away with the helmet.

"Stop, he's out already, take it easy!"

Someone grabbed Harkness by the shoulder. He looked up, blurry-eyed, at someone wearing white and green, and an unmistakable Imperial cap.

"Back off!" he shouted, swinging the helmet at the person's knees. Whoever-it-was managed to dodge out of the way, and said, "Hey, whoa! It's me! Take it easy!"

Harkness stopped himself. His vision cleared; the Imperial was a platinum-haired woman wearing a fancy white smuggler's shirt
and half a trooper uniform. He looked wildly into her eyes, which shifted nervously back and forth as she took him in. “Remember? We’re your partners.... We brought you to Zelos.”

Someone else appeared behind her, a Twi’lek wearing dark glasses and gray robes caked in dirt. Harkness wasn’t sure what their names were, but their manner was familiar; he felt his whole body relax.

“You....” he said after a moment. “We went to the—didn’t you help me nail down a shipment of Imperial blasters? You’re Tru’eb...and Platt.”

“Actually, we’re Platt and Tru’eb,” Platt said.

“You came all this way to get me?”

“We’re funny that way. Do you think you can stand? We’re going to get you out of here, okay?”

Harkness jerked away, as if he suddenly remembered to be crazed. “No! They took her down the hall!”

“Who?”

“Jai! One of the New Republic agents—they were taking both of us down to the chamber, but she wouldn’t even fight—”

“Which chamber? Where?” Tru’eb asked, grabbing him around the waist and pulling him to his feet. Harkness leaned on Tru’eb’s shoulder with most of his weight; Tru’eb didn’t seem to strain at all.

Which door? Harkness looked down the corridor at the row of black doors to his right; the guards had taken Jai through the one with the large white Imperial seal painted on it, although Harkness could have sworn he remembered being shoved through two red-stamped doors before his own interrogation. Moreover, this white-stamped door turned out to be labeled “Command Center.”

As Platt worked at getting a code cylinder into the slot, Harkness found himself looking at his reflection in the metal doorframe. In fact, several seconds passed before he realized that the reflection was actually his; it blinked when he blinked and moved its head when he moved his. But its face was pale, with a mangy light-brown beard sprouting around the hollow cheeks, and the white eyepatch was now a filthy gray.

Platt turned around, scowling. “I lost the other code cylinders
with the jacket. Anyway, there's no way Radlin had this much clearance."

"But you did say you had thought of a plan?" Tru'eb said.

"Yeah, but it had a hitch in it," Platt said.

"Who cares?" said Harkness. "Tell us!"

"Okay—first, I pretend I'm a prison guard and I tell everyone I'm bringing Tru'eb in as a prisoner. Then we get into a heated fight in front of the Imperials, so that they're totally confused for half a second, which is all the time we need to stun everyone, get into the cell block, and free Dirk from his cell."

Dirk and Tru'eb looked at each other, and then back at her.

"Of course that's somewhat irrelevant now," Tru'eb said tersely.

"Yeah, see, that's the hitch."

Harkness leaned his head against the door. He couldn't hear anything going on inside, which made him feel worse. He should have known something like this would happen. It wasn't like it was with Golthan's people; pick a prisoner, teach him or her respect, and then forget about them. That was why Harkness' eye couldn't be replaced—the subsequent infection had destroyed the nerves. It wasn't the pain of the torture that hurt the most to remember; it was the sense of being nothing, a brief amusement to be thrown into a cell like a heap of garbage and then forgotten for three months. Certainly he hadn't been left in solitary, but his cellmates that time were Alliance intentions wimps, and not part of his team. They wouldn't even help him make any escape attempts.

"The sound of Tru'eb's voice brought him back to the present.

"Oh, no. They're here."

The four turbolifts on the opposite side of the mezzanine arrived almost simultaneously. One after the other, the doors opened, and Imperial troops and officers came pouring out, all of them armed, all of them running, all of them shouting. Within seconds, Dirk, Platt, and Tru'eb were surrounded.

"Drop your weapons! Now!"

They obliged.

Harkness' head started throbbing. This is not happening, not after all this, not after I made up my mind....

"Stand down!" somebody shouted.

A new voice. Everyone froze. Two figures were standing in the doorway to the command center.

Harkness blinked a couple of times. He saw a female Imperial major with a red-spattered uniform; her face had flashed into his
mind several times since his interrogation, but he hadn't recognized it until now. Then he saw her.

Jai was as bloody a mess as Harkness. Her eyes squinted in the combination of bright lights and, probably, a splitting post-interrogation headache. There was a thick, red seam across the bridge of her still-bleeding nose; an arm locked around the head of the barely-conscious major; and a heavy, Imperial-issue blaster aimed at the major's right temple.

"Stand down," Jai said again. "I have a proposition."

A young, skinny lieutenant spoke. "Let her go, Rebel," he said. "Drop your blaster, put your hands on your head."

"You can't afford to waste time taking us back into custody," Jai told him.

"And why not?"

"Because the Major and I made a little call to the planetary government."

The lieutenant blanched. A faint murmur started up amidst the troops.

Jai went on, "Apparently
they aren’t amused to find out what’s been lurking here in the Valley of Umbra. I think you’d best evacuate your troops before Governor Nul sends a full-blown air strike.”

“Don’t you think that would be a little paranoid, Rebel?”

Now Platt spoke. “Don’t you think the entire population on this planet is a little paranoid, buddy?”

“Aside from all that, I’m giving you an order,” Jai said. “Because as of three minutes ago, Zelos II belongs to the New Republic. Isn’t that right, Major?”

The major took a deep, rattling breath and nodded faintly.

The lieutenant stared at Jai for a minute, his eyes darting from her to Harkness to the major. It was obvious the boy had never made an executive decision in his life.


The lieutenant looked at the floor.

Then he turned around and signaled the troops. “Initiate evacuation procedure. Come on, do it now! Let’s go!”

Nobody seemed to object. Some of the grunts closer to the turbolifts had already put their blasters away when Jai had said “air strike.” Within seconds the troops had begun to disperse, some of them swearing, most of them trying to shove through the crowd.

“What about the major?” the lieutenant asked Jai.

“I think she’ll be coming back to my base with me. I also think she’ll be loaning us her shuttle to get out of the valley. You don’t object, do you, Lieutenant? Unless you’d like to come along?”

“It doesn’t appear as though your troops would be interested in stopping us,” Tru’eb said.

The boy licked his lips and mumbled something about Docking Bay One, and clearance; then he turned and walked away.

Harkness untangled himself from Tru’eb’s shoulder, leaned against the wall, and took a few excruciating steps toward Jai, who was visibly struggling to keep her adrenaline going in order to hang on to the major. Aside from Jai’s injuries, nothing about her appearance surprised Harkness at all. She matched her voice exactly. And she did look like her sister, a taller, blonde version, with the same ice-blue eyes. The only difference was what seemed to be behind the eyes; Morgan’s were clear and knowledgeable, a window to the brilliance beyond the absent-mindedness. Jai’s were bright and painful and hard to look into. Across her left cheek was a long, pink scar, testimony to a wound that had never seen a bacta
tank; but in a strange way, it didn’t seem ugly or out of place.
Something inside of him felt oddly settled, seeing her for real.
And in those troubled eyes, he saw a glint of recognition as she
finally took a second to focus on his face.
“Harkness.”
“Sarge.”
“You’re...just as I pictured you.”
“You mean happy and handsome?”
“Here, I’ll take Major Psycho,” Platt said. “You guys lean on
Tru’eb. Just concentrate on staying conscious until we get inside
the shuttle.”
Jai seemed to noticed Platt and Tru’eb for the first time. “Who are
you people?”
“Your ticket off the planet,” Platt said, taking Jai’s hand and
shaking it.

At first, Harkness had resisted the idea of being injected with a
heavy sedative. He needed to remind himself that he was on board
Platt’s ship, the *Last Chance*, already light years away from the
garrison, and that the major was imprisoned in the hold. At least
that was what Platt had told him. He didn’t remember anything
beyond hobbling into the major’s *Lambda*-class shuttle and sinking
down into a shiny black passenger seat.

Beyond the concept of taking the sedative, however, he just
didn’t want to sleep. In his experience, sleeping drugs tended to
pull you down into heavy fever dreams you had a hard time waking
up from. And he knew what kind of dreams he was going to have.

“Sorry I don’t have a bacta tank on board,” Platt said, rummaging
through the cabinet next to Harkness’ medical bunk. “But it’s only
a couple days to Wroona from here. Jai, I’ve got a couple of Rebel
friends out there. They can help you contact your base.”

“Thanks,” Jai said. She was lying in the bunk across the room, on
her stomach.
Tru’eb came in. “No medpacs in the forward berthing compart-
ment,” he said.
“You’re kidding. I thought we just stocked up on...oh, here we
go.” Platt tossed one to Tru’eb.
“I don’t want to sleep,” Jai said.
“This really isn’t a strong mixture,” Tru’eb told her, sitting on the edge of her bunk. “It’s actually designed to kill the pain while improving the quality of your sleep. That way your injuries don’t interfere with your normal sleep pattern. Which means you are less likely to have vivid dreams.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“And listen,” Platt said, “it’s not a big ship. If you need anything at all, press the green button on the side of the bed. Yeah, that one. “Okay, Tru’eb and I are going to get a little shut-eye—is there anything else you two need?”

“Leave the lights on,” Jai said.

After Tru’eb and Platt had gone, Harkness said, “What will you do when you get back?”

“Are you kidding? I just inducted an entire planet into the New Republic. I’ve got lots of desk-work to do.”

“Eh. Bag it. Make somebody else fill out the forms.”

“Yeah.” Jai was quiet for a moment; then her voice seemed to slur together. “Maybe when I get back I’ll tell General Madine what he can do with this Intel assignment.”

“Maybe you should.”

“Maybe.”

Harkness felt the sedative seep into his limbs, warm and heavy. The room seemed to mist over, in the same blue-gray fog as the one that hung over the Valley of Umbra.

“Sarge?”

“Yeah?”

“You ever think about becoming a mercenary?”

“Sometimes,” she said. Then her voice seemed to gather a little strength. “Yeah, I think that would be pretty nice.”

“You said you don’t care much about fighting for the New Republic.”

“Why? You proposing something?”

“Maybe.”

She seemed to drift off after that. Harkness felt the silence tugging at him, but it seemed to be easing him into a warm darkness, not a bottomless well.

Then the humming noise came back.

Harkness started; he felt a surge of dismay. But then he settled back and closed his eyes. It hadn’t been a song, or anything to do with Chessa. The humming was the sound of the engines on Platt’s ship.
Roleplaying Game Information

Master Sergeant Jai Raventho'n

Type: Ex-SpecForce Operative

DETERINITY 4D
Blaster 7D+2, brawling parry 5D, dodge 6D, grenade 5D+2, melee combat 5D+1, thrown weapons 4D+2

KNOWLEDGE 3D
Intimidation 5D, streetwise 4D, survival 4D+1, willpower 6D

MECHANICAL 2D+2
Repulsorlift operation 5D, space transports 4D+2, starship gunnery 3D+1

PERCEPTION 2D
Con 5D, hide 4D, sneak 5D

STRENGTH 3D+1
Brawling 6D, lifting 4D+1, stamina 6D+1

TECHNICAL 3D
Demolitions 6D+2, repulsorlift repair 4D, security 6D+1

Force Points: 1

Character Points: 11

Move: 10

Equipment: Blast vest (+1D physical, +1 energy), comlink, 3 fragmentation grenades (5D), 2 heavy blaster pistols (5D), hold-out blaster (3D), vibroknife (STR+1D)

Capsule: Jai grew up scouting and clearing planets, the eldest child of a scout service commander. Her mother died on a backwater planet giving birth to Jai's sister, Morgan. Eight-year-old Jai was devastated, but automatically appointed herself protector to her little sister.

As the girls grew up, it became obvious that they couldn't possibly be more different. Morgan was clumsy and absentminded but brilliant, a child prodigy who wanted to do nothing more than fix ships and clear planets when she grew up. Jai, on the other hand, hated the constant upheaval; she was rambunctious and sarcastic, a crack shot with a blaster by the age of nine, and constantly at odds with their father. But the two sisters
remained close, even after Jai left home following an argument with her father. She went to Rodaj and became a miner, desperate for a quiet, sedentary life.

She got what she wanted, at least for a few years. Eventually the Empire began to exploit Rodaj for its natural resources; some of the Imperial soldiers made a point to harass the local miners, and in one such altercation, Jai’s fiancé was gunned down for no apparent reason. In short order Jai realized that she would never have the kind of life she wanted, blew up an Imperial munitions depot, asked a friend to watch over Morgan, and went into hiding.

Several months later Jai made contact with a Rebel spook. She joined the Alliance and later won a place in SpecForce’s deadliest branch—the Infiltrators. There she gained the respect of her peers, maintaining the lowest casualty rate per mission in that division’s history. All this meant nothing, however, when her sister, Morgan, was killed at the Battle of Endor.

Jai now finds herself adrift. With the Emperor gone, Jai doesn’t

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**Black Curs Sourcefile**

For more information on the Black Curs, their backgrounds and their future activities, check out the following sourcefiles:

- “Recon & Report: The Journey to Coruscant”—the Black Curs’ report from their reconnaissance mission into the Core Worlds after Endor—can be found in *The Official Star Wars Adventure Journal* #2, downloaded again in the *Best of the Star Wars Adventure Journal*.

- “Black Curs Blues” in *Journal* #8 details some of the team’s misadventures after their recon mission.

- Several stories in *The Official Star Wars Adventure Journals* #1–5 shed light on the backgrounds of Dirk, Platt, Tru’eb and Jai.

- For more background on Platt and Tru’eb, you might consult *Platt’s Starport Guide* and *Imperial Double-Cross*.

If you’re looking for more data on Zelos II, there’s a fairly comprehensive sourcefile in the *Star Wars Planets Collection*. 

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remember her purpose in the Rebellion, if she ever had one; with Morgan gone, Jai believes herself a failure. To clear her mind of the overwhelming grief, guilt, and all the what-ifs, she has almost completely shut off her emotions.

Jai Raventhorn is very tall, with long, blonde hair and troubled, ice-blue eyes. Across the left side of her face is an eight centimeter-long vibroknife scar, which she sometimes fingers when she’s nervous or preoccupied.

**Dirk Harkness**

**Type:** Outlaw  
**DEXTERITY 4D**  
Blaster 7D, brawling parry 5D, dodge 5D+2, grenade 4D+2, melee combat 5D, pick pocket 4D+2, running 4D+2  
**KNOWLEDGE 3D**  
Alien species 4D, bureaucracy 4D+1, intimidation 4D+2, planetary systems 4D+1, streetwise 4D+2, survival 5D, willpower 6D  
**MECHANICAL 2D+2**  
Communications 3D, repulsorlift operation 5D, sensors 5D, space transports 4D, starfighter piloting 4D, starship gunnery 5D, starship shields 3D+2  
**PERCEPTION 2D**  
Command 4D, hide 4D, search 3D, sneak 5D  
**STRENGTH 3D+1**  
Brawling 6D, climbing/jumping 4D+2, lifting 4D+1  
**TECHNICAL 3D**  
Capital starship repair 6D, capital starship weapon repair 5D+1, demolitions 4D, first aid 4D+2, repulsorlift repair 4D, security 5D, space transport repair 6D, starfighter repair 5D+2, starship weapon repair 4D+2  
**Force Points:** 4  
**Dark Side Points:** 2  
**Character Points:** 12  
**Move:** 10  
**Equipment:** Datapad, heavy blaster pistol (5D), knife (STR+1D)  
**Capsule:** As chief engineer of *Colders Watch*, a bulk freighter for a large shipping magnate, Harkness tried to steer clear of the Empire as best he could. All he really wanted was to meet a nice girl and settle down with her on
some peaceful planet—as far away as possible from other people. Harkness could be friendly and easygoing, but he was also quiet and introspective, and preferred to keep to himself most of the time.

A quick learner and brilliant technician, Harkness believed that he could accomplish anything. But the one thing he couldn’t do was save Chessa Dohenny—the woman he loved and a Rebel sympathizer—from the wrath of the Empire. He watched in horror as she was gunned down before his eyes; then he retaliated by killing several of her murderers. Fortunately, he quickly met up with Chessa’s Rebel contacts and joined the Alliance.

In essence, he went straight from the scene of her death to the military. He threw himself blindly into training, and dreamed endlessly of making the whole Empire bleed for what it had done to Chessa. His single-minded desire for revenge made his fellow soldiers nervous; his superior officers feared that he might not be a team player. But in a strange way, he was. Harkness wasn’t very sociable, but he was always listening to everything everybody said, and learning from it. He was an extremely perceptive judge of character, and despite his loner attitude, he was actually very good at handling people. Somehow he could always tell what they needed to know, or what they wanted to hear, or what their ulterior motives were. It made him a born leader, whether or not he wanted to be. And to many, it made him even scarier.
With over five million flights every standard hour, we're sure to have space for you.

Corellian Translines

By Chris Hind

Illustrations by Will Warren

Are you tired of hassles at starport customs? Are you fed up with lengthy waits for departure clearance? Have you been ripped off by disreputable captains? If so, scan on, and discover why Corellian Translines is chosen by more beings on more worlds than any other form of galactic travel.

Consider Your Alternatives...

Most Imperial citizens are familiar with one form of commercial space travel—the notion of traveling aboard a light freighter. Indeed, the lifestyle of a “tramp” captain has been romanticized in holovids.
If you’re a freighter captain, you realize this image is mistaken. Freightier travel is not about smuggling star-crossed lovers from planet to planet, visiting strange, new worlds, or cutting loose and becoming your own boss. It is about docking tariffs, refueling and restocking fees, ship permits, flight plans, repair and maintenance fees, customs inspections, devaluing cargo, scrambling to find your next pick-up, waiting for clearance from spaceport traffic controllers, and long, boring hours in hyperspace aboard a cramped ship.

If you’ve ever purchased passage aboard a light freighter, you may have noticed that the accommodations are somewhat lacking, starport traffic controllers give low priority to smaller craft, and the price of fares is highly variable (and almost always outrageous compared to the service). This assumes you were fortunate enough to avoid the many criminals—con-artists, smugglers, even cutthroats—who disguise themselves as honest captains.

In both cases, freighter travel is fraught with peril. Let’s face it: the spacielines are dangerous. There are pirates, Rebel terrorists, hostile aliens, and a host of other dangers. Though the Imperial Navy does an impeccable job in keeping our galaxy safe, space is vast and insidious criminal elements appear in the least-likely places. In case of an emergency, a lone vessel must often fend for itself until help can arrive.

Now Consider Corellian Translines:

Safe • Fast • High Quality
Affordable • Convenient

These words and more have been used to describe Corellian Translines. And it’s no surprise, considering the high standards we’ve set for ourselves.

Your Safety Is Our First Concern

Corellian Translines is licensed to arm its ships with the highest grade of civilian shielding, defensive lasers, and sensor technology. Many members of our crew are Academy graduates. Even so, we take extra precautions. In system, our ships benefit from an escort by patrol craft. Whenever possible, we coordinate our hyperspace jumps with Imperial convoys leaving system—nothing is safer than traveling with a fleet of star galleons! Finally, we trust only well-patrolled routes, so the Imperial Navy is just a comm call away.
Other issues of safety may be less dramatic, but we take them no less seriously. All our vessels conform to rigid safety regulations set by the Imperial Space Ministry concerning the number of escape pods and life boats, the state of distress beacons, life support, and damage control systems. Our stewards are fully trained and certified in first aid and emergency procedure, and can uplink with local medical facilities via a dedicated subspace channel.

**Proudly Corellian!**

Our fleet consists of quality starships—the best the Corellian Engineering Corporation and other reputable companies, such as Incom and DuroTech, have to offer. We employ the best Corellian pilots, as well as the finest Corellian, Sullustan, and droid astrogators. Our travel routes are charted along fast, safe, tried-and-true Corellian trade routes.

Corellians have been plying the spacetanes for as long as hyperdrives have existed. With this sort of experience and tradition anchoring our team of professionals, is it any wonder we can get you where you want to go faster than anyone else?

**We Prefer Voyage**

Rather than "trips" or "flights," our customers take *voyages*. No other word can described the quality experience that is yours each time you choose Corellian Translines. Our starships are clean, spacious, and tastefully furnished; our larger vessels boast custom life support for a number of non-human species. Courteous stewards serve beverages and meals, and happily discuss (often in your native tongue) anything you need to know about your destination.

**Save Time and Credits!**

What's the best thing about Corellian Translines? We take care of all those fees and permits, flight plans and other hassles. All you have to do is sit back and enjoy the voyage! You'll wonder why you ever considered any alternative form of space travel.

**Corellian Translines' Services**

**Interplanetary Shuttles**

Whatever planet you're on, look for our Shuttle Services kiosk first. On a growing number of worlds and in a growing number of starports, Corellian Translines offers quality, comfortable trans-
port from surface to orbit, surface to satellite, and between planets in system. We use the dependable Incom W-33 Star Ferry, a passenger configuration of the well-known W-23 Star Hauler.

One or more shuttles lift off every standard hour.* In 15 minutes you can be boarding an orbiting luxury liner for that cruise of a lifetime. In half an hour you can arrive at work on a satellite colony, having already scanned the morning's newsnet datacard. Within hours, you and your family can be visiting Aunt Amhel on your system's second inhabited planet. Each stop includes a layover of 5–15 minutes.

Tickets are priced at just five credits each way. We also offer two varieties of Shuttle Pass, monthly (just 200 credits) and yearly (2,400 credits), which qualifies you for unlimited travel during the specified duration. If you're a daily commuter, those savings can really add up! For baggage over 15 kilograms, you can secure space in the cargo hold. Just five credits per 100 kilos, this option is ideal if, for instance, you'd like to take your speeder with you on vacation (approximately 100 credits), or are returning from a commerce
station with an armload of purchases.

Our shuttle service is constantly expanding to new markets, so whenever you need to take an intersystem voyage, look for a Corellian Translines Shuttle Service kiosk first.

**Interstellar Transit: Standard Service**

For longer voyages, you'll want tickets on one of our hyperspace-capable, interstellar crafts. We offer three services: Standard, Express and Pinnacle. Standard service is sufficient for most casual travelers, especially those on a budget.

Depending on bookings, you will fly aboard either a Gallofree Yards transport, capable of carrying 200 passengers, or a 20-passenger Corellian YT-1300. In either case, our ships feature separate seating, dining and sleeping compartments (double bunks). Once in hyperspace, you're free to stretch your legs, purchase a snack from the autochef, or enjoy the vista of hyperspace from the observation deck. We suggest you bring along a datapad, portasonic, or conform pillow.

We offer a range of destinations from Corellia to other worlds, Core to the Mid-Rim, even to a few choice destinations in the Outer Rim. Most flights are routed through Corellia to take advantage of the fast space lanes.*

Tickets cost approximately 100 credits per 10 hours of flight each way. This price includes an allowance for 100 kilograms of baggage, such as a droid; for each additional 100 kilos of baggage (or non-sentient pets), a 50 credit charge applies, irrespective of distance. We're currently offering a special fare: buy one ticket and a companion travels for free. For sample routes, fares, and schedules, please refer to the Available Flights listing at the end of this datafile. Some restrictions apply.

**Interstellar Transit: Express Service**

For more comfort and less travel time, may we suggest Express Service? Designed for interstellar trips of 1–10 hours duration, these faster flights take advantage of the Corellian Corvette's grade-II hyperdrive and feature window or aisle seating, refreshers, holovids, and meals. A choice of first-, second-, and third-class seating is available.

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*We also have hubs in the Brak, Kira and Raviter sectors for voyages to and from certain Mid- and Outer Rim destinations; for these routes and schedules, please refer to local data listings.*
• Third-class seating is similar to our Standard Service, but you benefit from a faster trip.
• Second-class passengers are served an in-jump snack, holovid, and comfort pillow.
• First-class provides a steaming insta-cooked meal, free distilled beverages, even more legroom, an in-jump holovid, complementary datalink hookup, and a personal viewport.

Tickets cost roughly 80 credits (third-class), 110 credits (second-class), and 140 credits (first-class) per hour of flight. This price includes 100 kilograms of baggage; for each additional 100 kilos costs 50 credits. Tickets are non-refundable; a 50 credit surcharge applies to any rescheduling.

Interstellar Transit: Pinnacle Service

Corellian Translines is proud to provide Pinnacle Service, something no other commercial spaceline offers. That’s because we have painstakingly worked to acquire virtually the entire production line of classic DuroTech Superluminal-class passenger shuttles. Equipped with grade-1 hyperdrives and the best defensive shielding, the Superluminal-class is the pinnacle of speed, safety and comfort. These ships provide first-class comfort for 6 passengers.

We offer many regular routes within the Core Worlds. Other regions may have variable service, depending on demand.

Tickets cost roughly 300 credits per flight hour. Due to space limitations, passengers are restricted to 100 kilograms of cargo, 10 kilos of carry-on baggage, and one walk-on droid. A Superluminal can also be chartered for 2,000 credits per hour; in this case, cargo is simply limited to the ship’s capacity.

Luxury Liners

Most Imperial citizens are familiar with Galaxy Tours and their slogan: “Give us four weeks, and we’ll give you the galaxy.” This travel agency books cruises for all the major spacelines, including Corellian Translines. If you’ve ever taken their Grand Galactic Tour, chances are you’ve already flown Corellian Translines.

We currently have three luxury liners in our fleet. The Lady of Mindor, a Shobquix Yards Lady-class luxury liner, tours the Corporate Sector under the auspices of Authority Tours. Boarding at the borderworld of Dis, the Lady visits Bonadan, Reltooine, Ammuud
and several other systems.

Our *Kuari Princess*, a scaled-down MC80 Star Cruiser, is the flagship of Galaxy Tour’s Four Week Grand Galactic Tour. Boarding at Corellia, the Princess brings the romantic deserts of Tatooine, gambling resorts of Bespin, and Imperial splendor of Coruscant within your reach.

Following the success of the Kuari Princess, we’ve recently launched a full-sized MC80 Star Cruiser, the *Empress*. A full 1,200 meters from stem to stern, this liner offers larger staterooms and a greater range of entertainments and activities. You’ll also find the galaxy’s first shipboard biosphere resort, managed by a staff of Ithorian and Ho’Din ecologists, where you can get back to nature without the danger or discomfort associated with undeveloped worlds. The *Empress* departs from Coruscant and visits the oceanic paradise of Pantolomin, The Wheel orbital casino, Berchest (famed for its markets and the City of Glowing Crystal), and Hijarna, where passengers may participate in an archaeological expedition and treasure hunt through the planet’s fabled ruins.

Each of our luxury liners features the highest quality in service, dining, entertainment and accommodations. A typical four-week cruise may cost as little as 1,000 credits for an economy double-berth room. For those who demand only the very best, we offer the deluxe Royal Suite—complete with personal viewport and 1,000 cubic meters of personal space—for 10,000 credits. We are able to provide this range of accommodations thanks to our unique pass-key system, which limits some passengers to their designated decks while allowing others free run of all the ship’s passenger decks.

For more information, please contact Galaxy Tours or a Corellian Translines office near you.

**A Step-by-Step Guide to Space Travel**

For those of you new to space travel or to Corellian Translines, please read the following step-by-step guide to find out how painless we make this process, from the time you book a flight to when we wish you “clear skies” at your destination.

**Booking a Flight**

Corellian Translines maintains offices on every major planet—sector capitals, worlds with a civilized population greater than two billion or an Imperial-class spaceport, and worlds designated as
major commerce systems. Additionally, you can reach our many booking offices via subspace comm unit or planetary comm-net.

Our friendly agents will book a flight that is right for you. If you call three standard months in advance, you'll receive a 20 percent discount. Bookings made more than six standard months in advance are subject to change with notice, should our flight schedule alter for any reason.

Once payment is verified, we'll send out your tickets as well as duraplast luggage tags.

Check-in and Customs

Please arrive at the spaceport at least two hours in advance. This way you will have ample time to pass through customs and react to any change in your flight's schedule. At the spaceport, check in at the Corellian Translines desk, where you will receive your boarding authorization and be asked to fill out a Customs Declarations dataform. Then proceed to Customs. There security personnel will scan you and your luggage.

For your safety, weapons, explosives and certain electronic
devices are not permitted aboard the ship; however, assuming you have an appropriate license, almost anything can be transported in your baggage. This does not include anything deemed illegal under Imperial law; in such a circumstance, the item will be confiscated, the bearer detained, and proper authorities notified.

Our customs inspectors will also notify you of any unique restrictions or laws your destination may have regarding anything you are bringing with you. Where possible, they can comm ahead and set the appropriate licensing processes in motion.

**The Wait Until Boarding**

While waiting for the boarding call, take advantage of the holoscreens, shops, and cafes that border most starport lounges.

Boarding starts 20 minutes before departure. It begins by calling aboard the elderly and infirm, those with small children, and any beings who need special consideration, and then proceeds in order of seating. Please have your boarding authorization ready.

**The Voyage**

Sit back and enjoy the trip. If your flight includes a layover, feel free to spend the time as you like, but we suggest you allow yourself ample time to return to the ship. Corellian Translines runs a very tight schedule. Our flights *will not wait* for stragglers.

**Arriving at Your Destination**

Proceed to the baggage department to claim your belongings. If your luggage contains anything requiring special clearance, it will be re-routed to the local customs inspection site, where you'll have to go to claim it, pay any fees, or make other arrangements. Also note that certain planets—particularly in the Core—require every visitor to go though a second customs inspection to verify your identification, determine the reason and length of your stay, and re-scan your luggage.

In any case, we recommend you carry valid identification and all licenses/permits with you to avoid being detained.

And that's all there is to it. We hope you choose Corellian Translines for all your space travel needs.

**Roleplaying Game Adventure Ideas**

A part of Star Wars involves racing about the galaxy in your own starship, whether as a tramp freighter captain, a scout, or a noble
# Corellian Translines

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aboard her private yacht. However, many other stories could be
told. Imagine a group of blasters-for-hire traveling from planet to
planet in search of work; a Rebel cell operating deep undercover as
factory workers on an enslaved world; a failed Jedi and his protégé
wandering the galaxy in search of enlightenment; or a team of
corporate trouble-shooters....

None of these groups require a private ship, yet they all need
some way to get around. Until now, the easiest solution was to have
the group include a smuggler, trader, scout or other character who
starts the game with a ship, somewhat spoiling the theme. This
article attempts to provide all the necessary material to use
commercial space travel as a viable alternative.

While most voyages should be uneventful—that's supposed to
be part of the appeal for characters to "Fly Corellian Translines"—
the following adventure ideas might be used to add occasional
variety.

Shipwrecked

The characters are traveling aboard a commercial flight when a
mishap occurs. The deck rocks, the lights flicker, then go out, and
the hull groans. The ship has dropped out of hyperspace and is
severely damaged, perhaps by a rogue moon or a forgotten
spacemine. The entire command section has been obliterated.
Depending on their proximity to the impact, passengers take 1D to
6D damage. Gamemasters are encouraged to describe the ship
breaking apart in dramatic fashion. Unless the characters act
foolishly, they should be able to escape just in time (but they don't
know this).

Warning alarms sound, and a maddeningly placid computer
voice instructs everyone to proceed calmly to the nearest escape
pod. In fact, struggling through the panicked crowds while the
artificial gravity begins to fail involves a Difficult running roll.
Perhaps the first escape pod they reach is full, or a selfish passen-
ger shuts the hatch and punches the ejection sequence even as the
characters approach.

While the fleet of escape pods streaks toward the nearest planet,
the characters may want to scan the surface using sensors. On a
Very Difficult or Heroic planetary systems roll, someone may have
actually heard of this world—horror stories, of course.

Once the pod has crash-landed on the planet's surface, the
characters face a number of challenges. First, they may want to
**Starport Security**

What do you do if a character attempts to smuggle a weapon through customs, either in his luggage or on his person? Simple concealment requires the player make an opposed hide roll against the security guard's search. To modify or design a weapon or explosive so it resembles some less-dangerous item requires a Very Difficult blaster repair or Technical roll. Even so, it is possible that an astute security guard may still realize the item's true nature (roll Perception).

In all cases, the gamemaster should use common sense. Starport security and customs officers take their jobs seriously, sometimes fanatically. Characters who attempt to smuggle illegal items through customs are doing so at their own risk.

**Typical Security Guard.** All stats are 2D except: blaster 3D, brawling parry 4D, dodge 3D, investigation 3D, streetwise 4D, brawling 4D, Perception 3D, search 4D, security 3D. Move:10. Blast vest (+1D physical, +2 energy), comlink, hand-scanner (+1D to search), stun blaster (4D stun).

round up the other survivors and take charge of organizing their survival. If aliens are among the passengers, this may be complicated by a language barrier or physiological considerations, such as a Tarong's poor resistance to cold. Many passengers require first aid. What if one of the ship's crew has survived, and tries to undermine the characters' authority (perhaps by leading a splinter group off on a hopeless mission)? Other challenges include creating shelters and finding food while avoiding dangerous plant and animal life, and maintaining a steady distress beacon with limited power cells.

The differences between this survival scenario and others in Star Wars are the lack of salvageable parts to repair one's own ship or a convenient pirate vessel to hijack. The characters' lives are in the hands of fate, and they must struggle to survive until a rescue team finds them.

**Hijackers**

While traveling aboard a starliner, terrorists take over the ship. They have managed to smuggle weapons and explosives aboard the flight, perhaps because they have someone on the inside (maybe a customs inspector or steward), or because the weapons are of unique alien design and do not register on standard scanners.
The terrorists are Mon Calamari, whose secret sect—the Akkad ("Deep Dwellers")—wants nothing to do with either the Empire or the Rebellion, seeing both as manipulative and destructive to their traditional way of life. This particular attack is an attempt to gain notoriety for their sect, as well as alienate Admiral Ackbar and other Mon Calamari from the galaxy at large. To achieve this, they are prepared to destroy the entire ship and kill everyone on board, after attaining a direct feed to a popular newsnet, of course.

The characters have limited time to overpower the terrorists (who outnumber them by at least two to one) or disarm the explosives (Very Difficult demolitions; failure by more than 10 being very bad...). Sneak, brawl, and dodge would all be useful. Various Technical skills might be used to improvise weapons, over-ride ship security or access computer controls, or selectively sabotage ship functions.

At the same time, less physical characters may help to calm the passengers or attempt to buy time by negotiating with the terrorists.

And what if the pilot is incapacitated during a failed attempt at heroics? A character with space transports skill may be called upon to take the con, and thus find herself in a position to act as intermediary between the terrorist leader and outside authorities (via subspace comm unit).

A Steady Job

Need to get the characters aboard a starliner? Perhaps they’re either down on their luck, need a break from risking their necks, or want to go undercover as “average citizens.” As a result, they answer a newsnet ad: “Progressive corporation seeks qualified pilots, navigators, engineers, and stewards. Excellent opportunities for advancement: 20,000 to 40,000 credits a year, depending on experience, plus benefits.” They sign on with Corellian Translines as crewers in various positions. Give them some idea of what three months of routine aboard ship feels like, then throw one of these adventures at them.

Seek and Detain

For the last several months, Rebel operatives or independent bounty hunters—the characters—have been closing in on an assassin known only as Nova. At the last moment, the criminal manages to slip away, but not cleanly. Thanks to clues found at her
abandoned living quarters, the characters are led to believe that Nova intends to board a Corellian Translines flight under an assumed identity. Once she reaches her destination—a heavily populated world in the Core—she will vanish. The operatives must board the ship and find her before the end of flight.

The characters have only a few clues to her identity: Nova is a human female; she is a master of disguise and forgery, so appearances will be deceiving. However, they should be able to narrow the search by using what they know of her personality (self-indulgent, a fan of Lorradian ballet, allergic to fur) and other clues (she couldn’t have brought much luggage).

While performing the shipboard search, useful skills might include search, investigation, security (to sneak into various cabins), computer programming/repair (to access the ship’s passenger list), and forgery (to detect falsified identification).

Cornering Nova might present other problems. Challenges might include a chase through a crowded passenger deck, a blaster fight in the engineering section, or a tense hostage situation involving a high-ranking member of the crew.

**Courier Run**

The characters are offered a lucrative job as couriers, carrying a time-sensitive package from one world to the next. Either their ship is in repair for the next couple of days, or it is simply too slow to reach the destination on time: only Corellian Translines’ Pinnacle Service will meet their tight deadline.

The package could be stolen corporate data, news of a raid on a Rebel cell or base, or even a cloned organ needed for life-saving surgery. The gamemaster is responsible for justifying why the employer trusts the characters for such a delicate job.

To succeed in this mission, the characters may have to hide the item or encrypt the data deep in a datapad’s memory banks, invent alternate identities and con their way past customs (if the item is illegal), or even keep the item from being stolen by a rival, or perhaps just a petty con artist who sees an opportunity for profit.
Roleplaying Game Statistics

**Passenger Shuttle**

- **Craft:** Incom W-33 Star Ferry
- **Type:** Intra-system passenger ferry
- **Scale:** Capital
- **Length:** 80 meters
- **Skills:** Space transports: W-33 Star Ferry
- **Crew:** 2, skeleton: 1/+5
- **Crew Skill:** Space transports 4D, starship shields 3D
- **Passengers:** 40
- **Cargo Capacity:** 250 metric tons
- **Consumables:** 1 month
- **Cost:** 196,000 (new), 50,000 (used)
- **Maneuverability:** 1D+1
- **Space:** 3
- **Atmosphere:** 260; 750 kmh
- **Hull:** 3D+2
- **Shields:** 1D
- **Sensors:**
  - **Passive:** 15/0D
  - **Scan:** 30/1D
  - **Search:** 30/1D+2
  - **Focus:** 1/1D

*Source:* Thrawn Trilogy Sourcebook

**Mass "Standard" Transport**

- **Craft:** Modified Gallofree Yards Transport
- **Type:** Modified medium transport
- **Scale:** Capital
- **Length:** 90 meters
- **Skills:** Space transports: Gallofree Yards transport
- **Crew:** 6, gunners: 1, stewards: 10, skeleton: 3/+10
- **Crew Skill:** Astrogation 5D, sensors 4D, space transports 4D, starship gunnery 3D+1, starship shields 3D, cultures 4D, languages 3D, planetary systems 3D
- **Passengers:** 200
- **Cargo Capacity:** 5,000 metric tons
- **Consumables:** 6 months
- **Cost:** 350,000 (new), 125,000 (used)
- **Hyperdrive Multiplier:** x4
- **Hyperdrive Backup:** x15
- **Nav Computer:** Yes
- **Space:** 2
- **Atmosphere:** 225; 650 kmh
- **Hull:** 2D
- **Shields:** 1D
- **Sensors:**
  - **Passive:** 10/0D
  - **Scan:** 25/1D
  - **Search:** 40/2D
  - **Focus:** 2/3D
- **Weapons:**
  - 4 Twin Laser Cannons (fire-linked)
  - **Fire Arc:** Turret
Crew: 1
Scale: Starfighter
Skill: Starship gunnery
Fire Control: 1D
Space Range: 1–3/12/25
Atmosphere Range: 100–300/1.2/2.5
Damage: 4D
Source: Rebel Alliance Sourcebook

Light "Standard" Transport
Craft: Modified Corellian Engineering Corporation YT-1300 Transport
Type: Modified light freighter
Scale: Starfighter
Length: 26.7 meters
Skill: Space transports: YT-1300
Crew: 1 (1 can coordinate), gunners: 1, stewards: 1
Crew Skill: Astrogation 5D, sensors 4D, space transports 4D, starship gunnery 3D+1, starship shields 3D, cultures 4D, languages 3D, planetary systems 3D
Passengers: 20
Cargo Capacity: 20 metric tons
Consumables: 2 months
Cost: 100,000 (new), 25,000 (used)
Hyperdrive Multiplier: x2
Hyperdrive Backup: x12
Nav Computer: Yes
Space: 4
Atmosphere: 480; 800 kmh
Hull: 4D
Shields: 1D
Sensors:
   Passive: 10/0D
   Scan: 25/1D
   Search: 40/2D
   Focus: 2/3D
Weapons:
   Laser Cannon
      Fire Arc: Turret
      Crew: 1
      Skill: Starship gunnery
      Fire Control: 2D
      Space Range: 1–3/12/25
      Atmosphere Range: 100–300/1.2/2.5
      Damage: 4D
Source: The Star Wars Roleplaying Game, Revised & Expanded

Mass "Express" Transport
Craft: Corellian Engineering Corporation Corvette
Type: Mid-sized multi-purpose vessel
Scale: Capital
Length: 150 meters
Skill: Capital ship piloting: Corellian Corvette
Crew: 30, gunners: 12, stewards: 20, skeleton: 10/-10
Crew Skill: Astrogation 5D, capital ship gunnery 3D+1, capital ship piloting 4D, capital ship shields 3D, sensors 4D, cultures 4D, languages 3D, planetary systems 3D
Passengers: 600
Corellian Transline

Cargo Capacity: 500 metric tons
Consumables: 1 month
Cost: 3.5 million (new), 1.5 million (used)
Hyperdrive Multipler: x2
Hyperdrive Backup: x8
Nav Computer: Yes
Maneuverability: 2D
Space: 6
Atmosphere: 330; 950 kmh
Hull: 4D
Shields: 1D
Sensors:
   Passive: 10/0D
   Scan: 25/1D
   Search: 40/2D
   Focus: 2/3D
Weapons:
   6 Laser Cannons
     Fire Arc: 3 front, 1 left, 1 right, 1 back
     Crew: 1 (3), 3 (3)
     Scale: Starfighter
     Skill: Starship gunnery
     Fire Control: 1D
     Space Range: 1-3/12/25
     Atmosphere Range: 100-300/
     1.2/2.5
     Damage: 4D
Source: The Star Wars Roleplaying Game, Revised & Expanded

Light Express

Transport

Craft: DuroTech Superluminal
Type: Rapid passenger shuttle
Scale: Starfighter
Length: 27 meters
Skill: Space transports: DuroTech Superluminal
Crew: 2 (1 can coordinate), steward: 2, skeleton: 1+10
Crew Skill: Astrogation 5D, space transports 4D, starship gunnery 3D+1, starship shields 3D, sensors 4D, cultures 4D, languages 3D, planetary systems 3D
Passengers: 6
Cargo Capacity: 20 metric tons
Consumables: 1 month
Cost: 200,000 (new), 100,000 (used)
Hyperdrive Multipler: x1
Hyperdrive Backup: x10
Nav Computer: Yes
Maneuverability: 2D
Space: 7
Atmosphere: 350; 1,000 kmh
Hull: 2D
Shields: 4D
Sensors:
  Passive: 25/1D
  Scan: 50/2D
  Search: 75/3D
  Focus: 3/4D
Weapons:
  Double Laser Cannon
    Fire Arc: Turret
    Crew: 1 (fires from pilot's console)
    Skill: Starship gunnery
    Fire Control: 1D
    Space Range: 1-3/12/25
    Atmosphere Range: 100-300/1.2/2.5
    Damage: 5D
Source: "Elusive," No Disintegrations

Light Luxury Liner
Craft: Shobquet Yards Lady-class Luxury Liner
Type: Luxury passenger liner
Scale: Capital
Length: 310 meters
Skill: Space transports: Lady-class liner
Crew: 36, gunners: 4, stewards: 81, skeleton: 20/+15
Crew Skill: Astrogation 5D, capital ship gunnery 3D+1, capital ship shields 3D,
sensors 4D, space transports 4D, cultures 4D, languages 3D, planetary systems
3D
Passengers: 600
Cargo Capacity: 1,000 metric tons
Consumables: 300 days
Cost: 19 million (new), 10 million (used)
Hyperdrive Multiplier: x2
Hyperdrive Backup: x20
Nav Computer: Yes
Space: 6
Hull: 2D
Sensors:
  Passive: 20/0D
  Scan: 30/1D
  Search: 40/2D
  Focus: 2/2D+2
Weapons:
  4 Twin Blaster Cannons (fire-linked)
    Fire Arc: Turret
    Crew: 1
    Skill: Capital ship gunnery
    Fire Control: 1D
    Space Range: 1-3/6/9
    Atmosphere Range: 100-300/600/900
    Damage: 4D
Source: Han Solo and the Corporate Sector Sourcebook (The Lady of Mindor)
Mass Luxury Liner

Craft: Mon Calamari MC80 Star Cruiser
Type: Luxury Liner
Scale: Capital
Length: 500 meters
Skill: Capital ship piloting: Mon Cal cruiser
Crew: 300, gunners: 30, stewards: 510, skeleton: 150/+10
Crew Skill: Astrogation 5D, capital ship gunnery 3D+1, capital ship piloting 4D,
capital ship shields 3D, sensors 4D, cultures 4D, languages 3D, planetary systems
3D
Passengers: 3,500
Cargo Capacity: 5,000 metric tons
Consumables: 1 year
Cost: 140 million
Hyperdrive Multiplier: x2
Hyperdrive Backup: x9
Nav Computer: Yes
Maneuverability: 1D
Space: 5
Hull: 5D
Shields: 2D
Sensors:
  Passive: 30/1D
  Scan: 50/2D
  Search: 100/3D
  Focus: 3/3D
Weapons:
  10 Turbolaser Batteries
    Fire Arc: 3 front, 2 left, 2 right, 3 back
    Crew: 1 to 3
    Skill: Capital ship gunnery
    Fire Control: 2D
    Space Range: 3–15/35/75
    Damage: 3D

Source: "A Certain Point of View," Star Wars Adventure Journal #8 (The Kuari
Princess).
A Servant of the Empire

By James L. Cambias

Illustrations By Matt Busch and Jeff Menges

Mace knew he was in trouble when the shooting started. When the Imperial Customs cruiser had hailed his ship, Mace had tried desperately to stall for time. He'd used the old "communications malfunction" routine, followed by the "how do I know you're not pirates?" ploy. He was just going into the "reactor leak" number when the cruiser opened fire.

Either the first barrage was just a warning, or else the Imperial gunners were terrible shots. Mace threw the engine controls to maximum and switched off the safety interlocks. The Ordinary Trader leapt away from the cruiser like a frightened tauntaun.

Thump! The cabin shook as a laser blast struck the ship's flimsy
shields. Two more shots followed. The shield status panel was all red.

Okay, so they're not bad shots, thought Mace. But how's their piloting?

He began jinking and veering the Ordinary Trader. Give them a minute to get used to it, and then—the hull groaned as Mace pulled the ship into a tight corkscrew turn, sending it hurtling down toward the system's largest gas giant.

On the bridge of the patrol cruiser Sentinel, Commander Panatic was deceptively relaxed. Normally a very upright, spit-and-polish officer, in combat he slumped immobile in his seat. Only his eyes remained alert, glued to the tracking display.

When the fugitive changed course, Panatic barely blinked. "Ensign Monidda, change to vector ten by two-ninety. Maintain speed."

"He's going into the planet's ring system!" Ensign Av, the astrogator, called out.

"Follow him."

As the view of the rings ahead changed from a shimmering silvery arch to a barrage of tumbling icebergs, Ensign Monidda began to earn his pay. The fugitive freighter looped and dodged among them, and the Sentinel hung grimly on its tail.

"All stop!" The helmsman shut down the engines with a sigh of relief.

"You're letting him get away, sir?" Av looked puzzled.

"Take us out. Vector zero by ninety." Panatic glanced over at the astrogator. "I'm not going to play his game. Once we're clear of the rings, switch to silent running. Engines off, sensors to passive mode. We'll let him find us."

"Ha!" Mace allowed himself a little chuckle when his scanner no longer showed the Imperial cruiser. "Serves them right for trying to follow a master pilot through an ice ring."

He slowed the Ordinary Trader to a safe speed, and scanned. No sign of the Imperial ship anywhere. Had they hit an ice chunk? He felt a momentary twinge of sympathy as he steered cautiously out
of the rings and set a course for open space. He was just setting the hyperdrive when everything went wrong.

The cruiser was dead ahead, blazing away with all four lasers. Before Mace could react or adjust the shields, the Ordinary Trader was hit three times. Mace’s control board lit up red, showing maneuvering thrusters out, shields gone, and the laser cannon disabled.

“Surrender or be destroyed!” the comm speaker blared.

“Okay, okay. You’ve got me.”

Commander Panatic led the boarding party himself. Sergeant Ivlik and Private Kamlok kept the prisoner at gunpoint while Ensign Av and the other two troopers searched the ship. Panatic sat in the pilot’s seat, asking questions.

“Name? Occupation?”

“My name’s Rav Mace. I’m a freelance trader registered out of Dovuli.” That much was true. Of course, he had registration documents for half a dozen other systems, too.

“You’re a long way from home, then. Cargo and destination?”

“I’m carrying medical supplies to the Moldar system.”

“Your drive’s set for the Shkali system.”

Mace tried to keep his face blank. “Must’ve made a mistake setting it. You were shooting at me.”

“Yes. Why did you try to run, by the way?”

“I thought you were pirates. My comm system’s been acting up, like I told you.” Mace glanced nervously at the two black-clad troopers flanking him.

Panatic swivelled his seat around to the comm panel, and flipped a switch. “Panatic here. Do you read me, Sentinel?”

“Sentinel here. Loud and clear, sir,” said Lieutenant Sukal’s voice from the speaker.

Panatic raised an eyebrow. Mace said nothing.

“Your ship has pretty good drives for a simple trading vessel.”

“I like to tinker. Besides, speed is money.”

Ensign Av returned. “I’ve checked the cargo hold. Four cases of medical supplies—no contraband.”

Mace broke into a big smile. “See? I told you! This is all just a terrible misunderstanding. Now if you’ll just let me be on my way...”
Panatic got to his feet. “Bring him.”
Urged by Sergeant Ivlik’s blaster, Mace followed the captain aft, to the cargo section. Panatic looked impassively at the crates. “Ensign! Did you look inside the cases?”
“Yes, sir. Clear down to the bottom.”
“Mm.” Panatic turned and glared at Mace. “Mm,” he repeated. Slowly, like a trackbeast on a scent, he went forward again, stopping to look into each compartment. Crew quarters, galley, passenger stateroom....

“Are your life pods in order?”
“Sure! I’ve got the latest inspection logged in the computer. I’ll just call it up for you and then—”

“Check the life pods,” Panatic ordered Sergeant Ivlik.
The Ordinary Trader carried two life pods. Ivlik opened the hatch on the starboard pod and looked in. “Looks all right, sir.”

“See? Everything’s perfectly all right. I’m sure you’ve got a busy schedule, so there’s no point in wasting any more time here.” Mace fell silent as Ivlik opened the second pod.

“Captain! There must be a hundred blasters packed in here.” Ivlik squinted at the serial numbers on the wrappings. “Looks like Imperial Army issue.”

“Look, I had no idea—” began Mace, but Panatic cut him off.

“Lock him in the brig.” As Ivlik and Kamlok led Mace away, Panatic got out his comlink and called the bridge. “Lieutenant Sukal, I’m putting you in charge of the prisoner’s ship. Tell Monidda to plot a course to Shkali system. We’re going to find out what this smuggler was up to.”

The Sentinel entered the Shkali system ten hours later, on full battle alert. Lieutenant Sukal, followed close behind in the Ordinary Trader. But repeated scans showed no other ships in the system.
“Still nothing, sir,” Ensign Monidda reported for the ninth time.
“All right. Cancel alert. Disarm weapons. Take us into orbit and do a sweep of the planet’s surface.”

He called up the astrogation database. Shkali, the main world of the system, was a cool, watery world with wide forests and some dry grassland. The natives were stone-age saurians with no planet-wide political system. Orbital scans had found no useful resources,
and the system was far from any trade routes. Panatic frowned at the screen. Why would anyone want to smuggle blasters to such a backwater? An adventurer might arm some natives and carve out an empire, but for what? The glory of lording it over a pack of scaly primitives?

There must be something else on Shkali. Something missing from the database. A Rebel outpost, perhaps? Panatic’s pulse quickened at the thought.

Ensign Monidda interrupted his ruminations. “Sir! I’m picking up a comm signal. It’s just the carrier wave, not a message.”

“Pinpoint it and scan the area. Any ships down there?”

“No power sources, no energy discharge, no large metal masses. Just the one comm signal.”

“What’s the surface like there?”

“Low hills, with dense forest. Hmm—just west of the signal source is a large burned area.”

“All right, take us down.”

The Sentinel set down in the center of the burned area just after dawn. Panatic and the ship’s troops fanned out in search of the source of the signal.

The fire had scorched a section of forest half a kilometer across. The ground underfoot still smoldered in places, and the air was hazy with smoke and ash. Soot and gray mud choked a small stream. Panatic’s normally immaculate boots were soon filthy.

About a hundred meters from the ship they found the charred remains of a dozen crude huts. The wood walls and roofs were burned away completely, but the stone foundations and some clay pots had survived the blaze. A couple of Shkali bodies lay face down in the ash.

“Captain! I’ve found something!” Sergeant Ivlik called out.

Panatic hurried over to the edge of the burned area, where Ivlik was kneeling by a rock outcropping.

“Down here.”

In a hollow formed by two large boulders a Shkali child huddled, staring out at the two humans with terrified eyes. It clutched a comlink with both hands.

“Come on out, there’s a good little one. The fire’s out now. It’s all
right. Come on. There, I’ve got you. What’s this you’re holding? May I see it?” Ivlik was a family man, and had little trouble coaxing the frightened little alien out of the crevice. He gently pried the comlink from its grasp and handed it to Panatic. The captain examined it while the sergeant stood by, nonchalantly jiggling the Shkali child and making baby talk.

The unit was an expensive commercial model, with a built-in recorder. Panatic pressed ‘replay.’”

A woman’s voice, tense and breathless, almost drowned out by the sound of shouts and blaster fire in the background. “Mace, I hope you find this soon. The slavers are back—two ships this time. They’re using speeder bikes and nets. Warn the other villages.” A long pause, then some rustling sounds, then a man’s shout, and finally a whispered, “go!” Then the message cut off.

The little Shkali wailed.

“Slavers.”

“Lot of that going on nowadays, Captain. Even legal some places.”
“That doesn’t make it right.”
“What about this little tyke?” The Shkali child was shivering in Ivlik’s grip.
Panatic sighed. “It looks like there’s another village a couple of kilometers north of here. Leave the child there. Take Kamlok and Lancer with you. The natives will probably be nervous about strangers right now. Set your blasters on stun; we don’t want an incident.”

The Sentinel’s brig was designed to be cheerless. The walls and floor were gray metal, and a pair of cameras watched from the corners. Mace lay on one of the hard bunks and stared at the flickering glow panel in the ceiling. He was counting the flickers. When the door opened he was up to eight thousand.
The Imperial captain stepped in, followed by a guard. He took a comlink from his belt and pressed a button. “Mace, I hope you find this soon....”
Mace’s elation turned to horror as the message played out.
“Did you find her?” he asked, knowing the answer already.
“I think you’d better tell me everything,” said Panatic.
“It can’t make things any worse. That’s Nadria’s comlink; she’s my business partner. Knows a lot about primitive cultures, art, things like that. We’ve traded a fair bit with the Shkali in the past, but on our last visit they were all spooked. It took us a while to get the full story. Seems about a month ago some strangers showed up in a ship. They rounded a couple dozen Shkali up at gunpoint and took them away.”
“Why didn’t you report it to the authorities?”
Mace laughed derisively. “As if that would do any good. Half the slavers in this sector are on some Moff’s payroll.”
“You’ve been listening to too much Rebel propaganda.”
Mace stared at the captain for a moment. “You Imperials are such kidders; for a second I thought you were serious. Anyway, we decided to do something about it. Nadria stayed here to try and organize the tribes, so they could help each other against raiders in the future. I went off to get some blasters so the Shkali would be able to shoot back.”
“You got the blasters from the Rebel Alliance?”
"I...got them. Anyway, I was bringing them here when you stopped me."

"Do you know anything else about these slavers? Where they might be based?"

Mace looked genuinely puzzled for a moment. "You mean you're actually going after them?"

"They have broken the law. I checked—the Shkali haven't been declared a slave species yet."

"Well I'll be a one-legged nerf herder. Sure I know where to find them! The boss is Worruga Yab, a Rodian. He operates out of a place called Zahir. Know where that is?"

"Too well." Panatic turned to go, then paused. "Thank you, Mace. I'll be sure to mention how cooperative you've been in my report. It might mean a reduced sentence for you." The armored door hissed open and the Imperial officer strode out.

Mace resumed counting.

Panatic's cabin was as severe and tidy as his uniform. The only personal touch was a holo of the dreadnaught his grandfather had commanded in the Clone Wars. Everything else was strictly Navy issue.

He sat at his desk and called up the file on Zahir. He knew most of the information by heart, but it never hurt to review the facts. The place was the remnant of a failed development project. One tiny asteroid moon of an outer planet had been domed over and surrounded with a docking ring, to serve as the commercial hub for a new sector. But the nearby systems turned out to be worthless, the colonists and prospectors had never showed up, and eventually the promoters went bankrupt.

Years later the smuggler Worruga Yab had bought Zahir and turned it into a wide-open free port, a haven for smugglers, pirates and all manner of unsavory characters. Panatic and other patrol captains had begged Sector Command for a Star Destroyer or two to shut Zahir down for good, but somehow their requests never got heard.

Panatic found himself wishing the Sentinel was more than just a customs vessel. It would take at least a strike cruiser to capture the place in a straight fight.
Or...his eyes lit up as an idea struck him. Maybe he did have the right ship for the job.

“Are you sure this is a good idea, sir? You’re putting yourself at a terrible risk.”

Panatic glared at Sukal. “Your opinion is noted, Lieutenant. You’ll be in command while I’m gone. Run silent until you get my signal. Then I want you to come in fast and hit that place with everything we’ve got. Target ships docked on the ring, and the communications array. Do not engage any other ships in space—there’s too many of them, and they could easily box the Sentinel in and destroy her.”

He turned to regard his travelling companions. Sergeant Ivlik looked remarkably uncomfortable in a cheap civilian suit. Mace wore the same scruffy-looking clothes he had been captured in. Panatic had to drape himself in a huge prospector’s poncho to conceal his uniform. Thus attired, the three of them boarded the Ordinary Trader and parted company with the Sentinel in the dim outskirts of the system.

Panatic seated himself in the copilot’s chair and sat for a moment watching the stars before speaking. “I want to make a deal with you, Mace.”

“Music to my ears, Captain.”

“At Zahir we’ll be in your element, not mine. You know the smugglers and prospectors who do business there. I’m sure it would be tempting for you to reveal my identity and escape.”

“I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t thought of that.”

“But I can get those slaves released. You can’t. And I think you want your partner back. So here’s my offer: if you cooperate with me, I’ll see to it that she goes free. Your arrest is already logged, so I can’t let you go, but I won’t charge her.”

“Mighty generous of you.”

“I should add that I haven’t contacted Systems Command to see if either of you are wanted for treasonous activities. As far as I’m concerned, you’re an ordinary smuggler. Now will you give me your word that you’ll help me?”

Mace regarded Panatic silently for a moment. “You’ve got a deal.”
“Good. Sergeant, I think you can put away your weapon now.”

The ringed rock of Zahir grew large in the cockpit window as Mace brought the ship in. There were a dozen vessels docked at the ring or floating nearby. Most were scout ships or small freighters like the Ordinary Trader, but there were a few that stood out. Panatic eyed a bulky Corellian corvette nervously. In a stand-up fight the bigger ship could pound Sentinel to scrap.

A fancy yacht with gold-alloy plating on the hull was clamped to the docking ring. It looked familiar, but Panatic couldn’t place it and Mace’s computer was no help at all. Probably stolen, he decided.

The traffic controller sounded as if he was overdue for a lung bath. “Welcome to Zahir, crossroads of the sector. All docking fees must be paid in advance. You can dock at Lock 23.”

Beyond the airlock, Zahir was a dingy place. The broad corridor of the docking ring was full of dust and litter, and half the glow panels were dark. The walls were marked with graffiti and blaster burns. Twice they had to step over people sprawled on the floor, either drunk or dead.

At the entrance to one of the three tubes linking the docking ring to the central asteroid, they met what passed for customs on Zahir. A wrinkled old Twi’lek with a missing tentacle stopped them at the door while a couple of Gamorrean thugs stood by with blasters.

“Docking fee. Twenty credits.”

Mace paid him. Panatic tried to look bored and tough under the gaze of the Gamorreans. One of them snorted and turned away.

They rode the slideway down one of the tubes linking the docking ring to the main body of Zahir. The center of the complex was a huge domed garden, which time and neglect were turning into a tangled jungle. A cleared area held an open-air bazaar, where vendors at a dozen crude stalls sold everything from glow-wine to protocol droids.

“Wait here and try to blend in,” said Mace. “I see a familiar face.” He spent a few minutes chatting with a fat little Sullustan selling tanks of Tibanna gas. Panatic and Ivlik stood stiffly in the middle of the throng, looking warily about them. Mace waved goodbye to his Sullustan friend and threaded his way through the crowd to them.

“Yab’s here, all right. He’s got a whole load of new slaves down
in the holding pens. There’s going to be an auction this afternoon.”

“Perfect. We can find out who his customers are.”

“Until then we’d better lie low. You two stick out like a couple of rancors at a garden party. There’s a bar near here with a pretty good band.”

Panatic let Mace lead the three of them to the saloon. It was a bit rougher than the officers’ clubs he normally frequented. But the music was good, and Sergeant Ivlik was big enough to make the other patrons give them a wide berth. The three of them sat in a corner booth with a view of the door and waited.

“And I replaced the hyperdrive flux coil with a pair of synchronised B-105 units, which improves the jump response time by—” Mace was droning on about his ship, and Panatic was only half paying attention. Suddenly, Mace stopped short, staring at the door. Panatic followed his gaze.

A small, thin man in the garb of an Imperial administrator had just entered the bar, followed by a pair of stormtroopers.
“Uh-oh,” Mace whispered. “Maybe if we slip out one at a time they won’t spot us.”

“Don’t worry, Mace,” said Panatic, smiling. “You’re already in the hands of the Empire, remember?”

Inwardly, Panatic wasn’t so sanguine. The presence of an Imperial official here on Zahir was a puzzle. How had he come here? And why? And why did nobody seem to care? For a gang of thieves and smugglers, the denizens of Zahir seemed remarkably calm about two Imperial stormtroopers in their midst.

“I still don’t like this, Captain,” Mace hissed. “He’s watching us.”

“Calm down. That’s just your imagination.”

The Imperial official summoned the bartender to his table and ordered quietly. His two guards remained standing on either side of him, scanning the bar for trouble.

“I’ll be in the ‘fresher,” said Mace, getting to his feet.

“Stay with him,” Panatic ordered Ivluk. The sergeant hurried after Mace.

Panatic sighed in annoyance. This was no time for Mace to start getting nervous. But what could one expect from a criminal? He sipped his drink and looked at his chrono again. Still an hour before the auction.

A heavy finger tapped him on the shoulder. Panatic turned to see three Gamorreans standing behind him with drawn blasters. Before he could move, they shot him.

He woke up in an agony of pins and needles as the blaster stun wore off. A boot in the ribs helped him regain consciousness. Panatic found himself lying on the floor of an office; a clear domed ceiling gave a splendid view of the starry sky.

Two men were standing over him. One was the Imperial official he’d seen in the cantina. The other was a Rodian in a flashy suit drawing back a chrome-plated boot for another kick.

“No need for that, Yab,” said the official. “I think he’s waking up.” He smiled down at Panatic. “I do apologize for my colleague here. He’s a bit unsubtle. My name’s Varden Quil. And you, I believe, are Commander Ulan Panatic of the Imperial Navy.”

Panatic struggled to his feet and straightened his uniform. The smelly poncho was gone, as were his blaster and comlink. “That’s
correct. This man is a slaver and a murderer, and I am here to arrest him."

The official sighed. "Oh, dear. Evidently you haven’t been in-
formed—Yab is a friend of Moff Tricus Phenge."

"The governor of Deratus sector?"

"The same. My employer, in fact. The Moff and Yab here have an
arrangement. In exchange for protection from bothersome people
like you, Yab provides laborers to work the goldberry fields on the
Moff’s estates, and the occasional specialty item. A perfect part-ner-
ship."

"Raiding native settlements for slaves is illegal."

Quill laughed. "Oh, dear me. Really, Commander, you should be
in a museum somewhere. Surely the Imperial Navy has better
things to do than worry about the welfare of a few primitives.
Besides, an intelligent officer such as yourself should know that the
wishes of a Moff are more important than the letter of the law."

"Too much talk," hissed Yab. "What are we going to do with
him?"

"A good question. Commander, I’d like your input on this. Should
we kill you or let you go?"

"What?"

"You could cause my employer a great deal of inconvenience if
you insist on arresting Yab. We can’t have that. So unless you agree
to drop this whole business and go back to chasing Rebels, I’m
afraid we’re going to have to kill you. Which will it be, Commander?"

Panatic swallowed hard, then forced his face into a smile. "I’m
willing to forget about the whole thing if you are."

Quill stared at him for a moment, then burst out laughing.
"Goodness, Commander. I don’t think I’ve ever seen worse acting!
It’s good to know your death won’t rob the galaxy of a great talent."

Panatic leapt forward to grapple with Yab, trying to grab the
Rodian’s blaster. He had the advantage of surprise, but the slaver
was an experienced brawler. The two of them slammed into the
desk, rebounded, and crashed into a drink synthesizer. Quill darted
for the door.

Panatic snatched up a footstool and smashed it over Yab’s head.
The Rodian staggered back for a moment, long enough for Panatic
to get the blaster from his grip.

"All right, hands up, both of you!” He backed away from Quill and
Yab, covering them with the blaster. The two raised their hands
slowly.
"Now don't do anything hasty, Commander," said Quil. "We can still salvage the situation. You're obviously an ambitious fellow—I'm sure I could arrange a promotion for you. Maybe a Star Destroyer instead of a patrol cruiser?"

"Shut up." Panatic moved over to the desk. "Where's my comlink?"

"In the drawer," said Yab. "The top one."

When Panatic looked down to open the drawer, Quil bolted for the door. It hissed open, revealing the two stormtroopers on guard outside. "Get him!" the little official yelled.

Panatic got off one wild shot, which glanced off one trooper's armor. Then they were on him, using their rifle butts to club him into submission.

"What shall we do with him now?" asked Quil thoughtfully.

"Now he dies," said Yab, giving Panatic another kick in the ribs. "Put him in the furnace."

"How tidy," said Quil approvingly.

The stormtroopers dragged Panatic from the office. "Let me go! I order you to let me go! Quil is only a civilian; he has no authority. I am an officer of the Imperial Navy! What you're doing is a court-martial offense! Can you hear me in there? A court-martial offense!"

The troopers marched on in silence.

Yab's quarters occupied what had been built as a luxury hotel. His office was on top, and the rooms were used to house the slaver's henchmen and bully-boys. The lower levels were kitchens, freezers, and services. For waste disposal the hotel had been equipped with a large plasma furnace. The stormtroopers shoved Panatic into the furnace and slammed the heavy door.

The furnace was a gleaming steel cylinder, dimly lit by the glow of safety lights behind thick glass. The loading hatch was at one end, and the other end was the open maw of the fusion torch. The interior was filled with bits of scrap, piles of food waste and assorted junk too worthless to keep. All of it, Panatic included, would be reduced to a cloud of ionized plasma when the fusion torch switched on.

Panatic didn't waste time shouting or pounding on the door. He had a few seconds while the troopers unlocked the controls and started the warm-up cycle. What to do? The furnace was too solid
to break out of, and there was nothing that could protect him from the heat of the fusion torch.

But scrap metal and garbage doesn’t fight back. He snatched up a bent metal rod and scrambled over the junk to the mouth of the torch. Deep inside it he could hear the whine of fuel pumps and the hum of containment coils powering up. Panatic jammed his makeshift tool deep into the torch, and was rewarded with a powerful shock that threw him into a pile of scrap and left his fingers numb. Blue light flared around the metal rod as it shorted out the containment coils. The sound of pumps faded as the fusion torch shut down.

Hampered by his useless arm, Panatic climbed back over the junk to the door, and grabbed the heaviest thing he could find—a big chunk of thick pipe. It wasn’t much of a weapon, but it would have to do.

The door opened, and the dim light outside was dazzling. Panatic swung his pipe club clumsily at his attackers, catching one a solid
blow on the side of the head. But the second dodged aside and grabbed Panatic’s arms.

“Sir! It’s us!” It was Sergeant Ivlik. The one he’d clubbed was Mace.

“Ow. Remind me never to go up against any Imperials armed with scrap metal! Are you all right, Captain?”

“Yes. Just a little sore. Where are the stormtroopers?”

“Stunned, for the moment,” said Ivlik.

“Good. We can stow them in this furnace; they’ll be safe there. How did you find me?”

“I got chummy with one of Yab’s goons and asked him where the boss puts people he doesn’t like. To be honest, we were afraid of finding nothing but some greasy soot.”

“I was lucky.”

“Well, let’s hope your luck holds long enough for us to get off this miserable rock before they notice you haven’t been fried.”

“Leave? We’re not going anywhere. What time is it? Has the auction started?”

Mace glanced at his chrono. “It started about half an hour ago. You’re not serious about this, are you? This place is crawling with armed creeps, goons, slavers and pirates.”

Panatic finished straightening his uniform, flexed the fingers of his right hand and adjusted his cap. “In the fleet we have a saying. Mace: ‘Defeat is not in the manual.’ Worruga Yab thinks he can defy the Imperial Navy. I’m going to teach him otherwise.”

“Now I understand why the Academy turned me down. I wasn’t crazy enough.”

“You’re forgetting your friend Nadria. This is probably the last chance to rescue her.”

Mace became suddenly serious. “All right, I’m in. I still think this is crazy, but I’m in.”

“Good. Now, since the enemy currently outnumbers us, we must rely on strategy and make the best use of what assets we have.”

The slaves were penned in six cavernous storage chambers carved from the bare rock of Zahir. To allow buyers to inspect the merchandise, there were catwalks raised four meters above the floor, from which guards and customers could look down on the
helpless captives below. One of Yab’s thugs patrolled each chamber, armed with a blaster and an electrolash.

Mace strolled along the catwalk, trying to look like a prospective buyer. The slaves stared up at him miserably as he passed. He could recognize a dozen species, and there were a dozen more he’d never seen before.

In the fifth chamber he spotted a familiar face. Nadria was standing with a group of Shkali, glaring at the guard. She looked tired and dirty, but unharmed. He coughed. She looked up at him, started to smile, then controlled her reaction. Mace risked a wink at her.

Keeping his expression neutral, he sauntered over to the guard, a tall, bony fellow with an impressive collection of scars. Mace waited until there were no other customers in the chamber, then spoke. “Are these slaves healthy?”

“Young Boss don’t keep sick ones.”

“A sensible precaution. The reason I ask is that one of these doesn’t look too well.”

“Which one?” The guard uncoiled his electrolash.

“The one in the green tunic over there.”

“Green tunic?”

“There in the back, see? Kind of crouching down by the wall.” Mace pointed at a random spot. “Right next to the Mon Calamari.”

“I don’t see any green—” Mace grabbed the seat of the guard’s pants and tipped him over the railing into the pit of slaves below.

In an instant Nadria and some of the others muffled the guard’s shouts and snatched away his weapons.

“Mace!” she cried happily. “I knew you’d come for me! Did you get help from the Alliance?”

“Not exactly. I’ll explain later. Let’s get you and these others out of this pit. Time’s short.”

The auction was being held underneath the main dome. A crowd of perhaps a hundred buyers stood around a platform, where Yab himself auctioned off the slaves.

A Twi’lek woman stood on the block, eyes downcast, while Yab made his pitch to the buyers.

“Pretty girl. Young and healthy. Perfect as a household servant.

Suddenly, a blaster shot exploded overhead. The crowd fell silent as Panatic strode forward, accompanied by Ivlik in stormtrooper armor. “I am Commander Ulan Panatic of the Imperial Navy. Everyone here is under arrest!”

That was Mace’s cue to come running in from one of the side entrances, yelling wildly. “Imperials! Imperial soldiers everywhere! Run for it!”

Most of the people in the room were criminals of one variety or another. They reacted instinctively by fleeing. In an instant the auction dissolved into a wild melee as buyers fought to get away. “You!” Yab shrieked at Panatic. “Why aren’t you dead?”

“You are under arrest, Worruga Yab. Surrender or we’ll shoot!”
Yab's answer was to draw his own blaster and open fire. Panatic snapped off one shot, then dropped and rolled to avoid Yab's fire. Ivlik dodged clumsily in the armor, blazing away with his rifle. "Don't just stand there—after him!" Yab shouted to his guards. Four of them advanced toward Panatic's hiding place, fanning out to surround him. The other two tried to pin down Ivlik with a barrage of blaster bolts.

"This is your last chance, Yab!"
"Kill him! I want his head on—Eyaah!" he shrieked as an electrolash struck him in the back. Nadria stung his arm again with the lash, and kicked his fallen blaster out of reach.

The freed slaves were pouring into the dome from the entrances, converging on Yab with murder in their eyes. The thugs turned and began firing into the throng.

"Give up and you won't be harmed!" Panatic shouted at them. As if to back up his words, the Sentinel streaked past the dome, firing at the ships around Zahir. Ships were fleeing in all directions.

The guards, stunned, raised their hands.

"Have you finished processing the prisoners, Ensign Av?" Panatic asked, entering the Sentinel's bridge. Four hours of sleep and a hot meal had restored him completely, and he had changed into a freshly-pressed uniform.

"Yes, sir. The ringleaders are already aboard, locked up in the brig. We found Worruja Yab—dead. Apparently a group of slaves wanted revenge."

"A pity he won't stand trial."

"Yes, sir. That still leaves two problems. First, what are we going to do with all these slaves? There must be a hundred of them. We can't fit that many aboard the Sentinel."

"How many ships were captured in our raid?"

"Eight. Three are spaceworthy."

"All right, then. You, Monidda, and Sukal will use those ships to ferry the slaves back to wherever they were captured. And contact Captain Innis of the Protector; see if he can lend us a hand."

"Yes, sir. The second thing is the prisoner Varden Quil. He keeps demanding to see you."

Panatic sighed. "I suppose I can't put that off any longer. Have
Sergeant Ivlik bring him up here.”

A few minutes later, Sergeant Ivlik and trooper Lanzer arrived on the bridge, flanking a furious Varden Quil.

**Zahir**

Type: Asteroid station
Temperature: Temperate (artificial)
Atmosphere: None (artificial environment under domes)
Hydrosphere: Arid
Gravity: Zero (artificial gravity in habitat)
Terrain: Bare rock
Length of Day: Nonrotating
Length of Year: 701 standard days
Sapient Species: Gamorreans, humans, Rodians, Twileks
Starport: Standard class
Population: 1,000
Planet Function: Free port and trading center
Government: Owned and ruled by Worruga Yab
Tech Level: Space
Major Exports: Luxury goods, starship equipment
Major Imports: Foodstuffs, technology

**Capsule:** Zahir is the outermost moon of an unnamed gas giant in the Vohad system. It is a tiny chunk of rock and ice, extensively tunnelled. A large dome on the surface encloses an artificial habitat, and the entire asteroid is surrounded by a large docking ring.

During the last decades of the Old Republic, the rock was purchased by the New Frontiers Corporation, which converted it into an enormous space station. The company hoped to profit from the opening of a new trade route passing through Zahir to virgin territories beyond. But the fall of the Old Republic put a halt to the development program and New Frontiers went bankrupt. The moon eventually fell into the hands of an individual named Worruga Yab.

Despite evidence linking him to various piracy and smuggling operations, Yab is currently the sole owner and government of Zahir. He operates the world as a free port. Its permanent population is less than a thousand, but at any time there are likely to be a hundred or more transients. The settlement functions as a trading post and supply center for independent traders, prospectors, bounty hunters and scouts.

**Note:** The Imperial Navy has declared the entire Vohad system a high-risk area for piracy.
“Captain, this is an outrage! I demand that you release me at once!”

“Not until you stand trial. I’ve got a long list of charges for you, Quil—conspiracy, assault on an Imperial officer, resisting arrest, attempted murder, trafficking in illegal slaves, and I’m sure an investigation could uncover more. You could wind up on Kessel, or worse.”

“May I remind you that I am the personal assistant to Moff Tricus Phenge? He has powerful friends. If you offend the Moff, you can forget about a career in the Navy.”

“We seem to be at a standoff. If I press charges, the Moff may destroy my career. But if I let you go, you’re quite capable of making trouble for me on your own.”

Quil sneered. “If you apologize, I may forgive you, Captain.”

Panatic smiled back. “As an Imperial officer, I have the option of pressing charges against you in an Imperial court, or of handing you over to planetary authorities. I’ve decided to take the second option.”

“Planetary authorities? What planetary authorities?”

“I am going to hand you over to the Tribal Council on Shkali for trial. They have stiff penalties for slave raiding there. Good luck.”

“Wait! Surely we can work something out! I have friends!”

“Take the prisoner back to the brig, Sergeant.”

As Ivlik and Lanzer dragged Quil away, his shouts grew louder and more frantic. “I have money! Fifty thousand credits! A hundred thousand! Cash!”

Panatic did not permit himself to smile. He turned to Ensign Av.

“Anything else to attend to?”

“There is the matter of the prisoner Rav Mace. He’s still missing.”

Panatic’s face remained expressionless, and he paused for a split-second before replying. “Don’t bother searching for him. He tried to make a run for it and I had to shoot him. Someone must have stolen his ship in the confusion. The details will be in my report.”

Av looked at his commanding officer curiously for a moment, then nodded. “That takes care of everything, sir.”

“Good. You may begin transporting the slaves at your convenience, Ensign. I’ve got some messages to send.”

Three months later, Mace and Nadria were getting the Ordinary
Trader restocked at Moldar when an Ithorian scout dropped off a message chip addressed to them. When he put it into the reader, Panatic's face appeared on the screen. "I didn't get a chance to thank you properly, Mace. You saved my life at least once and I am grateful. But now the score is settled. I better not catch you in my sector again."

Mace smiled and shook his head. "May the Force be with you, Captain."

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**Shkali**

*Type:* Terrestrial  
*Temperature:* Cool  
*Atmosphere:* Type I (breathable)  
*Hydrosphere:* Moist  
*Gravity:* Standard  
*Terrain:* Forest, steppe, tundra  
*Length of Day:* 29 standard hours  
*Length of Year:* 322 local days  
*Sapient Species:* Shkali (N)  
*Starport:* None  
*Population:* 16 million (estimated)  
*Planet Function:* Primitive agriculture  
*Government:* Scattered tribes and monarchies  
*Tech Level:* Stone  
*Major Exports:* None  
*Major Imports:* None

**Capsule:** Shkali is a primitive planet with no central government and few useful resources. The Empire has decided to defer development of this world.

The largest political entity is an empire controlling all of the third continent; it is ruled by a caste of bureaucrats acting in the name of a hereditary monarch. The other four continents have no states above the tribal level.

The Shkali are a humanoid species evolved from saurian ancestors. Adults stand approximately 180 centimeters tall and mass 80 kilograms. Shkali lay eggs, but care for their young. They are omnivores. (See the xenology database for more information.)

The planet has three moons: two asteroidal and one a thousand kilometers in diameter.
Roleplaying Game Information

Rav Mace

Type: Smuggler

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

KNOWLEDGE 2D
Alien species 4D, bureaucracy 3D, law enforcement 3D, planetary systems 4D+2, streetwise 5D

MECHANICAL 3D
Astrogation 4D, sensors 3D+2, space transports: Ghtroc freighters 6D-1, starship gunnery 4D

PERCEPTION 3D
Bargain 4D, con 3D+2, persuasion 4D+2, sneak 4D

STRENGTH 3D

TECHNICAL 3D
First aid 3D+2, security 4D, space transports repair 4D

Force Points: 2
Character Points: 11
Move: 10

Equipment: Blaster pistol (4D), lightfreighter Ordinary Trader

Capsule: Rav Mace is a small trader and occasional Rebel spy. He and his partner Nadria conduct a profitable trade by visiting primitive worlds and exchanging tools and medicines for native artwork and handicrafts. These voyages are sometimes a cover for scouting and diplomatic missions on behalf of the Rebel Alliance. Mace does not consider himself a dedicated Rebel—he's just a freelancer who happens to work for them from time to time.
Craft: Ghtroc Industries class 720 Freighter
Type: Modified light freighter
Scale: Starfighter
Length: 35 meters
Skill: Space transports: Ghtroc freighter
Crew: 1 or 2 (can coordinate)
Crew Skill: See Rav Mace
Passengers: 4
Cargo Capacity: 120 metric tons
Consumables: 4 months
Cost: Not available for sale
Hyperdrive Multiplier: x2
Hyperdrive Backup: x15
Nav Computer: Yes
Maneuverability: 2D
Space: 6
Atmosphere: 330; 950 kmh
Hull: 3D+2
Shields: 1D
Sensors:
  Passive: 15/0D
  Scan: 30/1D
  Search: 50/3D
  Focus: 2/4D
Weapons:
One Double Laser Cannon
  Fire Arc: Front
  Skill: Starship gunnery
  Fire Control: 2D
  Space Range: 1–3/12/25
  Atmosphere Range: 100–300m/1.2 /2.5 km
  Damage: 5D

Capsule: Rav Mace’s ship the Ordinary Trader is a heavily modified Ghtroc freighter. Because his trade and espionage missions take Mace into dangerous regions of the galaxy, he has equipped the Ordinary Trader with more powerful engines, making it much faster and more maneuverable than one would expect. Its guns have been beefed up as well, but Mace prefers not to fight if he can run. These improvements come at the expense of cargo and passenger space.
Commander Ulan Panatic

Type: Imperial officer

DEXTERITY 3D
Blaster 5D, dodge 4D

KNOWLEDGE 4D
Bureaucracy: Imperial 5D, law enforcement 5D+2, planetary systems 5D, streetwise 4D+2

MECHANICAL 3D
Communications 4D+2, sensors 4D, space transports: Guardian-class cruisers 4D

PERCEPTION 3D
Command 5D, investigation 4D, persuasion 3D+2, search 5D

STRENGTH 2D

TECHNICAL 3D
Computer programming/repair 4D, security 4D+2

Force Points: 1
Character Points: 8
Move: 10
Equipment: Blaster pistol (4D), comlink

Capsule: Ulan Panatic is a strict and capable Imperial officer. As captain of the Guardian-class patrol cruiser Sentinel, he is responsible for fighting Rebels, pirates and smugglers in a broad area of the Mid-Rim. Panatic is loyal to the Empire, which he sees as the only thing protecting the galaxy from lawlessness. But he is increasingly troubled by the fact that law and justice have taken a back seat to the ambitions of corrupt officials.
Type: Imperial bureaucrat
DEXTERITY 3D+1
Blaster 4D, dodge 5D, pick pocket 4D+1
KNOWLEDGE 4D
Bureaucracy 6D, business 5D+2, intimidation 5D, languages 5D, value 5D, willpower 5D

MECHANICAL 2D
PERCEPTION 4D
Bargain 6D+1, command 5D, con 5D+2, forgery 4D+2, investigation 5D+1, persuasion 5D

STRENGTH 2D+2
TECHNICAL 2D
Computer programming/repair 5D+2, droid programming 4D, security 4D+2

Force Points: 1
Dark Side Points: 2
Character Points: 7
Move: 10
Equipment: Comlink, datapad

Capsule: Varden Quil is the chief aide to Moff Tricus Phenge, overseer of the Deratus sector. Quil is an ambitious and greedy fellow, who is perfectly willing to do his boss's dirty work because it gives him greater control over the Moff. He has no personal loyalty to Phenge, but sees him only as a useful stepping-stone to higher positions.
Fenig Nabon searched the skies for the ship she knew was on its final approach. But, from her vantage at a grimy window, all she saw was Ryloth's tortured landscape, empty and desolate, stretching into darkness.

She shifted from one foot to the other. The movement betrayed her uneasiness and stirred choking dust in the stifling heat of the port control room. As the veteran of seedy spaceports too numerous to be counted, the Corellian smuggler knew she should be entirely in her element. Instead, the whole deal about to go down left Fen with a queasy stomach and three not so minor questions. Why was she here when she could have been making a simple raava
run between Socorro and Coruscant? Why was her beloved ship, the *Star Lady*, docked systems away on Nal Hutta? And when, in over twenty years of traversing the stars, had she irrevocably and irretrievably lost her mind?

There was one answer to all these questions—Ghitsa Dogder, her current partner of circumstance. Feeling another bead of moisture weave its tortuous way between her well-worn flight suit and her sweat-soaked back, she wished for the millionth time that she had followed her first instinct two years ago and just blasted the little con artist right out of her wildly impractical high-heeled shoes. It would have truly been an act of galactic altruism on par with the destruction of both Death Stars.

Squinting, Fen finally spied a speck of fast-moving light. It materialized into the mid-sized, heavily armed freighter she and Ghitsa had hired for passage to Nal Hutta. The ship arrowed up and disappeared overhead to cruise above the cliffs housing the Twi'lek clan warrens of Leb'Reen.

Always the victims of pirates and plunderers, the reclusive Twi'leks never made even the legitimate landings easy. For the Leb'Reen approach, a pilot had to fly down a narrow rift carved into the plateau to emerge into the landing cavern 500 meters below. Harsh gouges made by disrespectful pilots marred the unforgiving rock walls. Fen doubted the Mistryl piloting the inbound ship would make the same mistakes.

Mistryl. These enigmatic women warriors would do desperate things for their impoverished people. And in a universe of uncertainty, getting on the wrong side of a Mistryl was a sure way to meet a really certain, and completely lethal, end.

"It would be a pity if they damaged the ship, said a cultured Coruscantan voice.

Fen didn't bother to look down at her diminutive partner. "They won't. Shada D'ukal's a good pilot."

"High praise from you, Fen."

"Simple fact. I didn't say she was a great pilot."

"Or as good as you think you are?" Ghitsa taunted softly.

Fen was too tense to argue with her. "I told you before, conning a Hutt is a bad idea; using Mistryl to do it is a really bad idea."

"Such uncharacteristic understatement for a Corellian." Ghitsa sighed, smoothing back a tendril of spiky, blonde hair that dared to be out of place. "We have been over this. Mistryl possess a peculiar, tarnished nobility. And..." she screwed her perfectly applied face
in concentration, “they are likely to identify with the seeming predicament of our cargo. We could not count on anyone else to be as predictable.”

“They also carry heavy weapons, know how to use them, and don’t need a blaster to do permanent damage to a body.”

“A Hutt is a big mark in a blaster sight, and a very small one in a con,” Ghitsa replied evenly.

They turned from the window as the hum of repulsorlifts echoed in the landing cavern behind them. With a whoosh, the ship burst through the gaping hole in the roof of the Leb’Reen landing bay. Fen studied its descent intently with a professional’s eye. *Watch out for wind shear,* she cautioned the pilot mentally, as the ship bounced to a final, unsteady stop.

Her partner’s crisp words interrupted Fen’s musing. “I will finish the details with the Shak Clan.” Straightening the shoulder pads of her tailored ensemble, Ghitsa took in Fen’s own tattered flight suit and ragged, nut-brown hair pulled into a sloppy braid. “Must you always look as if a rancor dressed you?”

Fen slapped her head in mock horror. “And I ever so wanted to squeeze in an appointment with your designer.”

Ghitsa rolled her eyes with amused disgust and, as always, got in the last pointed barb. “You are as hopeless as a Mistryl’s cause.” Pivoting on a sharp, stylish heel, she walked away.

Fen positioned herself precisely so that the ramp of the ship extended to rest at her big toe. From the bottom, she studied the two Mistryl at the hatch. Tall and not so tall, dark and light, mature and young, they bore vibroknives, blasters and the easy confidence of those accustomed to using them.

“Shada, you’re lucky you didn’t loose your rear deflector when that wind shear caught you,” Fen said, in her equivalent of “Welcome to Ryloth.”

“It’s nice to see you, too, Fenig,” the older of the Mistryl returned, calm and unruffled. “I’m sorry to hear the *Star Lady* is still dry-docked. We’ll try to make you as comfortable as possible on *The Fury.*

Fen scowled. Shada knew nothing pained a pilot more than playing passenger on someone else’s ship. “You know me, Shada.
I’ll be comfortable anywhere.”

Shada moved down the ramp to stand next to Fen. Fen made a point of ignoring the younger Mistryl who followed. To Shada, she muttered, “New sidekick, I see.”

“Dunc T’racen,” the younger woman identified herself. “And we of the Mistryl don’t refer to subordinates as sidekicks.”

“My mistake,” Fen replied, her voice flat. Dunc bore her Mistryl heritage proudly, but not yet with Shada’s smooth competence. Possibly a novice, she speculated. “My partner’s over there,” Fen continued, with a tilt of her head. “Hammering out the final details with the Shak Clan representative.”

Across the Leb’Reen landing cavern, they saw Ghitsa in an earnest, close exchange with an immense, cloaked Twi’lek. Abruptly, Ghitsa spun about and trotted away, swallowed quickly in the darkness of the spaceport. With a flick of his head tails, the Twi’lek stalked after her.

“Where’s the cargo?” Shada asked.

“And how much ryll are we talking about?” Dunc added.

“Ryll?” Fen scoffed. “Who said anything about ryll?”

A frown creased Dunc’s delicate face. “Given the cost of your Ryloth cargo, we assumed you were moving ryll kor for bacta use.”

Fen barked crudely, “Saltan valorosa n telval mord.”

“What’s that supposed—?” A subtle hand signal from Shada, and Dunc swallowed the rest of her question unasked.

“It’s old Corellian,” Shada said, measuring Fen with a cool gaze. “It means ‘assumption is the first step into a shallow grave.’”

“Very good, Shada,” Fen responded, trying to sound casual or even a little sneering, no small feat under that gaze. “But I would have expected better language skills in your younger mercs.”

“We’re not mercenaries,” Dunc uttered with the firmness of one who still believes what she has been told.

Heels tapping a staccato rhythm on the stone floor interrupted them. Ghitsa emerged from the gloom of the landing bay; one by one, five Twi’lek females followed her. Subdued, head tails limp, each shouldering a heavy pack, the Twi’leks padded forward, as if links in a chain, one after another.
“You’re shipping Twi’lek females?” Shada moved closer, her sheer physical presence crowding Fen back a step. “To Nal Hutta?” she added, her voice chilling still further.

“I have a contract, executed by your leadership, that guarantees our passage to the Hutt homeworld,” Fen said, again striving for offhanded casualness. She drew her datapad from her pocket, careful to keep her movements slow and nonthreatening.

“Ladies, is there a problem?” Ghitsa asked pleasantly.

Shada ignored her. “You know we won’t run slaves,” she said icily, her eyes still on Fen. She threw a quick glare at the approaching Twi’leks, who took the cue and stopped.

Ghitsa held out her hand; Fen wordlessly slapped the datapad into her palm. “It’s Shada D’ukal, isn’t it? Pursuant to our agree-
ment, the Mistryl are bound to provide passage from Leb'Reen to Nal Hutta for myself, my colleague, and our cargo.” Her intricately wrought bracelets clattered against the display. “Fee of twenty thousand, nonrefundable deposit of five thousand, contract void if done in aid of the former Empire...."

“The Mistryl won’t deliver anyone into slavery,” Dunc bit out.

Ghitsa spared Dunc a slitted, reptilian glance before returning her attention to Shada. “Of course you wouldn’t slave. Slavery is illegal under New Republic Senate Resolution 54.325.” She deftly manipulated the pad again. “This is my contract with Brin’shak, the Twi’lek talent agent. He is providing the services of a Twi’lek dancing troupe to Durga the Hutt. Durga will pay these dancers.”

Shada shifted her measuring gaze to Ghitsa. Not that the diminutive con artist would require that much measuring. “Sure he will,” the Mistryl said, her tone clearly indicating how much she believed that.

Ghitsa proffered the datapad. “And pay them very well. Datapage 8, paragraph 12.”

Shada took the pad and reviewed the contract entry. Not satisfied, she scrolled through the document from beginning to end. Dunc, in a tribute to her training, remained watchfully silent.

The seconds seemed to be dragging on toward forever before Shada finally looked up again. “According to this, eighty percent of the dancers’ pay reverts back to the Shak Clan,” she pointed out.

“The Twi’lek method of compensation is not your concern, Shada,” Ghitsa said loftily. “And if you back out now, you’ll forfeit the deposit, loose the contract, and pay a ten thousand penalty.”

Fen winced inside herself. That was the right lever for moving impoverished Mistryl, all right. And Ghitsa had done her usual expert job of pulling it.

Shada didn’t react, at least not visibly. Her younger partner, though, wasn’t nearly so good. “Shada, we can’t be party to this,” Dunc urged quietly. “Not in good conscience.”

“Conscience?” Ghitsa asked blandly.

Fen couldn’t let that one pass unremarked. “Do you need to look up the word, Ghitsa?”

Ghitsa waved a gilded hand. “No, Fen. I have a passing familiarity with the costly phenomenon known as conscience. Still, if this conversation is going to drift into ethics, I might point out that our hirelings should not be trying to renegotiate an agreement their leadership executed.”
"The contract appears to be both legitimate and legal." Shada shoved the pad back to Ghitsa. "But of course we all know what appearances are worth. So I'm going to go talk to Brin'shak and your alleged dancers. If they show any indication of coercion, the deal's off. Period."

Shada gave Ghitsa a smile that didn't make it anywhere near her eyes. "I suppose I could also threaten to report your activities to every law enforcement agency you've ever heard of, plus a few you haven't. But I won't bother. I'll just mention that you'll be in trouble with us. Serious trouble."

She looked at each of them in turn, as if daring them to protest. "And if the whole thing is legitimate, you'll pay thirty-two thousand, not twenty," she added. "Or you can back out right now, we leave, and the contract is void. Your choice."

"No problem," Ghitsa said airily, waving toward the Twi'leks still waiting off to the side. "Satisfy yourselves as much as necessary. We have nothing to hide."

Sure we do, Fen thought grimly. Sure we do.

"Did you really have to say that the Twi'leks could just rattle around in the cargo hold since they are trained to endure physical pain?" Fen grumbled, strapping herself in for the ride to come. Her partner had quickly moved to Phase Two of their plan and was determined to make the now-committed Mistryl rue the day they contracted with Ghitsa and Fen.

"I did see the wisdom of seat restraints," Ghitsa conceded, struggling to squeeze her shoulder pads into a passenger seat of The Fury's main cabin. "None of them have been off planet before. We don't want them panicking and injuring themselves."

"Of course not," Fen said. "Incidentally, the next time you feel an urge to spout off about how an injured dancer depreciates in value, either don't do it when Dunc's hand is anywhere near a hold-out blaster, or wait until I'm not around. Okay?"

"Given what we have heard of their unarmored combat skills, a blaster would make little difference to a motivated Mistryl," Ghitsa pointed out.

Fen swallowed her retort, preferring to savor instead the familiar thrill of a ship lifting. She felt every pitch and roll as The Fury fought
the Leb'Reen cavern wind shear, only to emerge into the blistering wind and driving sand of Ryloth's brutal lower atmosphere. Fen counted down the minutes of that wild ride in anxious anticipation.

The moment the ship surged into hyperspace, Fen slipped free of her seat harness. She rose from her seat with a grace borne of thousands of hours logged in flight while Ghitsa was still fumbling with the clasps of her restraints. Eyes darting to the winding passage leading forward, Ghitsa whispered, "You go check on the Twi'leks."

Ghitsa was curled in the most comfortable seat in the cabin, filing a perfect, pink nail when her partner returned. Fen responded to Ghitsa's unasked inquiry, "They're fine." Fen turned her attention to the cabin's computer station, wondering if all of it had been passworded.

A moment later, Shada and Dunc appeared in the cabin, without the slightest sound to warn of their approach. Nodding a greeting, Fen started her mental countdown. She made it to three—a new galactic record—before Ghitsa asked the inevitable question. "So, what do you have in the way of recent holovid recordings?"

"We're not here to entertain you," Dunc said scornfully.

Shada leaned against the bulkhead, crossing one long leg over the other. From this vantage, she was, Fen realized, able to observe both the burgeoning spat and the score in Fen's own battle game.

"Come now, last we heard, Princess Leia had been kidnapped by that rogue smuggler." Ghitsa rose, and moved across the cabin to a small holovid recorder. Pawing through the cataloged disks, Ghitsa asked in a pout, "You do not have anything more recent?" She withdrew a disk from a pocket, "How very fortunate that I purchased the last two weeks of downlinked Coruscant Daily Newsfeed before we left."

The trip had just taken a horrifying turn for the worst. The Mistryl would be demanding combat allowances.

"Have you checked on your passengers yet?" Shada asked.

"The cargo?" Ghitsa asked airily. "Why?"

Shada sent a cool look her direction, then turned without a word and left the cabin. "How very humanitarian," Ghitsa commented, just loudly enough. "For a mercenar..."

Annoying electronic theme music interrupted any rejoinders. "Ah, there we go." Ghitsa sashayed across the cabin, forcing Dunc to shift slightly out of her way. "I confess to being an avid Imperial Palace watcher," she divulged.
An image of a human man appeared on the screen. “Welcome to the Coruscant Daily Newsfeed. Today’s top story, the dramatic kidnapping of Princess Leia Organa by her former flame, Han Solo.”

“White is simply not her color,” Ghitsa clucked.

Dunc threw Ghitsa a look of obvious disdain as the vid droned on. “And now Organa’s brother, Jedi Knight Luke Skywalker, and Hapan Prince Isolder have gone in search of the errant Princess.”

“He’ll never find them,” Fen declared. “Not a chance.”

“Of course he will,” Dunc countered, clearly being drawn into the conversation despite herself. “A Jedi Knight using the Force—”

“Force, my blaster,” Fen retorted, pulling on a loose thread on her flight suit. “He’s just a farm boy from a dust bowl.”

“A very lucky farmer,” Ghitsa murmured. “I wish I’d taken those odds on the second Death Star....”

“I’d say Skywalker has a better chance than anyone of finding his sister,” Shada put in.

Fen had not even heard Shada return from the cargo hold. “Unless her ladyship doesn’t want to be found,” the smuggler sneered.

They all started at Ghitsa’s loud outburst of laughter. “Why would that be, Fen? Not everyone is as smitten with the astral General Solo as you were.”

Fen stiffened involuntarily. “Me? Smitten? He could only wish.”

“Is that why there is still a Wookiee-sized bunk on the Star Lady?”

“You know I had that bunk installed specially to accommodate your shoulder pads, Ghitsa.” Fen slipped out of her seat. “I’m going to go check on the cargo, make sure they weren’t damaged.”

“I’ve just checked,” Shada told her. “They’re fine.”

“Glad to hear it,” Fen said shortly. “You don’t mind if I look for myself, do you?”

Fen headed out of Ghitsa’s line of verbal fire. Prowling down the passage, she took a turn, stopping at the plate concealing the shield generator. She popped the panel out, pulled a multitool from her pocket, and waited for Shada to arrive.

She didn’t have to wait long. “I don’t think you’ll find the Twi'leks in there,” came the Mistryl’s calm voice.

“No Sithspawn?” Fen peered at the deflector matrix. “Must have taken a wrong turn.”

“You must also be feeling particularly foolhardy today,” Shada warned.
“Oh, come on, Shada. You know I know what I’m doing.”
“Perhaps.” Shada lifted an eyebrow. “On the other hand, would you allow me to tinker with the Star Lady?”
“Not while fully conscious,” Fen conceded, pocketing the tool. “Fine. You check the rear shields.”
Shada stepped to the wall and punched a button. A hidden panel slid open at Fen’s elbow, exposing a row of tools. Waving Fen out of the way, she selected a scanner and probe tip and set to work. “So tell me, Fen,” she said. “What is going on here?”
“Should be obvious,” Fen said, craning her neck to see over Shada’s shoulder. “With that wind shear slamming the ship down stern first and the rough ride out, I figured the shield had probably gone weak back there.”
“That’s not what I meant.”
“What did you mean?” Fen asked, trying to sound innocent and sly at the same time.
Shada glanced up at her. “I meant what are you doing with...” She seemed to struggle to find a suitable word, finally gave up. “Her.”
“Ghita?” Fen laughed. “She’s not bad with a datapad, and she can cook.”
“And she’s got Coruscantan Imperial stamped all over her,” Shada said bluntly. “What do you really know about her?”
“Probably no more than you do,” Fen countered. “Come on, Shada. I know the Mistryl have her mapped out. Her entry is probably right next to mine in the ‘useful but untrustworthy’ category.”
“She’s not Jett, though, is she?” Shada observed quietly, the question really a statement.
A thick, tense silence hung in the air. “That’s the whole point,” Fen finally replied, her voice dead.
Shada’s next words were careful, like a sculptor gently carving a piece of limestone. “Jett Nabon was a man of great compassion.”
“And look where that got him,” Fen spat. “Dead on the floor of an Ord Mantell cantina, with a bunch of drunks stepping over his carcass for last call at the bar. He might have lived if someone had bothered to pull the vibroblade out of his throat, but nobody showed him any compassion.”
“His compassion also brought trade to the Mistryl when almost
no one else would," Shada continued, ignoring the outburst. "I think that's why the Eleven agreed to this contract with you, despite their misgivings about your partner. Because we honor his memory."

"And look where it got you." Fen pointed over Shada's shoulder at one of the flux rods. "Make sure you tighten that one," she said. "It can jar loose sometimes."

"Already did." Shada picked up the panel and snapped it back in place before speaking again. "That same compassion compelled Jett to pull a young, abandoned pick-pocket off the streets of Coronet and adopt her as his own."
“Guess you could say that was another one of his mistakes, huh?”

Silently, Shada returned the tools to their wall case. Still silently, she headed forward, leaving Fen alone with her memories.

Since Leb’Reen, Fen could but marvel at how Ghitsa managed to sneak the word “mercenary” or “Imperial” into every exchange with Dunc lasting more than two sentences. It kept the conversation entertaining and far more dangerous than Fen normally preferred.

She and Ghitsa were now waiting in the cabin. Dunc and Shada were forward for their first course correction. The itch to be in the cockpit became an ache as Fen felt the ship drop into normal space. Just when she thought the whole process was taking a bit too long, Shada’s voice called over the comm. “Fen, get up here.”

She was out of her seat and half-way up the passage before Ghitsa caught up.

As they ducked into the cockpit, Shada swiveled around in the pilot’s chair. “I want your opinion on something the sensor sweep turned up.”

A few degrees off the bow a metal cylinder turned lazily on a spindle. An antenna protruded from its top. Stang, Fen swore silently. The trip had just gotten a whole lot more interesting.

Shada was watching them closely. “It looks like a relay buoy,” she said. “Apparently, it's picking up ship signatures as they drop in here.”

“Blast it,” Fen uttered curtly.

Shada was already bringing The Fury’s laser battery to bear on the buoy. “Yes. I intend to.”

“It’s probably too late, though,” Ghitsa opined as she eased into the cockpit’s rear seat. “Whoever put it there will know soon enough we were here and where we’re headed.”

“Who would care?” Dunc challenged.

For once, Ghitsa favored her with a straight answer. “Anyone interested in what travels on the smugglers’ hyperspace lanes between Ryloth and Nal Hutta.”

“Ryll pirates,” Shada said, making the name a curse.

“Or worse,” Fen said.
Shada deftly moved the targeter on her board. A sure punch and the buoy exploded, for an instant a brilliant orange glowing flower on the canvas of space. “Any particular ‘worse’ you had in mind, Fen?” Shada asked.

“The Karazak Slavers Cooperative springs to mind,” Ghitsa put in grimly. “The KSC used to ambush ships along this line looking for Twi’leks to sell.”

“Anyone who does this run will know that a ship from Ryloth will normally change course here,” Fen added. “Usually for a jump to the Naps Fral cluster—”

“And then a set-up there for the final jump to Nal Hutta,” Shada finished for her. “Which means that a relay buoy here implies a trap waiting at Naps Fral.”

Ghitsa nodded. “The KSC was once very active on this route. Jabba stopped it because he thought too many valuable slaves were dying in the ambushes.”

Shada gazed at both of them, her dark eyes thoughtful. Dunc could learn much from that knowing, quiet surety, Fen thought. It was probably why the younger Mistryl had been paired with Shada in the first place.

“Jabba died four years ago,” Shada pointed out. “Were you expecting the KSC to have moved back in here since then?

“There were reasons we wanted Mistryl,” Fen responded truthfully. “The possibility of the KSC returning was one of them.”

Turning back to her board, Shada nosed The Fury in the direction of the Naps Fral cluster. “Well, there’s no going back now,” she said simply. “Looks like you may get your money’s worth after all.”

“No!” Ghitsa protested with stamp of her shiny boot. “I am going to ride up front. I’m a perfectly capable co-pilot—”

“Forgot to take your anti-delusional medication today?” Fen cooed, pushing past her and into a cockpit seat.

Since the last course change, Ghitsa had harped endlessly on about wanting to be in the cockpit when they dropped into the Naps Fral cluster. She now curled her hands into tiny fists, reminding Fen of an extremely petulant toddler.

“She can stay,” Shada said calmly, as she slid into the pilot’s chair. Ghitsa smiled like a child just presented with a space pop.
"However," Shada added in the same tone, "if she says or does anything to annoy me or distract us, I'll cripple her."

"Unless I beat her to it," Dunc added, her eyes on the monitor readouts.

"Give you a cool thousand if you let me do it," Fen offered.

"I can too fly," Ghitsa stated for the official record, dropping into her hard-earned seat.

"Sure you can, Ghits," Fen mocked. "Just like the time your nav coordinates would have put us into Corellia's sun?"

"We would have just grazed the corona," Ghitsa said defensively. "How about the time you were shooting at dust because you thought it was draining the shields?"

"It was draining the shields."

"It was dust! Blasting dust will just make more dust."

"Put a cleaning rag in it, both of you," Shada cut off the growing argument. "We've got work to do."

Ghitsa bridled, but fell silent. "Sorry," Fen said.

"As I see it, our worst case scenario is that we'll find an armada waiting for us when we drop in," Shada went on. "They may try to hit the engines with surgical turbolaser blasts; more likely, they'll have a heavy ion cannon ready for a saturation disabling."

"After which they'll board us, take the Twi'leks, and kill us," Fen nodded. "Which means they'll try to be right in front of us or else aligned on our probable exit vector."

"That was my reading, too," Shada answered. "So our obvious countermove is to simply come in two or three seconds early."

Fen swallowed as she pulled up a chart of the Naps Fral system. Most hyperspace entry coordinates had a built-in "safety zone" of a second or two. In-system pilots knew to stay out of the zones to keep from having a ship pop into real space on top of them. Studying the chart, Fen realized Shada had, once again, done her homework. Three seconds would put the ship just outside the zone, probably not too close to anything lethal. Probably.Hopefully."

Ghitsa was clearly thinking along the same lines. "Isn't altering
your hyperspace entry point...dangerous?” she asked in a small
voice.

“Very,” Dunc said absently.

“It’s definitely a maneuver with a warning on the box that says, ‘Don’t try this at home!’,“ Fen forced a quip.

“Stay sharp, everyone,” Shada said. “At my mark. Fifteen, fourteen…” At five seconds, she squeezed her hand over the levers, and star lines melted to the milky cluster of Naps Fral.

A flash of blue ion fire cut across their bow, the proximity alarm pealed, and Shada pulled The Fury around in the direction of the threat. In the span it took for the sensors to tell her what had just tried to paste them. Fen reached over and switched off the alarms, wondering why anyone even bothered with the prijgin things. If you needed them, you were already dead in space anyway. “Kuat Firespray-class ship,” she announced through clenched teeth.

“Switching over,” Dunc said, her voice unreasonably calm. The Fury shook as a pair of concussion missiles blazed off in the direction of their welcoming committee.

“Fen, find out what the computer knows about Firesprays,” Shada ordered.

“Right.”

The Fury jerked to port, then rolled starboard as Shada bounced between bursts of ion energy.

At Fen’s elbow, the computer display began spewing technical information. “Puter says this model’s got a ticklish spot in the port shield,” Fen called. “Right below the stabilizer fin.”

“Stang,” Dunc muttered. “Wouldn’t you know we’d come in on their starboard.”

Shada pushed on the throttle. Still dodging between bursts of ion fire, she lunged straight for the attacking ship. At the last moment, she hauled on the rudder, bringing The Fury under the belly of the Firespray. There was a sickening crackle of ion discharge and a lurch—

“What does that red light mean?” Ghitsa asked, pointing over Fen’s shoulder.

Fen shoved the other’s rigid arm out of her face. “It means bad,” she spat. “We took a hit to that weak aft shield,” she added for the benefit of the others. “Another hit and we’re in trouble.”

“They won’t get the chance,” Shada gritted as they burst clear of the Firespray. Yanking on the throttle, she reversed the forward thrust hard, and flipped The Fury back over. The Firespray’s left fin
and vulnerable. "Dunc?"

"Got it," Dunc said, fingers flying across the console as she tracked the quivering Firespray and, from the sound of it, emptied an entire magazine into the left fin. The Firespray's shield rippled with the force of the blasts, plasma ebbing and flowing across the ship's hull like a flooded river. Dunc let fly another barrage, and this time the missiles pierced the other vessel's weakening shield. Fire exploded on the ship, scorching its armor. Plates began peeling off the hull like a reptile shedding its skin.

Dunc switched over to the heavy turbolasers. The hot lasers carved through the Firespray's collapsing shield, strafing the ship along its diagonal. Two explosions, one at the cannon and the other near the reactor, and the Firespray, true to her class, erupted in a
brief and blazing shower of white, yellow and red.

For a moment they all sat in silence. "Well," Shada said at last, her voice calm as ever. "That seems to be that. Well done, both of you."

"Not a bad piece of flying, Shada," Fen conceded, trying to get her breath back and wondering why she was so winded. "Though of course I would have done it without losing that aft shield."

To Fen's surprise, Shada laughed. "Fen, you have to be the most arrogant pilot in the galaxy. You want to see if the computer was able to pull an ID before we blew it into the next sector?"

"Let me check," Fen said, keying the computer. A name came up. "Surprise, surprise," she muttered in disgust. "It was the Indenture."

"Well, well," Ghitsa murmured.

Shada and Dunc exchanged glances. "Explain," Shada said. "You need to get out more," Fen said bitterly, "if you haven't heard about the Indenture."

"Mistryl don't move in the same exalted circles we do, Fen," Ghitsa scolded, her customary tinge of superiority returning. "And you can't imagine how pleased we are about that," Shada countered. "Fen?"

"That ship's had more names and ID codes than a Gamorrean has morts," Fen said. "Last I heard, it was traveling as Salvation, doing hit and runs for the Karazaks out on the Rim."

"Firesprays are mostly used in law enforcement," Ghitsa added. "I understand Krassis Trelix really appreciates the irony of using that kind of ship for slaving."

"And Krassis Trelix is?" Shada waved out at the still glowing dust cloud. "I'm sorry: Krassis Trelix was?"

"Karazak logistics coordinator," Ghitsa amplified. "A very nasty person, even for a smuggler."

"Couldn't have happened to a nicer guy," Fen added. Shada nodded with comprehension, and maybe satisfaction, too, Fen thought.

"Dunc, let's get those coordinates," Shada said. Next stop, Nal Hutta."

Fen rinsed the anxiety of the battle from her body. The water was flat and recycled, washing over her like a ritual cleansing that was really nothing more than a tepid sponge bath. She let her head fall
forward and rest against the wall, taking a deep breath.

The KSC encounter had not been entirely unexpected. It had been a lucky break in some respects, and disastrous in others. She had done her part. Now it was up to Ghitsa to get them out of this developing jam.

Stepping into another battered flight suit, she ran a comb through her wet hair, slicking it back in what Jett had called her drowned womp rat look. Having already been to Mos Eisley numerous times by age fifteen, she had long before ascertained how rare a commodity water was there. Her adoptive father had laughed until tears ran down his red face when she had explained that, in the Tatooine desert, water was too precious to be wasted on drowning rodents. Only belatedly had she understood that that had been his point. She quickly checked the small grin threatening to pull at her lips.

At the cabin entrance, she paused, taking in the sight. Dunc was straddling a chair, watching Ghitsa seated near the back primly apply a new coat of nail polish. The omnipresent holo viewer hummed lightly in the background.

Fen eased back over to the computer terminal. With Dunc distracted and Shada tending to the shields, now was a good time to complete a certain task still on her checklist.

The first eighteen times Shada had caught her, Fen had appeared to be doing nothing more than playing battle simulations. Shada had her suspicions, but, as every female on that ship knew, there was a galaxy’s difference between doing something and actually getting caught doing it.

Ghitsa delicately applied a streak of vibrant red to replace the pink adorning her fingertips. Dunc watched with suspicious fascination. “Why are you using such an obvious color?” she asked.

“Ohta su marvalic plesodoro,” Ghitsa responded.

“What means?” Dunc countered.

“Huttese,” Fen said. “Let them marvel at our splendor.”

“It was a favorite phrase of Jabba’s.” Holding out her hand, Ghitsa admired the gaudy red shade. “Jabba understood the importance of flaunting prosperity to demonstrate power. Since Mistryl have nothing, this is something you cannot understand.”

Ghitsa sure wasn’t wasting any time. Fen subtly shifted for easier access to her blaster, wondering if a stun setting would stop a truly enraged Mistryl.

But Dunc merely cocked an eyebrow, the same gesture Fen had
noticed Shada using on occasion. "You seem to know a lot about Hutts," she said. "One might wonder how that happened."

"Oh, I don't think you're wondering at all," Ghitsa said with a smug, evil smile. "Surely you've read the Mistryl backgrounder on me."

"What backgrounder?" Dunc asked. *Score one for Ghitsa, Fen thought. Although Dunc's light skin would probably always betray the slightest stress, the young Mistryl was going to have to learn to lie better. She would have to remember to mention that to Shada...from a couple of light years away.*

Ghitsa had obviously noticed the reaction, too. "Oh, come now, Dunc. Fen's dear-departed, noble partner dealt with the Mistryl for years. As has Fen." Her forefinger joined her thumbnail, both colored red. "So what does it say?"

"Why don't you tell me?" Dunc suggested, her voice dark.

"If you insist," Ghitsa sighed irritably. "Among other things, it says that I am a Hutt counselor. Do you understand what that means?"

Dunc's mouth twisted in contempt. "It means you're authorized by one or more Hutts to conduct business on their behalf," she said. "Like this dancers' contract between Durga and Brin'shak."

"A nicely standard textdoc answer, shadow guard," Ghitsa said approvingly. "But it doesn't even scratch the surface. Shall I tell you what it really means to be a Hutt counselor?"

Dunc nodded her head slightly to the side. "I'm all ears."

"Hutt clans appoint counselors to conduct their business," Ghitsa said. "The skill and loyalty required to manage their complex schemes, plus a Hutt's own longevity, dictate that counselors remain within a single unit, preferably a family. Doggers have orchestrated Hutt infiltration of Core World businesses for over one hundred and fifty years."

Fen lifted an eye from the screen. This was news to her, too, if it were true.

"I see," Dunc said in a cold voice. "What a splendid and honorable family history you have."

"I don't need to justify myself to you," Ghitsa said loftily. "My motivations, and those of my clan masters, should be perfectly comprehensible to you." Her left hand now completely painted, she switched the brush from right to left, and began reddening her right nails. "Money, profit, security—things even Mistryl ought to understand."
Dunc snorted. "Except that our principles aren’t for sale to the highest bidder."

"But that’s the irony of it. They are for sale. They have been sold, you have been sold, like any cheap trinket." Ghitsa laughed with merry scorn. "Do you really think Mistryl are immune because they don’t deal with former Imperials, refuse to assist in patently illegal ventures, and charge more for the questionable ones?"

Under the terminal, Fen slowly and silently slid her hand down and released the safety on the blaster at her hip. She had no idea how much of this was show and how much the twisted truth. What she did know was that Ghitsa was trying to push the young Mistryl to the snapping point. And that she might succeed.

"For all your exalted justifications of saving your desperate people," Ghitsa went on, "you’re delivering the Twi’leks to servitude and death as certainly as any Karazak slaver."

Slowly, deliberately, Dunc uncoiled from her chair and stalked over to the table, her face calm and deadly. Fen got a grip on her blaster butt; but Dunc made no move against her partner except to stand and tower over her like a storm cloud.

"The contract said they were being paid, Hutt," Dunc bit out, making the word a curse. "You said they weren’t slaves. You’ve lied to the Mistryl."

Ghitsa raised her eyes to Dunc. "I didn’t lie. They will be paid. And then they’ll be charged; for costumes, board, room, and expenses. At one time, they might have saved enough to buy out their contracts. However, because Twi’lek mortality hovers near seventy percent, Durga now withholds an additional sum to cover the cost of a burial shroud."

"Shada questioned Brin’shak," Dunc hissed. "She asked each of the Twi’leks if they wanted to go."

Ghitsa held her hands out, admiring her work. "In a uniquely Twi’lek way, these dancers do indeed go willingly. They know some Twi’leks must end up in Hutt throne rooms. This is the price they all pay for a lack of power. A Hutt commercial agent will see that the clan is compensated. The alternative is indiscriminate Karazak slaving raids on their enclaves."

Dunc’s lip twisted. "I’d heard that Twi’leks sell a few of their own to buy a greater peace for them all," she conceded reluctantly. "But you make it sound like your altruism keeps Karazaks from plundering Ryloth."

"Our altruism, Dunc—we’re all in this together, you know."
Ghitsa blew lightly on her perfectly marked claws. “I advised Durga it was more cost-effective to go this route, rather than contract with the Karazaks. The KSC is expensive and their slaves tend to be poor quality.” She began capping the little bottle. “As I see it, the Hutts purchased Mistryl morality for thirty-two thousand. Karazaks would have demanded at least forty-five. But then, they aren’t as desperate as the Mistryl.”

Fen cringed at Ghitsa’s attack. Perfectly crafted in the words of commerce, she was a humanoid vision of repugnant Hutt excess.

And it had worked, all too well. Dunc stood above her, color rising, the slow boil of a jump’s worth of taunts and insults bubbling over, threatening to ignite the fire beneath. She stirred, perhaps about to go for a weapon, perhaps to simply pick Ghitsa up and hurl her bodily across the cabin—

“Dunc, in aiente,” came a quiet order from the door.

Fen jumped. Ghitsa didn’t even twitch. “Hello, Shada,” the con chirped innocently. “How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough,” Shada said, her eyes on Dunc. “In aiente.”

Dunc took a careful breath. Then, wordlessly, she pivoted away from Ghitsa and strode from the cabin.

For a moment Shada studied Fen and Ghitsa, her face stiff and unreadable. “We drop out of hyperspace at 0100 tomorrow,” she said and followed Dunc out into the passageway.

Ghitsa finally broke the long silence that followed. With uncharacteristic, doubting hesitation, she asked, “Do you think I went too far?”

“Hard to say,” Fen said, working moisture back into her mouth. “If we get out of this alive, I’d say no. If they slash our throats in our sleep, then, yeah, probably so.” She hesitated, weighing her words carefully. “You said some pretty reprehensible things. How much of it was true?”

She grimaced. “Enough. Too much.”

Seeing the little grifter shift uncomfortably in her seat, Fen asked, “Ghitsa, could that be your conscience bothering you?”

Ghitsa made a show of examining her nails. “Of course not, Fen. Merely indigestion. Ship’s rations, you know.”

Fen slipped back into the main cabin just in time to see the holovid system sputter. Spewing smoke, it coughed out the smol-
dering remains of Ghitsa’s *Coruscant Daily Newsfeed* recording. Perhaps there truly was a higher power in the universe and she had a sense of humor, Fen thought.

“We’ll be adding the repair costs to your bill,” Shada said examining the unit.

“By all means,” Ghitsa replied, moving to the holographic game table. “How about a round, Fen?”

“I’ll pass.”

Ghitsa shrugged. “I don’t see why you won’t install a holobeasties game on the *Star Lady*.”

Fen laughed, stretching her arms high. “Let’s just say that the last time I allowed a round on board, my droid ended up with his arms ripped out of their sockets. Besides, we’re about to come out of hyperspace, aren’t we, Shada?”

“Five standard minutes,” Shada said over her shoulder as she exited the cabin. “I’ve already seen to the Twi’leks.”

Ghitsa waited, then whispered, “You didn’t run into her, did you?”

“No,” Fen replied warily, strapping into her seat. As Ghitsa did the same, Fen let her eyes slip shut. “Won’t be long now.”

“No, it won’t,” Dunc’s voice agreed quietly next to her ear.

Fen’s eyes flew open. Dunc was standing to the side, pointing a blaster at the two of them. Fen’s blaster, she realized suddenly, belatedly missing the weight at her hip. Her vibroknife, for good measure, was hanging loosely in Dunc’s other hand. The girl definitely had talent. “What is going on?” she snarled.

“There’s been a change of plan.” Dunc said. “Dogder, I’ll take that blaster in your boot. Slowly.”

“Certainly,” Ghitsa said calmly, reaching into her boot and removing a small hold-out blaster Fen hadn’t even known she owned. “I don’t recall a contractual provision about a blaster in our faces,” she added as she slid the weapon across the deck.

“The contract’s been changed, too,” Dunc said, settling in a seat facing them.

Fen felt the ship tumble into real space. A minute later, Shada joined them. “We protest this treatment, of course,” Ghitsa said, getting in the first word.

Shada ignored her. “From the beginning, Fen, your behavior on this trip has been completely irrational,” she said. “You convinced us to take this passage; then, at every opportunity, have hounded us that what we were doing was a moral outrage. I want to know
why.”

“We’re just chatty,” Fen muttered sourly.

“You wanted us to break the contract, didn’t you?” Shada persisted. “That’s the only explanation. But why? You can hardly bring suit against us—legally, we don’t even exist. Blackmail? Ridiculous.”

Ghitsa spoke up. “This is a perfectly legal operation. You renege, and the Eleven will be extremely unhappy with you.”

“Having others unhappy with you isn’t as bad as being unhappy with yourself,” Dunc put in. “We’ll take our chances.”

“Ah, yes—the wonderful view you get from the high moral ground,” Ghitsa said sarcastically. “Not that you gain much of that high ground by shooting two unarmed people.”

“We won’t deliver the Twi’leks into slavery, Fen,” Shada said. “Not even a carefully disguised slavery. If you won’t tell us what’s really going on, you leave us with no other alternative.”

She paused, waiting for a reply. Fen kept her mouth closed, her heart thundering as she wondered if Ghitsa had finally made her last miscalculation. If Shada decided that murdering a pair of would-be slavers did indeed count as high moral ground....

“Very well,” Shada said after a moment. “Time’s up. Unstrap—you’re making the rest of the trip without us.”

The Mistryl silently ushered them aft. It was worse than Fen had imagined. “You can’t be serious.”

Shada swung open a tiny door. “It was your choice, Fen. Into the escape pod.”

Ghitsa climbed in without protest. With her own blaster hovering somewhere behind her back, Fen ducked in after her.

“Good-bye, Fen,” Shada said.

The door slammed, shut and sealed. Like our fate, Fen reflected, before turning on her partner. “Fine mess you’ve gotten us into.”

“What are you talking about? This has worked perfectly.”

Before Fen could utter a properly acidic reply, The Fury belched the pod into space. She shouldered Ghitsa out of the way to get to the controls.

Just as she had suspected. There was a tiny ion engine cluster with enough reaction mass for orbital insertion, re-entry burn, and, maybe, something left over for deceleration before touch-down, correction, make that smash-down. Typical. In her experience, the best pilots always had the worst pods.

The odds of a controlled landing in this vessel were minuscule.
The odds of making it alive were only slightly better. All Fen knew for certain was that she planned on bracing herself with Ghitsa’s ample shoulder pads on impact.

"Shada?"

Shada turned her head as Dunc stepped into The Fury’s cockpit. From the tone of her voice.... “What is it?” she asked. “Something wrong with the Twi’leks?”

“Not at all,” Dunc said, sliding into her seat and handing Shada a small holo tube. “They’re quite happy. And they seem to have known all along that they weren’t going to Nal Hutta.”

“Really,” Shada said, examining the holo tube. “That’s very interesting.”

“That’s what I thought.” Dunc gestured to the tube. “One of them, Nalan, gave me that. Near as I could figure through her accent, she said that ‘Fenig-who-is-brave’ gave it to her to give to us.”

Shada looked out the viewport. The pod had disappeared, caught in Nal Hutta’s gravitational pull. “I’ll check out the tube,” she said. “You’d better run a fast diagnostic on the ship’s systems.”

“You think we’ve been conned?” Dunc asked, keying her board. “We were being conned from the minute we landed on Ryloth,” Shada said, carefully filtering her emotions out of her voice. It wasn’t proper for a Mistryl to show frustration and bitterness in front of a subordinate. “The only question was in what direction we were being taken.”

“Well, whatever direction that was, our former employers seem to have gotten what they wanted,” Dunc said sourly. “Except maybe for the escape pod part—oh, Sithspawn.”

“What?” Shada snapped.

“The Fury’s ID code.” Dunc was furiously pulling up the stored nav coordinates for an emergency leap out of Nal Hutta space. “Fen must have reprogrammed one of the comm systems to create an overlay. We’re broadcasting as that Karazak slaver ship, the Inden-ture.”

Shada spun The Fury around. A blinking comm light signaled a hail from Nal Hutta; she ignored it. “What are we going to do?” Dunc demanded.

“Get out of here, of course,” Shada said. “I have no particular
desire to get caught in the crosshairs of Hutt slave politics."

"No argument on that one," Dunc said. "What I meant was what are we going to do about our two former employers?"

Shada grimaced. Yes, the Mistryl owed Jett a debt of honor for his friendship to them. But no one misuses such a debt this way. No one. "The galaxy is big," she told Dunc darkly. "But not that big."

Dunc nodded. "Understood."

A Hutt patrol ship appeared, heading in their direction. With a final glance at the muddy planet, Shada pulled the hyperspace levers.

Fen wrestled with the pod, trying to align it so the aft shields bore the brunt of the re-entry burn. "Impact in one minute."

"Aren't we going a little fast?"

By way of response, Fen squeezed everything she could from the poor pod's deceleration system. White, hot fire burned out the window.

"Uh, Fen? The large brown area we are plummeting into? I suggest you try not to land in it."

"A swamp might cushion our landing, if we don't drown. Get ready for the cheapest mud bath of your life."

"You simply cannot be serious."

"Fifteen seconds," Fen replied, as she attempted to aim the pod toward a large, muddy swath.

With a terrific, teeth-shattering jolt, they splashed down.

Fen shrugged out of the harness. "This thing's got flotation pads. They may keep us from sinking right away." Tugging on the release
bar, Fen popped the hatch open. The dreary, gray colors, fetid odors, and mud of Nal Hutta poured in.

Fen clambered out first, and looked quickly around. Swamp. Oozing, oily goo. She jumped in and was immediately enveloped in slime up to her waist. Ghitsa, however, was stalling at the hatch of the rocking pod.

"Gotta do it, Ghits," Fen called back to her.

She looked out across the swamp. "Well, at least we don’t have far to go. I only wish I wasn’t wrecking a pair of designer boots." With a weary sigh, Ghitsa jumped into the bog.

Slogging through the tangled weeds and stinking mud, they trudged toward a landing facility they had both spotted, some 500 meters away.

As they staggered onto blessedly dry, hard duracrete, a tusked Whiphid lumbered out of the building. His manner was so casual, Fen concluded that two women missing the landing pad to crash in the swamp was a near everyday occurrence.

Ghitsa and the Whiphid exchanged a rapid-fire mix of Basic and Huttese, and the Whiphid ambled off.

"Now what?"

"With your best efforts, we have, however miraculously, crashed in Durga’s Clan territories. I told him that I am one of Durga’s counselors."

"He believed you?"

"Of course. This kind of mishap is not uncommon if you deal on behalf of Hutt clans." Ghitsa seemed bemused by Fen’s incredulity. "Durga’s estate is less than 300 kilometers from here. He will be here right away to inspect his new dancers. So we wait."

They found a cold, pitted bench at the edge of the pad, and sat.

"Fen?"

"Yeah?"

"Are your affairs all in order?"

"My what?"

"Affairs, your will, estate, and
such, in the event Durga feeds us to his pet dianoga."

_I definitely should have plastered her on Socorro two years ago_, Fen thought viciously. No money was worth this. "I thought this was going to be the easy part."

Seated on the bench, Ghitsa’s feet were swinging several centimeters off the ground. "Easy?" she echoed. "Whatever made you think that?"

"I assumed...."

Ghitsa’s reminder of assumptions and shallow graves was cut off as a low, loud hum reverberated across the sullen marsh. They scrambled to their feet. Squinting, Fen spotted a sail barge moving fast over the quagmire. Its size and sure, smooth movement evidenced the Hutt opulence which was always, to Fen’s mind, incongruous with the dank misery of Nal Hutta.

What had appeared in the distance to be blobs on the barge’s
deck devolved into a full complement of heavily armed and undoubtedly fiercely loyal guards of various slobbering species. As the sail barge skimmed to a stop before them, Fen’s fingers twitched at her side, instinctively looking for the blaster that was probably still in Dunc’s hands.

In a mimicry of how Fen herself had met the Mistryl, Ghitsa walked forward to stand at the bottom of the barge’s ramp. An immense Hutt with a large mark stretched across his forehead slithered down the plank.

"Counselor Dogder," Durga finally rumbled, with a glance at Fen. "I doubt my dancers are hiding in the escape pod I saw on our clan’s property. I expect an explanation for my missing Twi’leks.

Fen watched in fascination as her partner bent into a low bow. "Your Magnificence, thieving knaves stole your dancers from your most humble agent."

"Stole?"

With an effort, Fen did not flinch at the malodorous smell wafting from the Hutt. Was it something expelled when a Hutt was angry, she wondered? Or just the remnants of breakfast?

"Yes, your Corpulence. We were betrayed by those we hired for passage from Ryloth. When we arrived into Nal Hutta space, they overwhelmed us and forced us into the escape pod."

It was over before Fen could comprehend it had even happened. Durga snapped his grasping, stubby fingers, and five guards surrounded Ghitsa. Fen was now standing squarely, and without cover, in the sights of an E-Web repeating blaster mounted on the barge.

"Counselor, I will hear your explanation. And whether it pleases me will determine whether you die quickly, or very, very slowly."

Fen willed composure. Ghitsa, however, seemed perfectly calm. Or maybe, after a lifetime with Hutts, she was so warped that five slobbering aliens with BlasTechs aimed at her was simply all in a day’s work.

"Durga," the con artist said smoothly, "if I give you two reasons why you will not kill me, will you pay me 75,000 credits?"

"I will indeed, counselor."

"First, I hereby invoke the Hutt Commercial Laws, section c, subsection 12.4e, and the protections it affords all counselors and messengers."

Fen had never been able to read Hutts well, and though she had never seen it before—and doubted she would see it again—she
knew that Durga was shocked.

Ghitsa plunged ahead. “You kill me, Durga, and every deal I have brokered on behalf of our Clan is forfeit. At my last calculation, that sum exceeds 100 million.”

Anger rippled over the Hutt. Durga bellowed, “You dare cite our own laws to me?”

“You know the law, Durga.” Now, Fen heard steady reason in her partner’s voice. “Counselors and messengers are not to pay the price for those who use them to embarrass or cheat the Hutt Empire.”

Durga gave his little counselor a long, calculating look, then finally said, “If memory serves, those laws were enacted after the early and violent deaths of twelve counselors and innumerable messengers.”

“Your memory is faultless, as always. You will doubtless also recall what occurred when a young, skinny, and very foolish Hutt of the Vermilic Clan forgot this prohibition two years ago and disintegrated his counselor.”

Fen was startled to realize even she had heard of that incident. The Vermilics were bankrupted and no Hutt traffic moved for three months. She wondered now if the counselors had refused to broker the Hutt deals.

A long, humid pause strung out before Durga spoke again. “I believe, Dogder, you had a second reason?”

“If you kill me now, you will never regain your Twi’leks.”

“Ohhh, ho, Dogder.” When Durga laughed, Fen was reminded of a restless, rolling sea. “And just how will you return my dancers?”

“I can give you the ID code of the ship we retained, its itinerary, and ownership registry. You will be able to trace those who have truly wronged you.”

Durga’s face folded into frowns. “And how will I know if the information you provide me is useful?”

“You may pay me fifty percent now, and the remainder within one standard week,” Ghitsa replied. “You will have sufficient time to verify if the data is valuable.”

“Do you trust us so much, counselor?” Durga seemed amused. Fen was not.

“I trust you, Master.”

Under Durga’s thoughtful, raking scrutiny, Ghitsa stood impassively. Then, with a snap of his fingers, the guards lowered their weapons, and Fen found she could breathe again.

Durga put a companionable arm around Ghitsa’s mud-encrusted
shoulders. “After so many years of loyal service, counselor, you understand that should you prove unfaithful, I am confident that the galaxy will be too small a place for both you and my anger.”

“I understand, Master.”

“Although I remain disturbed with your failure, I am pleased with your efforts to foresee possible betrayal.” He held out a tiny, groping hand, and Ghitsa gave him the disk Fen had taken from The Fury. “You may transfer the sum from our Coruscant account.”

Ghitsa bowed slightly.

Durga’s tail twitched violently, serpentine. “You also know that for the sake of our interests, we permit only credible counselors. Once this transaction is completed, we will look elsewhere for an advisor.”

“You have always wisely insisted that counselors not be the victims of other predators, Master. I ask for no exception in my case.” Fen would wonder for some time whether Ghitsa actually sounded wistful at that parting.

“All right,” Shada said, easing the holo tube into the player. The scan had showed it was a normal holo tube, with no surprises attached. But that didn’t mean she entirely trusted it. “Here we go.”

A two-meter-tall likeness of Fenig Nabon appeared. “Hello again, Shada,” the figure said. “Since you’re watching this, I presume Ghitsa and I are gone. Hopefully still alive, though you’re now probably regretting that you didn’t send us out the airlock without the benefit of vac suits.”

Dunc grumbled in her throat, but said nothing.

“Ghitsa has maintained that you would want to deliver us to the Hutts for their own peculiar punishments,” Fen continued. “If this went down right, she’ll be selling to Durga the Hutt a data disk with detailed information on the ship responsible for the theft of his dancers. A competent slicer will trace that information back to the Indenture and the Karazak Slaving Cooperative.”

The image grinned, a little shamefacedly. “I’m sure you’ve also noticed that The Fury’s ID is reading as the Indenture. That was my own touch, in case someone on Nal Hutta spotted you. The overlay program is buried in your backup comm system. You’ll probably have to go in through the battle game I was playing to get to it—
that’s how I got in—but it shouldn’t be any real trick to disable.”

She sobered. “On the more serious side, you can probably predict what will happen when Durga reaches the conclusion that the KSC stole his dancers.”

“Gang war,” Dunc murmured.

“Ghitsa thinks that in the resulting turmoil both the KSC and the Hutts will leave Ryloth alone for a while. Durga’s slicer should also find certain inconvenient payments the KSC has made to Brin’shak. This will likely be the last Twi’lek acquisition Brin’shak will make for the Hutts.”

The image shifted, foot to foot. A little embarrassed, perhaps? “We’ve told the dancers that you’ll return them to Kala’uun on Ryloth. The Dira Clan is expecting them and can be trusted. The Shak Clan may howl about it, but you shouldn’t get anything but noise from them. They were discredited two years ago in Kala’uun after trying to scam the New Republic over some ryll kor and are generally trying to lay low.”

“Finally, assuming you haven’t killed us, Ghitsa will transfer twenty thousand into your account, as agreed. I know you’re expecting thirty-two, but if you play it right with the Dira Clan, they may pay you some ryll kor for bringing the dancers back.” The image smiled, a little smugly. “Ghitsa urges you to sell quickly, as she believes the market will top out soon.”

Fen raised her head, looking out into nothing. “Jett always really admired the Mistryl, Shada. But sometimes he was uncomfortable with what you would do for money. Poverty makes people desperate, he would say. But sometimes, it’s better to be poor. Ghitsa, of course, disagrees.”

The image of Fenig Nabon flickered out.

Durga escorted them to the port city of Bilbousa where Fen had berthed the Star Lady. They set course for the nearest New Republic facility with a decent banking exchange.

As soon as the ship jumped, Ghitsa slipped out of her cockpit chair. “I’m going to get cleaned up.”

When Fen emerged from her own long, hot shower, Ghitsa was already in the cabin, sitting at the cabin’s table, intently watching the final chapter in the wooing of Leia Organa. Fen grabbed a bottle
of Corellia’s finest and two glasses, before sitting across from Ghitsa.

“So,” Fen began, pouring and sliding a glass across the table to her partner. Ghitsa said nothing, but did accept the drink.

“Did Durga buy it?”

“I doubt it,” Ghitsa scoffed. “But he is cautious. He won’t part with 100 mill without proof and thirty-seven and a half is a small price to pay, for now. All the proof will point to the Karazaks. They are more likely to cheat him than I am.”

“But you aren’t a counselor anymore.”

Ghitsa visibly brightened, and took a sip of her drink. “Rather convenient, I thought.”

“You wanted this?”

She sighed, tilting her head back against the booth. It was the first time in a while Fen had seen Ghitsa look normal—a simple flight suit, damp hair, nothing caking her face or nails. “You remember how I said that mortality among Durga’s Twi’leks was around seventy percent?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s even higher for Hutt counselors. Even if a counselor’s own clan won’t kill her, we tend to be excellent acquisition targets for Hutt competitors.”

Ghitsa, Fen suddenly realized, would not have taken these kinds of risks for a mere seventy-five thousand. “And those twelve dead counselors?”

“Two of them were Dogders.” Ghitsa stopped there, lips pressed into a thin, firm line.

Fen veered to safer ground. “Will Durga pay the rest?”

Ghitsa took another swallow. “Maybe. Probably. He’ll be very happy when he finds out about the Karazaks. I expect he’ll give me a bonus.”

They watched as the Coruscant Daily Newsfeed gushed about Princess Organa’s impending nuptials.

“Pity about Han Solo,” Ghitsa said.

“Waste of a pretty good smuggler,” Fen sighed, staring into her drink.

The Princess appeared, again in her regal white, announcing that Dathomir would now be open to Alderaani exiles. The program intoned, “And Organa announced today that the New Republic has appropriated 200 million in financial assistance for displaced Alderaani. Low interest loans will also be available to aid in resettlement...."
Fen whistled appreciatively. "Too bad you have to be Alderaani to be eligible."

They stared at the screen.

"You know," Ghitsa began, "I've always wanted to play impoverished nobility."

Fen glanced from her partner to the vid, and back again. "True," she finally said. "And Leia Organa may not look good in white, but, Ghitsa, I bet you do."

Roleplaying Game Information

Fenig Nabon

Type: Smuggler
DEXTERITY 3D+1
Blaster 5D, dodge 6D, melee combat 4D+2, pickpocket 5D+2
KNOWLEDGE 2D+1
Alien species 6D, cultures 4D+2, languages 6D, languages: Old Corellian 7D, planetary systems 5D+2, streetwise 6D, value 4D
MECHANICAL 3D+2
Astrogation 6D, sensors 5D+2, space transports 5D+2, space transports: Corellian YT-2400 8D, starship gunnery 5D+2, starship shields 5D+2
PERCEPTION 3D
Bargain 5D, con 5D+2, forgery 4D, gambling 5D, hide 7D, sneak 4D+2
STRENGTH 3D
Brawling 5D, climbing/jumping 4D+2, stamina 5D
TECHNICAL 2D+2
Computer programming/repair 7D+2, security 4D, space transports repair 6D+1, starship weapon repair 4D
Force Points: 2
Character Points: 12
Move: 10
Equipment: Blaster (4D), comlink, datapad, Corellian YT 2400 modified light freighter Star Lady

Capsule: Fenig was born to a single mother on Corellia 34 years ago. Her father, a military man of some unknown rank, did not stick around long enough to give his daughter a name. Her mother's family didn't take kindly to the situation, so the mother and daughter were forced to make their own way on the streets of Coronet. By age five, Fen was an accomplished pickpocket and thief, who could lie her way in and out of nearly any situation. Her mother disappeared when Fen was 11.

At age 13, Fen picked the wrong pocket, or as it turned out, the right one. Rather than turn her over to the authorities, Jett Nabon took her under his wing and aboard his ship as the only crew member in his small, independent smuggling operation. She spent the next 16 years flying from one end of the universe to the other as his co-pilot and,
eventually, partner.

Jett taught her everything he knew, and gave her everything he had, including a last name. Her initial forays into piloting were hair-raising and her first transport repairs were explosive. But by the time she was 16, Fen was an accomplished mechanic and pilot. She added slicing to her skills when at 19—she patched into an Imperial storehouse and diverted a shipment of speeders to a waiting (and ultimately very happy) customer. When Fen turned 20, Jett renamed his ship the *Star Lady* and presented it to her as a birthday gift. At 26 she had been smuggling for almost half her life, and was fairly certain she'd seen the inside of every grubby spaceport and trashy cantina the galaxy had to offer.

Jett died trying to break up a pointless bar fight on Ord Mantell when Fen was 29. She'd been out checking on their cargo and returned to find him dead on the floor, people stepping over him to refresh their drinks. It was his undying compassion that got him killed. Fen resolved to learn from his mistake.

So Fen took to the stars alone, determined to stay that way. She managed it for three years—until she saw Ghitsa Dogder, resplendent in her Coruscantan tailored suit, her hair done just so, in a cantina on Socorro trying to scam someone it was better not to cheat. Fen intervened, preventing what might have been considerable unpleasantness.

It was only later that Fen realized that she had been the con's mark all along. Ghitsa had wanted her as a business partner for a little deal she was putting together and knew just what buttons to push. Two years later they are still working together. Some days (most days, in fact) Fen thinks she should have followed her first instinct and blasted Ghitsa out of her seat on first sight.
Ghitsa Dogder

Type: Con Artist
DEXTERITY 3D
Blaster: hold-out blaster 6D, dodge 4D
KNOWLEDGE 4D
Bureaucracy 5D+2, bureaucracy: Hutt 7D+1, bureaucracy: Imperial 6D, business 6D, cultures: Coruscant 6D, languages 4D+2, law enforcement 5D+2, streetwise 5D, streetwise: Durga the Hutt's organization 6D+2, value 5D
MECHANICAL 2D+2
Communications 4D
PERCEPTION 4D
Bargain 5D+2, con 6D+2, forgery 5D+2, investigation 5D, persuasion 6D, sneak 5D
STRENGTH 2D
TECHNICAL 3D+1
Computer programming/repair 5D+2, security 6D
Force Points: 2
Character Points: 10
Move: 10
Equipment: Comlink, datapad, hold-out blaster (3D), several changes of fancy clothes, 10,000 credits

Capsule: Platt Okeefe once said of Ghitsa Dogder, "She has a knack for getting what she wants." Another, very "reputable" smuggler, whom she had the fortune of not cheating, said with disdain that Ghitsa is "just a tawdry Coruscantan con in designer-wear." Of these epithets, Ghitsa disputes only the adjective "tawdry" as applied to her.

Ghitsa does not talk about her background much, except for the obvious points all can see. She spent much of her life in the high society of Imperial Coruscant. In certain circles, it is known that the Dogder family has served in advisory capacities to various criminal organizations for centuries. Yet the Dogders themselves maintain an air of cultured gentility, even while they serve some of the most vile gangsters in the galaxy. The family also maintains close ties to the Imperials in exile within the Core and frequently aids in fundraising efforts and money laundering to finance various renegade warlords and admirals.

Ghitsa states with pride that her first scam was at the age of eight when she devised a pyramid scheme to sell candy and space pops to her friends. The scheme collapsed when she ran out of friends.

Ghitsa attended university to study business and advocacy. It is rumored that she was placed on probation in her first year for selling examination questions to her classmates. The questions were fabrications. The following year she was supposedly expelled for cheating on the ethics examination. She denies only that she got caught.

After graduation she entered the family business and tradition, which in this case, was providing commercial advice to, and an aura of legitimacy for, Durga the Hutt's clan. As her experience broadened, so did the complexity of the matters she handled. Acquisitions through dummy businesses, purchase and sale of slave aliens and property, payoffs to governments, money laundering, financing smuggling operations, forging Customs documents, tax evasion—she was generally a full-service and able counselor to Hutt business interests.
The Battle of Endor and the events leading to it were an epiphany. As a loyal counselor, she ruthlessly bartered and dealt on Durga's behalf to consolidate his clan's power and wealth in the wake of Jabba's death. With growing alarm, however, she also saw the disintegration of the Empire and more importantly the Imperial way of life. And taking the long view, she questioned how long it would be before Durga ended up as Jabba did—dead from arrogance and a lust for power that went far beyond what she deemed appropriate for Hutt dominance in commercial and smuggling ventures.

She decided a major change was called for and began searching for a likely partner—one with whom she wouldn't have to share too much, who wouldn't pry, who was well-connected to the point of respectability (among smugglers, at least), not too moral, had a good ship, and most importantly, was unlikely to kill her. She profiled Fen Nabon for a year, following her finally to Socorro. There Ghitsa set the trap that would appeal to Fen's weaknesses for lost causes, animals and people. Two years later Ghitsa is thoroughly pleased with the partnership. Fen, she knows, harbors doubts, but Ghitsa reasons Fen has never really known what was good for her.
Shada D’ukal

Type: Mistral Shadow Guard
Dexterity 4D
Blaster 5D-2, dodge 6D, dodge 6D-2, melee combat 8D, melee parry 7D, thrown weapons: zenji needles 9D-2
Knowledge 3D
Alien Species 6D, languages 6D, streetwise 7D-1, survival 5D+2
Mechanical 2D+2
Beast riding 5D-2, space transports 5D-2, starship gunnery 6D
Perception 4D
Hide 7D, search 7D, sneak 7D
Strength 3D
Brawling 6D, brawling: martial arts 7D-2
Technical 3D+2
Computer programming/repair 6D, first aid 5D-2
Force Points: 2
Dark Side Points: 1
Character Points: 11
Move: 12
Equipment: Selection of false IDs, hold-out blaster (3D), 15 zenji needles (STR+3D+1 when used with the thrown weapons: zenji needles specialization, otherwise STR+1D)

Guard for nearly ten years. Like most girls growing up on her devastated homeworld, to Shada the Mistory had been the focus of all her hopes, the last heroes of a desperate and impoverished people. She began her training as soon as the Order accepted her, and worked tirelessly until she was finally worthy of the title "Mistryl."

It took Shada less than a year to distinguish herself. The young Shadow Guard had been a part of the Mistory team hired to provide security for the "Hammertong," an Imperial-funded research project. Her team leader and another Mistryl were killed in an Imperial ambush at the facility where the Hammertong was being loaded for transport. Taking command of the situation, Shada and another Mistory, Karoly D’ulin, commandeered an Imperial strike cruiser and stole the over 200-
meter cylinder of pipe connections and power and control cable linkages which comprised the Hammertong. The Mistryl then headed with their prize to a useless little hole in space called Tatooine.

After crashing the strike cruiser in the Tatooine desert, Shada realized they needed transportation to get off planet with any parts of the Hammertong. Seeking a pilot for hire, Shada and Karoly ventured into Mos Eisley disguised as Brea and Senni Tonnika, two well-known con artists. Their disguise was too good, however, and they were, mistaken for the genuine article; Colonel Parq arrested them for conning a Grand Moff.

In the Mos Eisley jail their warden pierced their disguise and traded their release in exchange for a look at whatever was in the strike cruiser. The warden was in fact a spy for the Rebel Alliance, and he recognized what the Hammertong really was—a part of the prototype laser for the second Death Star. Shada and the other Mistryl escaped Tatooine with a component of the Hammertong, the Rebel Alliance agent had technical readouts of the entire device, and the strike cruiser was buried, forever, in a sandstorm.

Shada is extremely attractive, with long, dark, wavy hair that she usually wears pulled up and held in place with a number of lacquered zenji needles. The needles are not merely decorative. In combat, Shada can hurl the needles with deadly accuracy and sufficient force to crack some battle armor.

**Dunc T’racen**

Type: Mistryl Shadow Guard

**DEXTERITY 4D**
- Blaster 5D, dodge 5D, melee combat 6D, melee parry 5D, pick pocket 5D

**KNOWLEDGE 2D**
- Streetwise 4D+2, survival 5D

**MECHANICAL 2D**
- Communications 4D, sensors 3D+2, space transports 5D, starship gunnery 5D+2

**PERCEPTION 3D**
- Hide 5D, search 5D, sneak 5D

**STRENGTH 4D**
- Brawling 5D, brawling; martial arts 6D, stamina 5D+1

**TECHNICAL 3D**

**Force Points:** 1

**Character Points:** 8

**Move:** 10

**Equipment:** Comlink, hold-out blaster (3D), selection of false IDs

**Capsule:** Dunc T’racen is a study in contrasts. Her slim, seemingly delicate physique conceals a tough-as-titanium body. Her fair, perfect skin and smooth hair and hands suggest a pampered life. In reality, like so many other Mistryl, she grew up in the great squalor and poverty foisted upon so many of their people. Her cool, light eyes conceal a very passionate, opinionated bundle of tightly controlled energy.

From an early age, she determined that the Mistryl alone were worthy of respect and admiration. Envious and awed by her Mistryl
sister and cousins, she fixed on the goal of attaining admission into the secret warrior order. Dunc believed that membership in the Mistryl alone held the possibility of a better life, bringing justice to all, and not incidentally, also providing schooling, a roof over her head, and regular meals.

Her fervent commitment to become a Mistryl, however, was continually tested by her own youthful and volatile nature. Bitter about the degradation and poverty around her, Dunc was in perpetual trouble as a younger child and early teen. Those who caught her brawling in dirty, fetid alleys were always astounded to learn that so lovely a little girl possessed such a very bad temper and was quite capable of bringing swift revenge upon those whom she felt had unjustifiably wronged her. Nevertheless, with her eyes fixed on the Mistryl goal, Dunc managed, more or less, to stay on the right side of a line that is very murky when animals the galaxy over lived in better conditions than she did.

The strict discipline of the Mistryl way of life saved her. Despite her short temper, she is marvelous in a crisis—calm, businesslike, capable. Throughout her training, she demonstrated repeatedly the ability to remain singularly unruffled by danger, mayhem, brawling, and dodging blaster fire. This quality alone makes her worthy of the Mistryl title.

In pairing her with Shada D’ukal for her first mission, the Eleven of the Mistryl hope that Dunc will learn some of the subtleties, discipline and interpersonal skills Shada has. Like Dunc herself, the Mistryl have taken the long view. They are willing to overlook the occasional impetuousness and bursts of temper, for they believe that with maturity, structure, training and order, Dunc is very likely to grow to be a superior Mistryl shadow guard.
Rendra stepped through the massive archway where at one time equally massive doors had kept out unwanted visitors. The interior of the temple was shrouded in musty darkness, and she had to pause a moment to allow both her eyes and her lungs to adjust to the new environment.

Shapes slowly coalesced in the black void before her—stairs leading downward...rows of seats running in concentric circles around the chamber...a domed ceiling of opaque plasteel tiles stretching overhead. And in the very center of it all, at the lowest level of the temple, a triangular dais covered by the decaying remains of a once-great altar.

A cold gust of wind swirled the dust at her feet, and she pulled her waist-length flight jacket more tightly about her to ward off the chill. “Can’t meet in a nice, warm space station, no,” she said, her words echoing around the chamber as if caught in a whirlwind.
She headed down the worn stairs toward the dais, scanning the seats for signs of her contact. It seemed he was late—not necessarily a good way to begin a business relationship as far as she was concerned. She chuckled to herself as she realized her father's wisdom was still lurking in her mind no matter how hard she tried to rid herself of it. She had no intention of winding up like he did, and if he had lived his life by the same tenets he had taught her, she wanted no part of them.

But still, showing up late could cost you a deal—she couldn't really refute the logic of that axiom. So it seemed she was following that adage, at least until she could figure out some way to disprove it. For now, though, she'd have to let it ride.

As she reached the bottom of the stairs, she glanced up and around. Standing on the low ground made her somewhat anxious, but the archways that led outside were still clear, and she'd seen no indication of trouble thus far.

She ripped the blaster from the holster at her hip so quickly and with such ferocity that she almost tore the straps holding the holster against her leg. She let her eyes pass along the top row of seats, and then slid the pistol back into its resting place.

_Yeah, still the fastest draw in the galaxy,_ she thought as she turned her attention to the dais. Three stairs led up each side of the triangular platform, but they were covered with so much debris that they seemed impassable at the moment. All that remained of the altar was a ragged hulk of rotting wood—even with the moonlight spilling in from a shaft directly overhead, she couldn't make out any of the symbols running across the sides. Whatever god this temple had once venerated had been long-forgotten or his people long-conquered, the thought of which gave Rendra the creeps, as if she were standing in the middle of an ancient crypt swelling with angry souls looking for some mortal to take the blame for whatever evil had befallen them.

_Why do I do this to myself?_ she wondered as she eased back from the dais. The first row of seats halted her progress, and she whipped around, just in case someone or something had managed to sneak up on her.

But she found only decomposing wood and fabric—not much of a threat as far as she could tell.

"Maex," called a voice. Her name spiraled around the chamber as if possessed of its own life.

She snatched her blaster from her holster and pointed it in
various directions as she sought out the voice’s owner.

"There’s no need for that," said the voice. This time she was able to catch its point of origin—a group of three, maybe four, figures moving through the same archway she’d entered a few moments before.

"You’ve got interesting taste in meeting places," she said, lowering her blaster. "If I knew you better, I’d suggest looking into psychological testing."

"I’m sure you could do with a bit of that yourself," the being said dryly, apparently far from amused. He reached the bottom of the stairs and stopped about five meters away from her. In the minimal moonlight seeping into the temple she could see that he and his companions were definitely humanoid—but for all the detail she could make out they could be humans, Bith, Nikto, Duro, or any one of a thousand other humanoid species.

Whatever he was, he was staring at her, apparently waiting for something. She gave a shrug to indicate her confusion, and he responded with a gesture toward her blaster.

She could see that his comrades had blaster rifles or carbines slung over their shoulders, but at this point they seemed to be fairly at ease. She didn’t feel there was any harm in holstering her own weapon for the moment—besides, she could outdraw a long firearm any day.

"I suggest we get straight to the business at hand," the leader said finally as he slipped a hand into an interior coat pocket and extracted a datapad. With a flick of his wrist he sent it spinning through the air toward Rendra.

The slap of her palm against the plasteel stuttered through the temple, dying to nothingness as she read over the text. Slowly, a reverent silence filled the chamber as if whatever spirits remained here had been awakened by the commotion and were now anxiously watching and waiting.

Rendra found herself reading the document over and over again. The words simply didn’t seem to make sense in her mind. But she soon realized that they accurately and precisely conveyed the intention of their author.

She looked up. "Are you serious?"

"Quite," he said without any particular inflection. "And for that sort of money, I would think you would not take the matter so lightly."

She glanced back to the datapad, and nodded. "Yeah, that’s a lot
of credits...but I don’t know—"

"It is far too late for a change of heart, my dear mercenary. You will carry out the duties described there or you will...let us just say that your life will become even less pleasant."

She shifted the datapad into her left hand, leaving her right free to grab her blaster when the moment came. "I don’t remember agreeing to any of this."

"Come, Rendra. We both know you need those credits desperately. Do not pretend that such a sum would not save you from years of difficulty. You are required to accomplish a relatively simple and straightforward task. My sources say that you can handle this in your sleep."

"It’s not a matter of what I can and can’t do—it’s a matter of whether I want to."

The being laughed. "I admire your...scruples. But you speak as if you have a choice, when you do not."

In a blur, she whipped her blaster out and had it trained on a spot she believed was the middle of his forehead before the sibilance from his last statement had faded away. "This gives me a choice."

"First of all, I don’t care how good you might think you are with that thing, but you can’t kill all three of us before you die. And second, you miss the point: I’ve already alerted GalactiCore to your presence here. If you can’t pay them, they will impound your ship and you will be completely without resources."

She maintained her stance as she considered his words. He was right: without her ship she’d have no livelihood whatsoever, making her far worse off than she was now. She looked to the amount listed on the datapad. The price was more than fair, and it was a one-time deal....

"All right," she said quickly, before she could change her mind. At the same time she lowered her blaster. "When do I get my money?"

He reached into his coat again and threw her a credit stick. "That’s half. You get the rest when you complete the assignment."

"That’s not enough to pay off GalactiCore."

"I know."
You sneaky little—

She took several long strides toward him before his companions raised their blaster rifles, stopping her in her tracks. She heard nothing, but she could see that he had started laughing by the flickering of moonlight across a crescent-shaped amulet hanging from his neck.

Before she let her frustration get the best of her, she shoved her blaster back into its holster and charged up the stairs and out into the cool night air. As she pulled her comlink from her belt she looked up to the starlit sky. “Okay, Nopul,” she said into the link. “Let’s get out of here.”

She put the comlink away and watched a tiny speck of light descend from the sky.

“Sounds like a bad idea to me,” Nopul Etrefa said, his husky, Kerestian voice accenting his pronunciation. The breathing holes set beneath his eyes expanded as he breathed out—what in human physiology would definitely be considered a sigh.

Rendra glanced off into the cantina’s eclectic crowd—a collection of aliens from across the sector and beyond: some off-duty security officers drinking themselves silly a few booths away, an intense game of dejarik festering off in the corner. Standard patronage for a space station bar in the Periphery.

She finally looked back to Nopul, who was staring at her, apparently still expecting her to comment on his remark. “We owe GalactiCore more credits than some planets earn in a year. And if we don’t pay them, we’ll be stranded—and I don’t want to go through that ordeal again. I don’t think I could handle it.”

Nopul said nothing, just continued to fiddle with the holo-locket he kept on a chain around his neck. She wasn’t sure exactly what he might be thinking, but she knew she didn’t like it.

“What, you think I want to do this?” she said. “I would think you’d know me better than that.”
He looked into her eyes, his face set in an accusatory expression, but still he remained silent.

"Look, if you’ve got a better solution, let’s hear it."

He breathed deeply and shook his head. "No, no. Your synopsis of our situation is accurate, and I don’t have an alternative. I just wanted to make sure this job didn’t at least bother you a little."

Rendra stared at her companion for a few heartbeats, and then couldn’t help but smile. "You know, you’re a better friend than I deserve." She grabbed her drink from the table. "Just don’t let it go to your head," she said and then swallowed the remainder of the Corellian whiskey in a single swig.

"So, when are these mercenaries supposed to show up?" he asked, scanning the latest group of arrivals.

"Not sure. Dania said we should just—"

"Whoa—you let Starcrossee put this deal together?"

"Yeah. Why?"

Nopul looked at her as if an arm had suddenly grown out of her face. "Gelgelar? Fiery conflagration? Loss of all cargo? Any of this sound familiar?"

Rendra felt her defense mechanism kicking in. "That wasn’t Dania’s fault—"

He shook his head, and his eyes squinted in that annoying Kerestian expression of shocked disbelief. "You’d better cut down on that whiskey, it’s starting to affect your memory."

"Okay, okay, we’ve had our problems with Dania in the past, but right now we don’t have time to establish a new contact in this sector or travel out into the Rim to hook up with Keleni. If we don’t take care of this job immediately, we’re out of luck and out of credits. And then we’re out of a ship."

Nopul’s expression slowly shifted from incredulity to understanding and then finally to reluctant acceptance. "Fine, point taken. But I’m still not happy about it—about any of it, for that matter." His eyes shifted to survey the crowd again. "I can’t wait to get this over with."

"You and me both," she said as she gestured to the waitress at the bar for another whiskey. "Just keep an eye out for anyone wearing a red sash or scarf or something. That’s the sign."

"Well, so far I don’t—"

The sound of shattering glass interrupted his statement, and their attention was immediately drawn to the dejarik table in the back corner. Two aliens were standing on either side of the game
board shouting at each other in languages that the other didn’t seem to understand.

“You catch any of that?” Rendra asked.

Nopul continued to listen for another second. “Apparently the one on the left, the Nikto, thought they were playing the Bespin Variant, and the one on the right, the Dresselian, thought they were playing the Smuggler’s Option.” He paused to absorb more of the argument. “And it sounds like they both take the game pretty seriously.”

As they continued to watch, the Nikto suddenly yanked a hand-sized spherical object from a compartment in his belt. At the same time, the Dresselian brought a hold-out blaster to bear on the Nikto.

“Great,” Rendra said, doing her usual best to infuse sarcasm into the word. “This is exactly what we need.”

“I say we make a quick exit.”

She turned to Nopul. “Uh, did I mention we’re supposed to meet the mercenaries here—in this bar?”

“Yeah, but in a few minutes there might not be a bar to meet in.”

Rendra glanced back to the confrontation. The Nikto had set the thermal detonator’s timer, and the Dresselian still had the blaster pointed at the Nikto’s forehead.

“Wait here,” Rendra said as she got up from the table.

“I’ll think I’d rather wait over there, by the door, if you don’t mind.”

Rendra would have laughed at Nopul’s comment if she weren’t about to walk into the middle of a conflict between two apparently humorless aliens holding deadly weapons.

By the time she reached the dejark table, she still hadn’t come up with a specific plan—but then again, that had never stopped her before. “So, is there a problem with the food?”

The two aliens glanced at her without turning their heads. “Go away,” the Nikto said in mispronounced Basic.

“Look...friends...we can work this out. There’s no reason to blow yourselves and everyone else here into the next system. Why don’t we just sit down and talk about—”

The Nikto looked straight at her and clicked the detonator’s timer into the “on” position. From her angle she could see the chrono display: less than thirty seconds and counting.

The Dresselian started screaming at her in an uninterrupted barrage of gutturals and sibilants, none of which sounded even remotely familiar. Apparently, a calm discussion was out of the
question, leaving her with a single choice.

Before the aliens could even comprehend her movements, she had drawn her blaster, shot the detonator out of the Nikto’s hand and the hold-out blaster out of the Dresselian’s, caught the detonator as it sailed through the air, and was just now clicking off the timer.

Both aliens twitched as if to come after her, but a wave of her blaster halted them. “Oh, what, you don’t want to play now that you’ve lost your toys?”

The Nikto seemed more ashamed than angry, while the Dresselian completely ignored the remark.

“Well, I’ll assume you two have learned your lesson. Now play nice. I don’t want to hear from you for the rest of the...”

Something had caught her eye. She looked from the Dresselian to the Nikto and then back again....

Both were wearing red straps around their necks. She’d been too preoccupied with their weapons to notice before.

“You’re not Vakir’sa’jaina and Oro Memis?” she asked. “Please say you’re not.”

They looked to one another, then back to her, and nodded.

Rendra dropped her head. “Okay, Dania, that was your last chance, and you blew it,” she muttered.

She regarded her mercenaries. “All right, you two. We’re already late. Let’s get moving.”

“So, what you’re saying is that you’ve finally lost it,” Nopul said as they passed through the wide archway leading away from the station’s commercial district and into the docking bay complex.

Rendra glanced at the Dresselian and the Nikto to make sure they hadn’t heard Nopul’s remark. The two were in the midst of some sort of heated discussion, oblivious to anything going on around them. Satisfied, she turned back to her companion. “What am I supposed to do? We don’t have time to find someone else, and even
if we did, how do we know they wouldn’t be worse?”

Nopul looked back to the mercenaries, and then regarded Rendra. “I don’t think that’s possible.”

She wasn’t sure whether he was just giving her a hard time or was genuinely concerned. Either way, she had no choice. GalactiCore wanted its money—it didn’t care if she was having staff difficulties. She decided to steer the conversation in a different direction. “Did you slice out those Ships and Services codes?”

If Nopul noticed her tactic, he didn’t show it. “You doubt my abilities? Well, perhaps I should link up with someone who—”

“Did you?”

“Of course I did. Stars, you’re testy. I’m just trying to lighten the mood.”

Rendra started a rebuke, and then realized that she was the one who was in ill humor. Sometimes Nopul displayed more wisdom than she thought he possessed. Being constantly on edge wasn’t going to help her complete this mission, especially given her current stack of problems. Another of her father’s axiom’s began to play in her mind, but she silenced it as soon as she realized its source. Thanks, Dad, but I’ll handle this on my own.

“Uh,” she began, trying to recall where the conversation had left off. “So, what’s our status?”

They turned down a narrower corridor toward the outer edge of the complex, farthest from the rest of the station. Starving for credits definitely had its disadvantages.

“Well, I swapped our BoSS registry numbers with a trading vessel called the Runaround. The Zoda still has the same transponder code—I just changed the information in BoSS’s computer banks to reflect the new ship information. It’s a lot harder to detect a forged file than a forged transponder.”

“The Runaround. Sounds appropriate.” She looked at Nopul, and they both broke into laughter, finally relieving several hours’ worth of pent-up tension.

As they took the next corner into an even narrower hallway, Rendra suddenly came to a halt. Nopul stopped a couple of steps ahead, and the aliens just managed to avoid slamming into both of them.

The Nikto muttered something behind her. Rendra had picked up enough of his language to know he was wondering what was going on. She turned and put a finger to her lips to silence him and the Dresselian, and then motioned for the three of them to stay put.
while she checked things out.

Halfway down the corridor she stopped at the hatch to bay 919-A, where she had docked her ship. She checked the control panel on the wall and found there had been one access since she'd left.

She turned to issue Nopul and the aliens instructions when the bay door suddenly slid upward, revealing the wicked muzzle of a blaster carbine pointed at her chest.

"Maex. What a coincidence. I was just looking for you." The Nimbanel spoke in his native tongue, but she understood every word—she'd had more than enough experience with Hutts and their Nimbanean underlings than she cared to recall.

She tried to hide the fact that she had been in the midst of signing to someone outside of the Nimbanel's view, but in doing so she had sacrificed her chance to quick-draw her blaster.

"Please, come in," the Nimbanel said with his mouth and insisted with his weapon. "You know, GalactiCore isn't very happy with you at the moment. You seem to have missed..." he glanced at the datapad in his other hand, "three payments."

As soon as she stepped inside, the bay door slid shut behind her, locking with a hollow thud.

"Uh," she said, cycling through every con and outright lie she could think of. Unfortunately, nothing useful came immediately to her mind, leaving her with the weak, honest approach. "Look, I don't have the money right now. But I just took on a job that will make me enough to pay back all of those payments, plus two more."

A hollow whine sounded from somewhere behind her ship, and she glanced over the Nimbanel's shoulder to see an espionage droid hover into view, its ocular scanners whirring as they took in every square inch of the vessel. That task now complete, it turned toward Rendra and its owner to capture data on their verbal transaction. She'd had to use such precautions on several of her own jobs before, sometimes for legal reasons, sometimes because her benefactor wanted to watch his target squirm.

"Oh yes," the Nimbanel said, stealing her attention away from
the droid. "My informants placed you on Eryso in the Hedya system thirty-two hours ago. Let's see, you met with several beings from a ship called Chasa Riv, BoSS registry 52462474-245. You left twenty-three standard minutes later carrying a datapad you didn't have when you arrived, and then, according to vector calculations based on your ship's maximum hyperdrive speed, you immediately jumped here."

She had to admit: the Nimbanel was thorough. But as he was wasting time reading off the log of her recent activities, a plan had begun to take shape in her mind. She just needed a few more pieces of information to make sure it would have at least a chance of working.

"You've been keeping track of me," she said, maneuvering slowly into a conversation. "I'm surprised you didn't pick me up twenty minutes ago while security was doing that background check." She did her best to hide that fact the her statement was an outright fabrication.

He regarded her with a forced smile. "Yes, well. It doesn't seem to matter now, does it?"

_Perfect_, she decided. _He must not have any informants here on the station or he would have known she was lying—which means he doesn't know about my newly acquired mercenaries._

"So," he continued as he pocketed the datapad, "I'll take the scandocs and the pass-keys to your ship. Now." He punctuated the request with an almost imperceptible heft of his blaster carbine.

Her eyes tracked down to her own blaster—

"Do I have to take the keys from your dead body? That's not in my contract—although I don't really have anything against it, other than having to fill out those tedious security reports."

"Look, uh..." she said, fishing for his name. When he didn't offer, she continued. "Let's work out a deal. You and me. I'm going to earn a lot more than I need right now. I'll cut you in if you'll just give me three days to—"

She saw him flick a switch on the carbine—she didn't know exactly what it did, but it couldn't be good—and she knew she'd run out of time.

She turned and leaped for the door controls as a blaster bolt zinged over her head, blowing a fist-sized chunk of duracrete out of the wall. From her prone position she reached up and clicked the release mechanism.

And nothing happened.
Another blaster bolt exploded from his carbine, this time striking the floor and spewing a cascade of debris across her back. She rolled several turns to her right as the Nimbanel continued to take shots at her.

Finally, she pushed herself to her feet and snapped the blaster from her holster. Before he could fire another shot, she had loosed a pair of laser bolts straight for his chest.

The first slammed into an invisible barrier that showed itself by flaring a pattern of visible-light static, as if the molecules in the air in front of him had momentarily erupted into a chaotic frenzy and then returned to normal. The second bolt met the same fate, leaving the Nimbanel completely unharmed. Rendra had always wanted her own personal shield, but she’d found the prices exorbitant. Apparently this bounty hunter was good at what he did if he could afford such a device.

Her mind raced as the Nimbanel smiled and took aim at her once more, moving slowly as if to signal his confidence of his inevitable success. Why hadn’t Nopul and the others charged in once they’d heard the exchange of blaster fire? She glanced to the door…and then down to the control pad. Oh yeah, she realized, it’s coded. Let’s see what we can do about that…

She raised her weapon to fire again, but rather than targeting her opponent, she tracked across the room to the door release.

The Nimbanel smiled at her obvious mistake, and took an extra moment to aim at her head.

Rendra fired, but the alien paid the shot no attention as he sighted her through the targeting guides. He squeezed the trigger—

And then a barrage of blaster fire lanced across the bay from the open doorway and knocked him halfway across the room toward her ship, where he crashed to the floor and lay motionless.

Rendra looked back to the bay entrance as Nopul and the mercenaries walked in with weapons still readied for any further trouble.

“So,” Nopul said, looking innocent. “You need any help in here?”

She smirked. “Exactly what was your plan? Wait ’til I come up with one and then get involved?”

“Well, if I knew that was going to be your attitude…”

Rendra noticed that Vakir had walked up to the Nimbanel’s body and was searching through his belongings. After grabbing a few small items, he put the muzzle of his blaster pistol against the Nimbanel’s temple.
“Hey!” Rendra shouted, startling everyone including herself. “What’re you doing?” She marched over to the Nikto and pulled his blaster away from the Nimbanel’s head. “If he’s still alive, let him be. He had a job to do—I don’t take it personally. Besides, we’ll be long gone by the time he wakes up.”

Vakir looked down at the Nimbanel, shrugged, and then walked away.

A thought suddenly crossed Rendra’s mind, and she scanned the bay for the espionage droid. “Anyone see a little annoying droid flying around?”

Her companions searched the bay, but came up empty.

“Well,” she said, heading for the ship, “I guess it doesn’t matter much now. All right, everyone, let’s go. We’ve got a lot of work to do and not much time to do it in.”

Rendra wandered back into the Zoda’s—now the Runaround’s—roughly circular recreation area to find the Nikto, the Dresselian, and Nopul engaged in a multiround sabacc hand, judging by the number of credits in the pot.

“Who’s winning?” she asked as she plopped herself down onto a nearby couch.

“Oro,” Nopul said without letting his eyes stray from his cardschips. “For now.”

The Dresselian laughed—a staccato shushing sound that made Rendra wonder for a moment whether the alien was actually having trouble breathing. But when Vakir threw him a hard look and Oro suddenly shut up, she knew she didn’t have to worry.

She watched as Vakir pulled a card-chip out of his hand and then looked to his two opponents, apparently searching for some hint of their reaction. Whether he had learned anything or not Rendra had no way of knowing, but he slipped the card back into his hand, selected another, and promptly shoved the new choice into the interference field in front of him.
For a moment, no one said a word, Oro and Nopul staring at Vakir as he regarded his pile of credits while clicking his sharp nails against the table.

"You bet or no bet?" Oro demanded.

Vakir slowly raised his gaze toward his fellow alien—and then suddenly reached across the table and grabbed the Dresselian by the throat.

"Okay, okay," Oro managed to gag out, "take as much time as need."

Satisfied, Vakir released his death grip. He watched his credits as he mulled something over in his mind, and then apparently came to a conclusion as he tossed the rest of his credits into the pot. "Twenty," he said, although the word could have been just a grunt as far as Rendra was concerned.

The other two matched the bet, and then turned over the card-chips in the interference field in front of each of them.

"Looks like Oro wins again," Nopul said, pushing himself back from the table. "Deal me out."

As Oro gleefully pulled the pile of credits toward himself, Vakir slumped back in his chair with a definitively dejected look on his face. Oro continued to make various happy sounds until he noticed the Nikto sitting silently next to him.

Oro looked at the credits, at Vakir, and back to the credits. With his hand he cut the pile in half and pushed the credits that fell on one side over to Vakir, whose eyes lit up as the winnings came his way.

Nopul watched in utter confusion. "What in the stars are you doing?"

Oro looked at him as if it were obvious. "Vakir no credits, Oro no play. No fun for either of us."

Nopul shook his head as if to clear his mind of the bizarre logic, while Rendra chuckled at the entire series of events.

"I get the impression you two have worked together before," she said.
“Many times,” Oro said as he stuffed his half of the credits into a compartment in his belt. “And always.”

Vakir simply nodded as he collected the remainder of the pot and started stacking the credits in hand-high columns.

“Good,” she said, “because we can’t afford not to trust each other. What we’re about to do is dangerous. Any one of us slips up and we all go down.”

She pushed herself up from the couch and walked over to the wall of storage compartments. “And we only have one chance at this. If we fail the first time, we’re out of luck.”

“You haven’t mentioned what we are to accomplish,” Vakir said.

“Yes...I know. Well,” she started and then cleared her throat. As she leaned her back against the bulkhead, she risked a glance in Nopul’s direction and saw exactly what she expected: a look that begged her to reconsider one last time. She responded with an expression of her own: we don’t have a choice. When she thought she had given Nopul enough time to catch the gist, she turned back to the mercenaries. “We’re going to assassinate Uli Aaregil, the clan-leader of the Weequay.”

She let the statement hang in the air for a moment to allow for reactions, but Oro and Vakir only looked at her expectantly.

“So,” she continued, “we’ve got about nine hours until we reach the Sriluur system. Why don’t the two of you get some sleep while Nopul and I take care of some of the final preparations.”

The two aliens nodded, got up from the table, and headed back into the sleeping compartment without so much as a word. Rendra found their silence somehow disconcerting.

“So,” she said after they had left. “They took that pretty well.”

“Yeah, I guess they did,” Nopul said as he brushed down the two strips of hair running across his scalp. “Too well, I would say.”

“We don’t need people who are going to question what we ask of them.”

He cast her a strange glance. “We don’t?”

Rendra found herself shaking her head. “Do we have to go over this again? I thought we’d straightened everything out.”

“Yes, you did spell out the entire reasoning in explicit and extremely logical terms.”

He was giving her that look again, the one that made her want to reach out and strangle him. She knew she had to take her eyes off him to stop herself from acting on her instinct, so she opened one of the storage units in the wall and pulled out a case filled with
electronic devices.

"You can't even face me," Nopul said. "Doesn't that tell you something?"

She spun on him before she could even think. "Yeah, it tells me I should start looking for a new partner."

"Oh, I see, you call this a partnership. I was under the impression that partners had equal say—"

"All right, fine. This isn't a partnership—it never was. I'm the one who always has to do the planning, who has to figure out how we're going to make it to the next job without getting killed, running out of credits, or losing the ship."

"And I sit around and do nothing, just follow you on these 'jobs' as you call them, sucking up your hard-earned money. I'm just another worthless alien feeding off the underbelly of humanity." Contempt flashed across his face. "Maybe you should take a closer look at yourself before you decide the value of someone else."

She threw the case of electronics onto the table, scattering the card-chips onto the floor. "I don't need you to be my moral compass. Maybe I am devoid of ethics. I don't know. But you're no better than me, and your righteous attitude is starting to get on my nerves."

"Fine then, excuse me for trying to stop you from making a mistake that could haunt you for the rest of your life. And you're right, I'm not any better than you. You want to kill Aaregil for money, sign me up. I'll take my share and start up my own little legitimate business."

Nopul's last inflection almost sent Rendra completely into a rage, but she managed to control herself long enough to say, "Just get these jammers working." And with that she headed aft to her personal quarters, her emotions seething just below the surface—much closer than she liked.

One of her father's sayings about something or other started to coalesce in her mind, but she quashed it before it could fully form. Whatever it was wasn't going to make her feel any better—that was one thing she never doubted about her father's remarks.

Once alone inside her quarters with the door closed, she walked straight over to one of the valla-wood crates containing her personal gear, and punched it as hard as she could. The old wood splintered at the point of impact, revealing the ancient clothing stored inside. As her mind filled up with memories sparked by the sight of the old clothes, she began to sense something, as if she were being—
A buzzing whine from behind her brought her full around, blaster extended toward the source of the sound.

Hovering before her—and looking completely innocent—was the Nimbanel's espionage droid, its ocular scanners whirring as they recorded.

Rendra holstered her blaster. "So, this is where you decided to hide out," she said. "I guess we think alike."

"This place is busy," Nopul said as he surveyed the crowds overflowing the city streets. Looking down from their open-air docking platform, they could see a majority of the metropлекс. Hundreds of thousands of beings congested the avenues and cross-streets, blocking up the surface-bound traffic for kilometers in every direction. Even the skyways were filled with planetary vehicles of every shape and function, from tiny swoop bikes to the most elaborate repulsorcraft.

"It is expected for such an event," Vakir offered.

Everyone turned toward him with expressions of mild surprise.

"What?" he said in response. "You did not listen to the public channel's METOSP?"

Oro and Nopul continued to look confused, so Rendra added what little she could to the unfolding information. "That's 'Message To Spacers,' the frequency that informs incoming traffic about space lane vectors, local regulations and laws, and recent events that could affect interplanetary travel."

"And?" Nopul prompted Vakir, pointedly ignoring Rendra.

"And," the Nikto said, "Today marks the..." He stopped to think for a second, and then continued in the slow, dry speech pattern of a comm announcer. "The historic peace agreement between the Weequay and the Houk, who have long been arrayed against each other, especially here on Sriluurr."

"That's a pretty good impression," Nopul commented. "Can you do an Imperial stormtrooper?"
Rendra silenced Nopul with a look. "Well, this isn’t going to make things any easier. Security’s going to be tight. These sensor jammers had better work."

"They work," Nopul said simply and—at least from Rendra’s perspective—forcefully.

"Good, then let’s not waste any more time," she said, and then headed for the turbolifts that would take them to ground level.

An hour later—twenty minutes later than Rendra had anticipated—the quartet arrived at the Coliseum of Witness deep within the city. The edifice rose high into the bluish sky in a vaguely mushroom-like shape, a combination of angles and curves woven together so gracefully that the building seemed more like an artist’s masterpiece than a bureaucratic afterthought. Apparently the Weequay were a more creative race than her previous experiences had indicated.

"This it?" Oro said from behind her.

She kept her gaze on the structure, still marveling at its beauty. "Yep. Power up your sensor jammers. We’ve got a job to do." She lingered for another moment, then flicked a switch hidden on the inside of her belt and marched toward the Coliseum’s gaping archway, which was already thick with pedestrians seeking entrance.

As they queued up at the end of the line, Rendra scanned the crowd. Though a majority were Weequay and Houk, several other species from the sector were represented. She even noticed a few Bith and a handful of Rodians mixed in with the rest. This event has to be pretty important to attract so many beings. And I can’t imagine that that can be a good thing.
She felt the emptiness in her stomach, and wished she’d consumed something before they’d left the ship. She didn’t need any distractions.

Slowly, the line moved forward as security checked out each and every being who wanted to get into the Coliseum. As far as Rendra could see, they were using some kind of droid to scan each being for...well, for whatever they didn’t want passing into the arena.

She turned halfway toward Nopul, who was standing just behind her, but didn’t look directly at him, pretending instead to be casually checking out the length of the line. “You ever seen that kind of droid before?” she said, barely moving her lips.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw him maneuver his gaze toward the security station ahead. “I don’t recognize it. Could be a local R-series variant.”

“Will the jammers work on it?”

“No way of knowing.”

Now she focused on him, a look of fear mixed with annoyance on her face. He only shrugged in response. She pivoted forward again as the line moved ahead. Well, this will be fun, she thought as she watched the droid’s sensory receptors scan a Houk from head to foot.

Though she hated to admit it, she could sense the fear growing within her. It was an emotion she hadn’t allowed herself to feel in a long time—since the last time she thought she’d had something to lose. Better to be worried than to have nothing to be worried about, she decided, hoping her intellectual side might convince her emotional side to calm down. Unfortunately, the argument didn’t carry the weight she thought it might.

After she’d had enough time to acquire several more symptoms of anxiety—rampant perspiration among the worst of them—she reached the head of the line. The security guards—one Weequay and one Houk—motioned for her to step up. As she moved into position, the droid’s miniature sensor array followed the contours of her body. Halfway down it came to an abrupt stop.

Rendra looked to the Weequay guard, who had bent over to examine some sort of display screen on the exterior of the droid’s cylindrical body. A puzzled expression crossed his face, and he called over his Houk counterpart. As the two conversed, Rendra started to run through escape plans. But after a moment she realized she didn’t have much chance of evading an entire security force that was already watching for signs of trouble.
Finally, the Weequay approached her. She tried to put on the best look of innocence she could muster, but she had no way of knowing whether it would translate into Weequay.

He stopped directly in front of her, one hand on the heavy blaster pistol at his waist, then waved her forward and turned to call the next person.

For less than a fraction of a second, she wondered what had just happened. Then her logical half caught up with her, and forced her to move past the checkpoint. She could count her blessings later.

A few meters down the corridor, she came to a casual halt and turned to watch the security droid scan Nopul. As soon as the sensor passed over his chest, the droid started to beep frantically. Both guards ripped their blasters free and pointed them at Nopul.

The Houk moved forward cautiously and then pulled open Nopul’s double-breasted tunic. From her angle, it was hard for Rendra to see exactly what was happening, but it looked like the guard was examining something on Nopul’s chest.

After a moment, the Houk lifted his hand to show the Weequay the holocharm from Nopul’s necklace. He turned it on, and the image of a beautiful blue-and-brown world appeared a few centimeters above the device and began to rotate.

The other guard nodded, and the Weequay motioned for Nopul to move forward.

As he reached Rendra, she could see an odd look etched into his face. “Yeah,” he said, his voice a bit wobbly. “The jammers definitely work, but they appear to have a limited range.” He patted his belt where the sensor jammer was tucked away.

Rendra couldn’t help but smile at her companion as the color returned to his skin.

A minute later, Oro and Vakir had joined them and they were all heading toward the other end of the tall corridor. As they got closer to the exit archway, the rumble of voices and bodies shuffling from inside the arena grew continually louder until Rendra thought the strength of the vibration might tear the structure’s supports asunder.

Finally they emerged into the vast stadium—and they all stopped simultaneously as the enormity of the Coliseum fell upon their senses. A ring of five tiers enclosed the immense area of open space—Rendra gauged that it would take a repulsorbike at least ten seconds at maximum velocity to reach the opposite end of the arena. From the topmost tier hung flat screens about a dozen meters on a side, one in each quadrant—the silver sheen of their
surfaces suggested they were some sort of ancient vidscreen system, but she’d never seen one outside of museums so she couldn’t be certain. As her gaze fell to ground level, she saw that the arena proper was empty except for a circular dais filled with a few dozen unoccupied chairs.

Rendra had to draw herself out of her wonderment to remember why they had come in the first place. From the information her employer had provided, the dignitaries would march in through an archway on the ground level and then parade up to the dais, where each would get his, her, or its turn at the podium. She imagined the whole procession, trying to give herself a sense of the timing and the positioning of the ambassadors and their security forces. When she thought she had the best estimate she was going to get, she nudged Nopul.

“We’ll put Vakir on the east side of the first tier and Oro on the north side of the second. You’ll be west on the third. That should give us a full range of angles in case he’s taken any precautions.” She had to shout into his ear to be heard over the crowd.

Nopul regarded her with confusion. “What do you mean ‘in case?’”

“Our employer has supposedly taken care of that aspect of the operation—but I don’t want to take any chances.”

Nopul nodded. “Where will you be?”

“Ground level. I want to be as close as possible.” So I can face my actions directly, she left unsaid, though she had the feeling he understood by the grim expression on his face.

After a moment, he motioned for Vakir and Oro to follow him. They headed for the stairwell that would take them up to the higher tiers, Oro throwing her a hand gesture that she took to mean “good luck.”

In front of her a narrow set of stone steps lead down to the ground level. After taking a deep breath—the last deliberate inhalation she’d probably have for a while—she headed for her position.
Loud warbles from some large form of wind instrument sounded throughout the arena, silencing the crowd for the beginning of the public ceremony. Rendra glanced up to the tiers above and tried to pick out her companions, but the enormous size of the stadium coupled with the massive crowd prevented her from locating them.

But now that the noise had died down, she realized she could probably use her comlink. She slipped it out of her belt and flipped it to send mode. “Nopul, you in position?”

“Yes,” came the barely audible reply.

“Good. Vakir?”

No answer.

She called him again.

Still nothing.

“Oro?”

He, too, failed to respond.

She would have to assume they had both reached their positions but had either forgotten to turn on their comlinks or hadn’t bothered because of the noise level. They knew the plan—she just had to rely on their ability to carry it out.

Carry it out. That was good. She didn’t even want to call it what it was: an assassination. Simple. To the point.

Then why was it so hard to admit?

She shook the line of reasoning before it could go any further. I guess Nopul is getting to me. Come on, Rendra, concentrate.

She turned her attention to the two lines of dignitaries emerging from the archway. One line was composed entirely of Weequay, the other of Houk. The leader of each held aloft the banner designating his government. Oddly, the fabric remained draped about the poles, lifeless. Rendra would have expected the arena structure to create strong wind currents, especially at ground level, but the banners remained motionless as the parade continued forward toward the dais. Come on, let’s go. Let’s go. Walk faster.

She pressed her back up against the wall of the small, partly enclosed alcove she’d found, then slid her hand in between herself and the duracrete and eventually up the back of her shirt. Slowly, she pulled away the hold-out blaster she had affixed to the skin of the small of her back. The weak adhesive gave way easily, and she just as cautiously slipped her hand back out, concealing the weapon as best she could as she eased it into the front pocket of her flight jacket.

The crowd remained transfixed by the ceremony before them.
Rendra saw expressions of sadness, joy, remorse, and hope on the faces of the assembled beings. Though they believed they were about to witness a momentous occasion, only Rendra and her companions knew it would instead become one of the most infamous events of galactic history.

She found herself playing with the blaster trigger, and immediately yanked her hand out of her pocket. All she needed was to accidentally fire a shot—the Weequay leader hadn’t even come into view yet.

Her heart was beating loudly in her head again—or still...she wasn’t sure. She knew she had to calm herself down, but nothing she considered seemed possible of doing so.

Suddenly she heard a voice. It boomed from one side of the arena to the other, but didn’t reverberate back upon itself. The Weequay were definitely master architects to have created dampened acoustics in such an enormous structure.

"Today marks a milestone in the history of the Periphery," the voice continued. Rendra now saw that it belonged to a politician standing at the podium. The remainder of the dignitaries had seated themselves in the chairs covering the rest of the dais. Apparently she’d lost a good few minutes dealing with her nerves.

"For thousands of years, the Weequay," he gestured toward one side of the dais and then to the other, "and the Houk have stood fervently against one another. Now they come together, united in peace, to put an end to their long-held differences." He paused to scan the bewitched audience.

"Millions have died as a result of this feud. That loss comes to an end here and now. No longer will children suffer the deaths of parents, or parents the deaths of their children. Today we make peace."

The intonation of his last statement indicated he had come to the end of his introduction, and the crowd responded with a splatter of applause that quickly turned into a raucous roar of cheers, clapping, and foot-stomping.

He put his hands up to call for quiet. "Now I would like to bring up the architect of this peace. A politician who has dedicated his entire life to ending the war between our two species...Ambassador Uli Aaregil."

An outpouring of emotion greeted Aaregil as he rose from his seat and assumed a position at the podium.

While the crowd rejoiced, Rendra removed the blaster from her
pocket and extended the tiny macroscope she had installed to aid her aim. She brought the weapon up to her eye as if she were trying to get a better look at Aaregil through an ocular magnifier, keeping the blaster concealed within her cupped hands. It would be an awkward pose to fire from, but she had no choice if she wanted to pull it off as surreptitiously as possible.

Finally, the congregation had grown quiet enough for Aaregil to speak. According to her employer’s information, his speech would include the line “for all of us, from now until eternity.” Rendra had decided that that would be the signal for all of them to fire. Between the silencing units and the macrosopes, they should each be able to squeeze off a shot and retreat into the crowds before anyone could pinpoint them as the assassins.

She watched Aaregil through the scope as he fiddled with a datapad. “I had prepared a speech for this occasion, but...but, to me, that’s too political for this joyous achievement.” He slipped the datapad into his tunic pocket. “Instead, I’d like to talk to you from the heart, about how I feel at this moment—one I have waited a hundred and twenty-two years to see.”

_Blazing stars_, Rendra cursed. She put the blaster back into her pocket and took out her comlink, pressing it against her lips. “Nopul.”

A pause, then, “Yeah.”

“No speech. Alternative: fire when he introduces the next politician.”

“Right.”

“Vakir. Oro.”

No response—not that she had expected one. She could only hope they’d figure out the problem on their own and contact her or Nopul.

As she exchanged her comlink for her blaster, she hoped Dania Starcrosser was having a good time wherever she was in the galaxy on the credits Rendra has paid her, because it was the last good time she was ever going to have.

Aaregil spoke. “We are about to embark on a new path for both of our species, one filled with freedom—freedom from the horrors of conflict; freedom from senseless death; freedom from meaningless ideals.”

She adjusted the macroscope until the readings indicated she had a perfect shot at Aaregil’s chest. _Meaningless ideals... I should have had you speak to my father years ago._
If her father knew what she was about to do, he would have shot her himself. Good old Dad, always placing ideals before everything else—including his family. Rendra had committed her life to avoiding that mistake and...

Look where it had gotten her.

She stared at Aaregl through the sights. What was she doing? Saving herself from returning to the life she had struggled so hard to escape, that's what. She pushed away her misgivings. *Ideals get you killed. Your father learned that the hard way. Don't follow in his footsteps.*

She breathed out, hoping to send her inner conflict along with it, when her comlink beeped. She yanked it out of her pocket without bothering to hide the blaster. "Yeah."

"I got through to Oro and Vakir. They know the new plan." He paused. "You sure killing him is worth a ship?"

Just what she needed right now, another outsider questioning her life.

"No," she said crisply, "but it is worth my life."
"And that of millions of Weequay and Houk, as well, apparently."
It was a damning statement....
And yet, it was true. She could not deny the logic, no matter how
much she wanted to.
Aaregil continued his remarks. "But I was not alone in this
struggle to bring about peace...."
"Time's running out," came Nopul's filtered voice.
She couldn't believe she'd come this far only to question herself
now. She should just do it and get it over with. Then she'd have no
decision to make.
But by then it would be too late.
"He is not only my colleague," Aaregil said from the podium. "He
is also my friend."
Rendra raised her blaster again and targeted Aaregil. She could
now see that another
Weequay had risen from his
seat and was standing behind
the ambassador. Sunlight sud-
denly flashed on an object
hanging from the being's
clothing, blinding her for a mo-
ment. When she looked again,
he had shifted just enough to
stop the reflection.
She adjusted the zoom on
her blaster's macroscope, fa-
voring the spot that had
blunted a second before.

From a long chain around his neck hung a crescent-shaped
amulet made from a lustrous metal, its hue falling somewhere in the
bluish green range.

Her mind flashed on an image of the meeting with her employer
in the temple—the Temple of Quay, Weequay god of the moon. The
realization came instantly: it had all been a set-up. For what reason,
she had no idea—not that it mattered right now. She could take
time to figure that out later.
"Here he is," Aaregil's voice boomed over the loudspeakers,
"Minister Pon Svale."
She put the comlink to her mouth. "Don't shoot!"
Ambassador Svale clasped Aaregil's arm in peace.
Rendra keyed her comlink again, recycling the entire system in
case it had gone on the blink. "Repeat. Terminate mission. Con-
firm?"

On the dais, Svale situated himself at the podium as Aaregil
moved off the side.

"Confirm?" she whispered as loud as she could in the sea of
onlookers.

A pair of blaster bolts, each from a different direction, pierced
the hushed silence in rapid succession, striking Ambassador Aaregil
full on. Rendra cursed as she shoved her blaster inside her tunic—
and then fell completely silent as she saw the result of the attacks.

Rather than knocking the ambassador down, the bolts collided
with a shimmering energy shield, ricocheting the blasts upward
into the sky and leaving Aaregil dazed but otherwise unharmed.

At that moment, the solemnity of the ceremony erupted into
frenzied chaos. Security guards hefted their weapons and took off
through the crowd. Minister Pon Svale shouted orders over the
speaker system—the words all but lost in the cacophony of con-
fused and outraged citizenry.

Rendra leaped forward, knocking down several bewildered
Weequay as she vaulted down the steps into the central walkway.
She flicked on her comlink and screamed into it at the top of her
lungs, "Everyone back to the Zoda! Now!"

She pocketed the comlink, and then pushed herself through the
thickening mobs, heading, however slowly, toward the exit. She felt
like an amoeba stuck in a pool of heavy plasma, and for once she
could relate to the life of a single-celled organism.

She had no way of discovering the fates of her companions at the
moment, so she instead concentrated on her own escape, hoping
they would all meet at the Zoda and get off the planet before it was
too late—if it wasn't already.

As she squeezed through the crowd, a lone thought dominated
her mind: Minister Pon Svale would pay for setting her up. And the
gods help him if any of her companions were hurt....
Rendra sat in the cockpit of the Zoda, cycling up the ship’s systems so she could take off as soon as Nopul and the others arrived—if they arrived. She didn’t have much of a window left, but she wasn’t going to leave them behind.

A hollow pounding came at the airlock. She grabbed her blaster, which she has placed in front of her on the nav computer, and headed for the airlock.

“It’s me...—on” said a voice over the comm system among the fuzz of static. “Hurry, I’m...—lowed.”

Rendra punched the release mechanism, and the airlock hissed open. Nopul jumped before it had come to its full aperture. “Close it!” were the first words out of his mouth.

“What about the others?”

Nopul looked at her, his gaze penetrating further than she liked, and then he shrugged.

She slammed her fist against the airlock controls, and the servos motors issued their hydraulic hush as the hatch closed. Rendra headed back to the cockpit.

Her hands were dancing across the console before she even hit the seat. After she made several adjustments, she fit the comm headgear over her ears.

“Well, you got us into a real mess, but I have to admit,” Nopul said as he took the co-pilot’s seat. “You made the right decision.”

She continued readying for takeoff for a moment before she turned toward him. “Don’t be too proud. I never had the chance to make the decision either way.”

“What?”

“I didn’t fire—but not because I had a moral wake-up call. The whole thing was a setup. I didn’t fire because I realized we were being used.”

Nopul said nothing and his expression failed to betray his thoughts. Rendra didn’t have time to deal with his thoughts on the subject anyway, so she turned back to her initiation routines.

“You’re not going to leave them here, are you?” he said finally.

“What do you want me to do? Walk up to security and say, ‘These are my mercenaries. Please let them go. They were only acting on my orders.’ That’ll get us all thrown into the detention center.”

Nopul stared at her as if examining her for the first time. She felt his gaze upon her like charged Tibanna gas, eating through to her soul. She’d never seen him give such an accusatory look—to
anyone.

And the first was directed at her, of all people. How dare he....

Something in his expression stopped her line of silent defiance. It wasn’t accusation etched into his face. It was surprise. Complete shock.

The same look her father had given her when she’d announce she was leaving their home, and more importantly, him. She’d realized only later that her words had devastated him, left him speechless. What she had taken for silent acceptance was actually complete shock.

Her hands slid from the console into her lap. When she was leaving the Coliseum she wanted nothing more than to rescue her companions and to make Svala pay for his betrayal. But once she had reached the Zoda, the more logical part of her mind had taken over. Only now did she realize that she was acting exactly as Svala had, betraying those who had trusted in her.

She slowly turned to Nopul, who was now staring through the forward viewport. She had a lot to say, her thoughts jumbling together so that she couldn’t utter a syllable. She felt her emotions swimming in her chest, threatening to explode upward through her throat and into her head. Only through her strength of will was she able to keep them down. Without looking, she keyed the computer, shutting the engines down.

Nopul glanced over at her, a hint of hope showing through the pain and anger.

She locked gazes with him. “We’re not leaving here without Vakir and Oro.”

Nopul’s face broke into a full smile, from forehead to chin. If Rendra hadn’t seen it, she wouldn’t have believed it was possible. “How?” was all he could say.

“I haven’t gotten that far yet.”

At that moment, a short whir preceded the espionage droid’s appearance at the entrance to the cockpit.

“But I’m starting to get an idea....”
Oro gently touched the bars of their cell, eliciting a spatter of electrical discharges from the durasteel that burned his fingers. "Aah!"

Vakir shook his head. "What are you doing, nerf-head?"
"Try to get free. What you do to help?"
"Well, I'm not wasting time checking to see if the bars are still charged every five minutes."
"Could turn off."
Vakir snorted. "If it makes you feel better, you can continue to think that. But it's just about as likely as Maex showing up to rescue us."

A clatter from down the corridor drew their attention. But the source of the noise was beyond their range of sight. After a moment they heard the soft patter of footsteps coming toward them.
And suddenly Rendra stepped into view, startling them both.
She put a gloved finger to her lips, and then pulled a lockpicking tool from her pocket. As she inserted the thin wand into the cell door's narrow lock, another figure floated past her.
Vakir recognized it as the espionage droid that had stowed away aboard the Zoda—except that now it was outfitted with brushes of all shapes and sizes. The droid floated to the end of the cell bay, finally resting quietly in a darkened corner. "What the—"
Rendra silenced him and then went back to work. To Vakir the whole process seemed to be taking an inordinate amount of time, but then again, he decided, it could just be his frayed nerves. He glanced over to see Oro grinning like an idiot, and it was all he could do to stop from slapping it off his face.

And then they all stopped what they were doing. Voices. Down the hall.
Rendra jiggled her lockpick—the it refused to come out of the lock. She looked down the corridor, past the point where Vakir could see, and then yanked at the lockpick with all her might, pulling it free with a loud scraping sound.
"Maex," said a voice, the owner of which remained out of Vakir's sight. By Rendra's shifting gaze, he could tell that whoever it was was coming toward her.
Minister Pon Svale came into view. "Thank you for giving yourself up. I thought you might try something this stupid. But then again, you fell completely for my little game."
Rendra assumed a casual stance. "I have to admit, Svale. You got me. Played on my fears and my ethics, knowing the whole time that
I would be too preoccupied with both to realize what you were doing.”

Svale issued a satisfied chuckle. “I’m not brilliant, but I am thorough.”

“I just don’t understand why you went to all that trouble.”

“Please, Maex, I’ve studied you long enough to know you’re not that incompetent.”

“Well, frankly, I’m beginning to think you’re insane.”

The remark did not sit well with Svale. His thin smile changed quickly to a sneer. “I don’t know what you’re trying to pull, but if you think it can get you out of this, you’re the one who is insane. You are a dozen meters below the surface, surrounded on all sides by thousands of troops loyal to me. I don’t know how you got in here, but I do know how you’re going out.”

Rendra said nothing. Neither did Vakir or Oro. But Svale continued.

“Now that you have completed your assignment, I have been appointed First Minister of Defense, second only to Uli himself. It was I who urged him to wear a personal shield, even though he thought it a politically incorrect thing to do. But thanks to the attack on his life—courtesy of me—I was able to prove him wrong.”

He pulled a slim device from his front pocket and clicked one of its protrusions. The cell opposite Vakir’s and Oro’s opened, and Svale motioned for her to enter.

Rendra stood her ground.

“Please, let’s not make this any messier than it already is.” And with that he drew a blaster from his hip.

She acquiesced finally, moving into the cell with a look of defeat on her face.

“Make peace with your makers. You will be executed tomorrow after your trial.” Svale gave the aliens one last look and then returned down the corridor.

The espionage droid floated into view.

“It worked,” Rendra whispered. “Now get back to the ship. Nopul has to take it from here.”

Vakir and Oro looked to one another, but neither seemed to have any understanding of what had just taken place right in front of them.

“Don’t worry,” Rendra said from across the way as the droid hovered out of sight. “I’ll fill you in later. If Nopul’s slicing skills are as good as he says, we should have at least a slight chance of getting out of this.”
Vakir didn’t know how Oro was taking the news, but to him, that didn’t sound as promising as he would have liked.

Nopul swiveled the cockpit chair one more time. That made six hundred and twenty-eight revolutions, and he’d still not heard a word from Rendra.

He’d set the ship’s comm system to the METOSP channel after she’d left. According to the updates, all of Sriluur had erupted into chaos. No vessels were being allowed to lift off until flight control could determine whether the threat had passed.

*Threat?* Nopul thought. *Trust me, there’s no longer a threat.*

He glanced over at the exterior ocular sensor display for a quick look—and then stopped to stare at the squad of armed security guards marching straight for the *Zoda*.

This was it. The end. All his hopes and aspirations dashed over the course of a few hours. Well, for what it was worth, he wasn’t going to let it end so neatly.

With his last embers of vigor, he sprang from the chair and pulled a blaster rifle out of the cockpit weapons locker. He checked the charge and found it three-quarters full. He gave a nervous chuckle: the weapon would probably last longer than he would.

With a stride infused with the power of imminent death, he headed for the airlock. Before he hit the release, he took a deep breath, guesstimating the time it would take for the patrol to reach the ship but before they were in a readied position.

He exhaled quickly and—before he let his common sense inform him of his insanity—jammed the airlock control with his elbow. As the door hissed open, he hefted the blaster rifle and took up an offensive stance. He began to ease the blaster’s trigger, just enough so that he knew he’d get off the first shot.

When the airlock had fully opened to reveal the open-air bay to the starboard of the *Zoda*, he was alarmed at what he saw.

Nothing. Where had they gone? Around to the other side of the
ship? Were they laying in wait for him to poke out his head so they could blast him into a million pieces without exposing themselves?

When no one appeared to answer his questions, he eased forward down the ramp, careful not to break the plane of the hull. To test the waters, he shoved the muzzle of the rifle outside.

No response.

Which didn't do much to settle his nerves. Maybe they were smarter than he was. No, he didn't like this one bit.

Realizing he had no other option—the ocular sensor unit was fixed on an aft view—he poked his head out and glanced in both directions, fully expecting not to live long enough to perceive the information his eyes absorbed.

So he was completely surprised to find himself unharmed in the next moment, the squad of security guards getting smaller as they headed for another ship a few dozen meters away.

Nopul took in a sweet breath. The adrenaline, though now unneeded, still coursed through him, making his hands—and in turn, the blaster rifle—shake. The movement woke him out of his respite and he scuttled back up the ramp and hit the locking mechanism. He left the airlock to shut by itself as he headed to the cockpit.

When he got there he saw the incoming message light blinking. That was the signal. He grabbed his slicer tools, thought twice about leaving the blaster rifle behind, and finally headed off without it. He had a lot to do. Rendra, Oro, and Vakir were counting on him. He couldn't take the risk of carrying a lethal weapon. If he were arrested or even detained for a few moments, all of them, including himself, would lose their lives. And that would definitely not make his day.

Sriluur’s yellow sun blazed down on Rendra from its position just to the morning side of the sky’s zenith. She’d been too busy to notice how bright it was yesterday, but now, chained to a makeshift
pillar on the dais in the center of the Coliseum floor, she didn’t have the option of missing out on that bit of information.

Next to her, Oro, Vakir and some other alien she didn’t recognize—apparently caught up in the same political machinations—looked on as First Minister Pon Svale continued to congratulate himself on capturing the would-be assassins and to deride her and her companions for their evil intentions. She wished she could show him some evil. Luckily for him there were two meters of durasteel chain holding her back.

She’d already suffered through half an hour of being pelted with everything from stones to sour vegetables—she was pretty sure one of the gourd-like fruits had broken a couple of ribs—and now the ceremony seemed to be coming to an end.

"You can kill me in two seconds, Just please look at the vidscreens."

Vakir, who was closest to her, glanced toward her. "You sure Nopul can handle this?"

"Would I lay all of our lives on the line if I thought he couldn’t?" She hoped her forceful tone would cover up the fact that she had no idea what Nopul was capable of. She knew nothing about computer slicing—she’d left that all to him—and so she hadn’t ever been able to gauge his level of ability.

But Vakir seemed to buy into it. "I cannot wait to see this man," he threw a disgusted look in Svale’s direction, "fall from his high promontory and be trampled upon by his own people."

Rendra, even in the midst of her current situation—and then again, perhaps precisely because of it—found herself grinning. "You and me both."

The roar of the masses seated and standing throughout the Coliseum—there seemed to be more here today than yesterday, a sad comment on sentient nature, she supposed—died down, and Svale regarded them all in silence, building up dramatic tension to elicit the greatest response from what he was about to say, which Rendra, unfortunately, could guess word for word.
Come on, Nopul. I have faith in you. More than I have in myself at this point. But you're just about out of time.

"Send these...insidious demons," Svale said, his voice booming over the amplifiers placed throughout the arena, "to their makers!"
The throngs cheered, whistled, clapped, and stomped, making enough noise to drown out the last syllable of Svale's decree. Four soldiers detached from their unit and walked across the dais, each taking up a position next to one of the guilty, placing blasters against the temples of their victims.

Rendra looked to the vidscreens around the Coliseum. They switched from a focus on Svale to the quartet of soldiers with their blasters held ready for the killing blow. Come on, Nopul. Come on.

And then every vidscreen in the arena erupted in static. Rendra's heart leaped. Almost. You almost have it.

She glanced at Svale, who was basking in the vengeance of the crowd. He nodded to the soldiers, who then turned their attention to Rendra and her fellow captives.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw movement high above, and she looked up to see the image of Pon Svale on the vidscreen—but this time he was standing in an underground corridor, not on the dais in full sunlight. Nopul had done it.

But as she turned to the soldier about to end her life, she realized it might be too late. No one was paying any attention to the vidscreens. They were all focused on the execution about to take place in front of them.

"Hey!" she found herself yelling at the Weequay soldier. "Look! Look at the vidscreen!" He responded only with a confused expression.

"You can kill me in two seconds. Just please look at the vidscreens."

He thought for a beat, and then threw a side-long glance across his shoulder. And didn't look back.

His fellow executioners—apparently his subordinates—hesitated as well, unsure why their leader had failed to carry out his task. They, too, looked to the vidscreens.

The audience booed and hissed—and then, amazingly, fell silent as they noticed the scene playing on the massive screens.

"But thanks to the attack on his life—courtesy of me," Svale's recorded image was saying, "I was able to prove him wrong."

Minister Aaregil raced to the podium. "Stop the execution. We cannot send these people to their deaths until we have investigated
this new evidence."

Svale was too far from the microphone to be picked up, but Rendra could see by his angry expression and exaggerated gestures that he was not taking Aaregil's announcement well.

Aaregil said nothing in response, but after a few moments under Svale's barrage, he motioned for security to take the First Minister into custody.

A half-dozen security guards cut off her view of him, and she turned her attention to the soldier who had been about to end her life.

"Thank you," she said, but he ignored the comment.

Aaregil walked up to her. "Even if this datatape can be verified, you're still in a lot of trouble." She wanted to tell him that she didn't
care, but before she could utter a word, he headed off.

She looked over to see Vakir hyperventilating—but alive—and she rested her head against the pillar. *Step one accomplished. We might go to jail for fifty years, but at least we're not going to die today.*

As the adrenaline faded from her body, she started to wonder whether that was a good or a bad thing.

Two long months later, Rendra, Nopul, Vakir, Oro, and even Scrud (Oro had named the espionage droid in his native tongue, though none of them could decipher from his explanations what exactly the word translated to in Basic), stood before the Zoda in its open-air docking bay on Sriluur.

“I don’t like it,” Nopul said. “The colors don’t match.”

“It was either this or stay in the detention center for the rest of our lives,” Rendra said, for what she guessed was the hundredth time.

“Yeah, I know. But why do we have to have the symbol of the Houk–Weequay Alliance painted across the side of our ship? It’s not going to help us carry out these missions.”

“Aaregil said something about establishing a reputation, having a presence...the usual political stuff.”

Nopul grunted as he smoothed back the twin lines of hair running across his scalp. Over the years, Rendra had learned that the gesture meant he’d accepted what he’d been told, but still wasn’t happy about it. “So what’s our first mission? Escort duty for a fruit transport?”

Rendra eyed the datapad in her hands. “Not exactly.”
"I just gave you a perfect shot!" Rendra screamed into her headset as she rolled the Zoda to evade a line of incoming laser fire. "What happened?"

"Missed," was Oro's simple response. If he'd been in the cockpit with her, she'd have smacked him on the back of the head. Luckily for him he was an entire deck away in the belly turret.

"They're coming around again. Two fighters at...one-twenty mark forty-four," Nopul said, his eyes glued to the sensor console in front of him. He turned toward her. "How long does this agreement with the Houk-Weequay Alliance last, anyway?"

Before she could answer, the Zoda shuddered as the pirate ships battered her with a barrage of laser bolts. Rendra responded to the attack by pulling up into a new vector, ninety degrees divergent from the last. "You don't want to know."

"That long, huh?"

"Oro, Vakir!" Rendra shouted over the headset. "It'd help me out a lot if you'd hit something!"

"Pirate starfighters, pyramid formation," Nopul announced. "Ninety-two mark seven and coming in fast."

"All shields to starboard flank. Oro and Vakir, fire at will!" She took the Zoda into a dangerous maneuver, heading straight for the enemy fighters. "And boys, I really mean it this time."
Roleplaying Game Information

Rendra Maex

Type: Mercenary

DEXTERITY 4D
Blaster 6D+2, blaster: heavy blaster pistol 8D, dodge 5D+2

KNOWLEDGE 3D
Business 4D, languages 4D, streetwise 5D, value 5D, willpower 6D

MECHANICAL 3D
Astrogation 4D, space transports 6D+2

PERCEPTION 3D+1
Bargain 4D, command 5D, con 5D, sneak 6D

STRENGTH 2D+2

TECHNICAL 2D
Blaster repair: blaster pistols 4D

Force Points: 2

Dark Side Points: 1

Character Points: 13

Move: 10

Equipment: Comlink, heavy blaster pistol (5D), hold-out blaster (3D)

Capsule: Arrogant, self-centered, cold—these are the words used after meeting Rendra Maex for the first time. There is a lot more to this 26-year-old than first appears, however. Raised by her father on the unforgiving world of Reuss VIII, she watched as the Reuss Corporation encroached closer and closer to the small town she lived in. Her father—a worker at one of the factories—spent his time and most of his money on the poorer residents of the town. He tried to help the rust rats—orphans who lived outside, breathing in the contaminated air. She always heard him tell how wonderful her life was and how good it was to sacrifice oneself for the good of all. She didn't care about that: all she wanted was to leave the planet.

She finally left at the age of 18, knowing her father was dooming himself. He was beginning to steal Imperial foodstuffs and water to help feed the poor. In a large yelling
match, she announced she was leaving, and accused him of loving everyone but her. She left her father in shock and boarded the first ship she could buy passage on. It was a week later that she heard her father had been caught and executed for stealing Imperial property. That was the last time she allowed herself to cry.

During her travels she picked up several skills, some of which could be considered unsavory. She found she had a talent for blaster-play. An old pirate she was cooking for noticed this and showed her how to take care of a blaster and make it her own. It wasn’t long before he was hiring her out for both entertainment and business purposes. Rendra Maex was 20 when she shot down her first target for money. Soon she was making a fair amount of money as a cheap assassin and mercenary.

After buying her ship, the Zoda, Rendra found herself working harder and harder to make ends meet. She took on a partner—Nopul—for a job in the Core and found she liked working with the Kerestian. Nopul agreed to stay on and help her pay off GalactiCore. While Nopul reminds Rendra strongly of her father, the two have become best friends.

**Nopul Etrefa**

Type: Kerestian Mercenary

**DEXTERITY 3D+1**
Blaster 5D, brawling parry 4D, dodge 5D

**KNOWLEDGE 3D**
Languages 6D, streetwise 5D, value 5D

**MECHANICAL 2D+1**
Astrogation 5D, space transports 6D

**PERCEPTION 3D+2**
Forgery 6D, gambling 4D, hide 4D+2, persuasion 6D, search 5D, sneak 5D+1

**STRENGTH 3D**
Brawling 5D, stamina 5D

**TECHNICAL 2D+2**
Computer programming 7D+1, security 5D

**Force Points:** 2

**Character Points:** 11

**Move:** 10

**Equipment:** Blaster rifle, code slicer (provides +1D security bonus in attempts to bypass or break through security measures), hololocket, slicer’s box (provides +1D computer programming/repair bonus in attempts to break into computer systems and alter files)

**Capsule:** When people meet Nopul Etrefa, they expect the cool, merciless killers seen in the employ of Hutt and Imperials. Nopul, however, is a Kerestian of practically another world. Long before the Kerestian sun began to cool, several sunspace colony ships were launched; the Kerestians aboard were placed in suspended animation.

After several hundreds of years of sailing through the galaxy, one of the few surviving colony ships was stumbled across by a passing merchant freighter. On this particular ship were, among others, a Kerestian couple, the female heavy with a litter of young. Two young survived the cryotank—Nopul and his sister, Forisa. As Nopul grew he learned the fate of those Kerestians who were left on Kerest—how they became barbaric bounty hunters and body guards. When the time came
for him to leave the nest, he was given a hololocket which shows a picture of the planet Kerest as it once was.

He decided that he would dedicate his life to technology and education and defy the stereotype his savage cousins created. Although he did learn much in his course of study, his dream of becoming a scientist was not meant to be. The Empire was taking Kerestians in as personal servants and Nopul chose at that time to disappear.

Due to the expectations of his species, he found work mostly in criminal locations. Eventually he hooked up with a young mercenary, Maex, who was trying to make a name for herself. After several adventures with the cocky sharpshooter, he signed onto her ship for good.

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**Zoda**

**Craft:** Ghtroc Industries class 720 freighter
**Type:** Modified light freighter
**Scale:** Starfighter
**Length:** 35 meters
**Skill:** Space transports: Ghtroc freighter
**Crew:** 1, gunners: 1
**Passengers:** 10
**Cargo Capacity:** 135 metric tons
**Consumables:** 2 months
**Hyperdrive Multiplier:** x2
**Hyperdrive Backup:** x15
**Nav Computer:** Yes
**Maneuverability:** 2D
**Space:** 4
**Atmosphere:** 260; 750 kmh
**Hull:** 3D+2
**Shields:** 2D
**Sensors:**
  - Passive: 20/1D
  - Scan: 40/1D+2
  - Search: 75/3D
  - Focus: 6/4D
Weapons:

1 Double Laser Cannon
   Fire Arc: Front
   Crew: 1
   Skill: Starship gunnery
   Fire Control: 1D+2
   Space Range: 1–3/12/25
   Atmosphere Range: 100–300/1.2/2.5 km
   Damage: 4D

2 Quad Laser Cannons
   Fire Arc: Turret
   Crew: 1
   Skill: Starship gunnery
   Fire Control: 3D
   Space Range: 1–3/12/25
   Atmosphere Range: 100–300/1.2/2.5 km
   Damage: 5D

Capsule: When Rendra was ready to start her new life as a gun-for-hire, her ex-employer and friend told her to get the best ship she could because it would become her life’s blood. Not one to do things halfway, she bought a fresh-from-the-factory 720 from an honest salesman. She also hired a pair of factory workers to modify the freighter to suit her needs. All of this custom work was expensive—the ship cost her over 100,000 credits when everything was tallied. She took out a loan from GalactiCore, knowing it would take her years to pay it off. After she met Nopul, he used his amazing slicing skills to pull a little extra from the sensors. Her ship has become her permanent home.

Vakir'sajaina

Type: Nikto Mercenary

DEXTERITY 4D
Blaster 5D, blaster: blaster pistol 5D+2, dodge 5D, grenade 5D

KNOWLEDGE 3D
Languages: Dresselian 4D

MECHANICAL 2D

PERCEPTION 2D+2
Gambling 4D, hide 4D, sneak 5D

STRENGTH 4D
Brawling 5D, stamina 4D+2

TECHNICAL 2D+1

Special Abilities:

Vision: Nikto have natural eye-shielding of a transparent keratin-like substance. They suffer no adverse effects from sandstorms or similar conditions, nor does their vision blur underwater.

Kajain’sa’Nikto Stamina: These Nikto have great stamina in desert environments. They receive a +1D bonus to both survival: desert and stamina rolls.

Force Points: 1

Character Points: 8

Move: 10

Equipment: Blaster pistol (4D), thermal detonator (10D)

Capsule: Vakir’sajaina is a “Red Nikto,” of the Kajain’sa’Nikto race. He was born in the dark caverns of a Hutt-controlled Nikto enclave on the
world of Nal Hutta. Raised completely subservient to Hutts, he was more or less freed of the their influence when he was given, along with several others, to the Empire to serve it and—more importantly—spy on it. Having left Nal Hutta, his eyes were opened to the galaxy. He wanted more.

Not long after being transferred to Dressel—an Imperial-held planet—he escaped with several other beings on an outbound dry goods freighter. The Dresselian who helped them all escape was about to go his own way when Vakir asked that he be allowed to follow. At first, the Dresselian was negative, even threatening, but allowed Vakir to follow. After many years of invaluable help to each other, they decided to admit to their friendship.

Oro Memis

Type: Dresselian Mercenary
DEXTERITY 4D
Blaster 5D, blaster: hold-out blaster 6D, brawling parry, dodge 5D, firearms 5D, melee combat 5D, melee parry 5D
KNOWLEDGE 3D
Languages: Nikto 4D
MECHANICAL 2D
PERCEPTION 3D+1
Gambling 6D, hide 5D sneak 4D+1
STRENGTH 3D+2
Brawling 4D+1
TECHNICAL 2D
Force Points: 1
Character Points: 8
Move: 10
Equipment: Hold-out blaster (3D), sabacc deck

Capsule: Oro had many misgivings when the Red Nikto he helped escape asked to join him. After all, he hated other beings. Completely. He was a loner, and wanted it to stay that way. Vakir, however, was insistent. The two fought in broken Basic for three hours before Oro finally went to a cantina in disgust.

His elders insisted he go and find the Rebel Alliance, in order to learn
better fighting techniques from them, then he was supposed to return and help fight the Imperials in guerilla warfare. Oro was to meet his contact in the cantina. Unfortunately when he arrived he found himself in the middle of a blaster fight. The Nikto jumped forward and knocked out one being who was about to level his blaster on Oro. After the fight, Oro found his contact dead in a corner. With no way to continue his mission, he finally agreed to let Vakir join up with him, for one mission only, to get enough money to go away.

Several hundred missions later, Oro finally had to agree that what started out as a barely tolerable relationship was now a firm union. They still have their moments, however, as they are both very independent.

Scrub
Type: MerenData RM-2020 Espionage Droid
DEXTERITY 3D
Blaster 4D, dodge 6D, melee combat 3D+1
KNOWLEDGE 3D
MECHANICAL 2D
Repulsorlift operation 3D, sensors 5D
PERCEPTION 4D
Investigation 6D, search 5D
STRENGTH 4D
TECHNICAL 2D
Security 5D
Equipped With:
• Espionage hardwired module
• Humanoid body (two arms, two legs, head)
• Information recording/coded broadcast system
• Repulsorlift engine
• Ultraviolet, infrared and analysis sensors
• Visual/audio sensor package (human range)
• Vocabulator speech/sound system
Move: 10
Size: 1.0 meters tall
Cost: 160,000 (new), 100,000 (used, Black Market only)

Capsule: Scrud was a very disgruntled droid. Despite GalactiCore's efforts and numerous memory wipes, they still couldn't change its basic programming. Scrud was designed for gathering data on the battlefield, not spying and playing holocam for meetings. It was made for war, not illegal actions. Its weapon arms were removed long ago. Scrud was, if anything, bored.

Then he was paired with a Nimban who was chasing a wayward client of GalactiCore. Unfortunately, the client was fast and dangerous. Realizing it would lose if it fought, Scrud instead ran for safer ground. Surprisingly, it found itself on the same ship as the deadly human. The human later proved to be safe and, for the first time, he was used in a covert mission of major import. Scrud received its new name from the Dresselian, Oro.

GalactiCore

GalactiCore is a large financial institution in the Corporate Sector. Concerned mainly with providing businesses and individuals with large loans (saddled with ridiculous interest rates), the firm also delves into a little gambling and information bartering. Many rumors have sprung up involving this well-established, thorough company. Some believe GalactiCore is an illegal offshoot of the Empire, making extra money on the side to fuel its military endeavors. Others believe the Hutts are funding the company. Whoever the backer, GalactiCore won't turn anyone down for a loan—the company manages to collect in the end, whether payment's made in credits, ships, information, property or blood.
Ambassador Ulil Aaregil
Type: Weequay Ambassador
DEXTERITY 3D
Blaster 5D, brawling parry 5D, dodge 4D, grenade 4D, melee combat 5D, melee parry 5D+2
KNOWLEDGE 2D+2
Alien species 5D, bureaucracy 4D, bureaucracy: Weequay clans 6D+2, bureaucracy: Dnalvec Militia 6D, cultures 4D, languages 6D+2, law enforcement 6D, planetary systems 4D+2, streetwise 4D, survival 4D+2, survival: desert 7D, value 4D
MECHANICAL 3D
Beast riding 4D+1, repulsorlift operation 4D, space transports 4D, survival: desert 6D
PERCEPTION 3D+1
Bargain 4D+2, command 6D, hide 4D, investigation 5D, persuasion 6D+2, search 4D, sneak 4D
STRENGTH 3D+2
Brawling 5D, climbing/jumping 4D, lifting 4D+2, stamina 4D
TECHNICAL 2D+1
Computer programming/repair 3D+2, demolition 4D, first aid 4D, repulsorlift repair 3D, security 6D
Special Abilities:
Short-Range Communication: Weequays of the same clan are capable of communicating with one another through complex pheromones. Aside from Jedi sensing abilities, no other species are known to be able to sense this form of communication. This form is as complex and clear to them as speech is to other species.
Force Points: 2
Character Points: 13
Move: 10
Equipment: Datapad, personal shield.

Capsule: Head of the Dnalvec Militia for several years, it was unsurprising that he became a Weequay clan leader. As his popularity grew, he became recognized as the ambassador for all the Weequay clans. All his life, he spoke of an end of the Weequay-Houk conflict. Soon after he was made ambassador, he insisted the war between Weequays and Houks be ended. It was Aaregil who proudly shook the hand of the Speaker for the Liuter Congress—administration of the Houk—after the signing of the Weequay-Houk Alliance Pact.

Minister Pon Sval
Type: Weequay Minister
DEXTERITY 2D+2
Blaster 6D, brawling parry 5D, dodge 5D, grenade 4D+2, melee combat 5D, melee combat: force pike 6D, melee parry 5D, vehicle blaster 4D
KNOWLEDGE 3D
Alien species 4D+1, bureaucracy 3D+2, bureaucracy: Weequay clans 5D bureaucracy: Dnalvec Militia 4D+1, intimidation 3D+2, languages 4D, law enforcement 4D+1, planetary systems 4D, scholar: dark wolf training 5D, streetwise 4D+1, survival 4D+2, survival: desert 6D+2
MECHANICAL 3D
Beast riding 4D, repulsorlift operation 5D, space transports 5D
PERCEPTION 2D+2
Weequay-Houk Conflict

The Houks have "shared" Sriluur with the Weequays for years. The Houk first came to the Weequay homeworld from the Ansuroer sector which is adjacent to the Periphery. A war broke out between the two groups and has been an ongoing battle for a little over 10 standard years. During this civil war, military imports dominated the planetary economy. The Dnalvec Militia was created exclusively for the conflict and established many Weequay in the bounty hunter and bodyguard trades.

The strong, violent Houk admittedly started the conflict. The Houk announced their intentions to start colonies on the Weequay homeworld after crashing their colony ship near the Lesser Cueva's expanse. The Weequay grudgingly allowed the Houk to set up shelters and made a verbal pact with the Houk about boundaries. Unfortunately, Houk politics consists of scheming, back-stabbing and the breaking of promises. No less than six local months later, during the holy days of Quay, another colony ship landed... and another... and another. Twenty colony ships, carrying a total of 20,000 Houk, landed and departed in little over a month.

The Weequay were no longer disgruntled—arguments flared between the two species and the younger Weequay were becoming violent. They lived in this high-tension state for several years—much longer than any outsider would have given it. This is due primarily to the religion of the Weequay. While violent, the religion keeps the focus on the clan—individuals are considered "disposable" for the good of the clan. As long as the Houk did not interfere with the clan, the Clan Leaders felt it was too impersonal to care about.
Then, in an attempt to gain more territory, the Houk surrounded Dnalvec in the middle of the night and ambushed the city while it slept, a tactic preferred by the Houk. The Weequay, however, found it cowardly. Several clan leaders who were meeting in Dnalvec were killed and the clans retaliated with strike missions on the Houk communities. The clan had been threatened and the Weequay could no longer tolerate the Houk presence. War was declared.

The Dnalvec military was formed to protect the borders of the city and push back the Houk colonies that were established near there. While Weequay are considered dangerous, quiet individuals who fight with calm coolness and intent, Houk are short-tempered and very strong—fighting is their preferred method of solving disputes. Most of the Houk on Sriluuer were fighters, specifically sent by the Lijuter Congress to take over the planet. The two sides nearly equalled each other in strength and the conflict was long and bloody.

It was Uli Aaregil, leader of a clan near the disputed border between the Weequay and Houk, who chose to fight for peace instead of territory. He constantly sent messages begging the Houk for peace. He treated prisoners of war with respect. He kept a tight reign on his troops, never allowing them to take the initiative; only to fight in self-defense of the border. Several peace talks occurred, each time with Aaregil taking the lead. Finally the Lijuter Congress agreed—with no side winning, the conflict was pointless. After 10 years of fighting, both sides came together and sorted out their differences. A peace agreement was signed and the two sides shook hands. The Houk-Weequay Alliance was official.
Command 4D-2, con 5D, forgery 4D+2, persuasion 5D, hide 4D, search 4D+1, sneak 4D+2

**STRENGTH 3D-2**
Brawling 4D-2, climbing/ jumping 4D+1, lifting 5D, stamina 4D+1

**TECHNICAL 3D**
Computer programming/repair 4D, demolition 4D+2, security 5D+1

**Special Abilities:**
*Short-Range Communication:*
Weequays of the same clan are capable of communicating with one another through complex pheromones. Aside from Jedi sensing abilities, no other species are known to be able to sense this form of communication. This form is as complex and clear to them as speech is to other species.

**Force Points:** 1
**Dark Side Points:** 2
**Character Points:** 8
**Move:** 10
**Equipment:** Crescent-symbol pendant.

**Capsule:** Svale was one of Aaregil’s few friends in the Dnalvec Militia. When Svale took the job of being his leader’s personal assistant, he had a different agenda in mind than just copying Aaregil’s notes and keeping him company—he wanted power, any power. With a large amount of patience he proved his friendship again and again. When Aaregil accepted a bid to become Clan Leader for the Weequays near the Houk Territories, Svale followed. When Aaregil began working on the peace treaty with the Houks, Svale supported it. When other clan leaders threatened to remove Aaregil from office, Svale did everything in his power to persuade them otherwise. It was Svale who first suggested Aaregil become the ambassador, essentially the Leader of all Clans. And Svale saw everything occur the way he wanted it to.

He didn’t support Aaregil out of friendship, he wanted to become the puppet master; essentially, make Aaregil trust in him like no other. He wanted to be the real power behind a figurehead. He found his answer in the bounty listings from the local Weequay hunter enclave. A mercenary-for-hire by the name of Rendra Maex owed a lot of money to GalactiCore. Quick, deadly, with few or no ethics, she would be the perfect weapon to assure Aaregil would never doubt Svale’s word again. He did not want Aaregil to die, of course; then he would have to become the ambassador himself—a target for all to see. This way, he would merely be a savior of the ambassador, to be adored and respected by all.
**Sriluur**

- **Type:** Terrestrial
- **Temperature:** Hot
- **Atmosphere:** Type I (breathable)
- **Hydrosphere:** Dry
- **Gravity:** Standard
- **Terrain:** Deserts, scrub, craters
- **Length of Day:** 22 standard hours
- **Length of Year:** 385 local days
- **Sapient Species:** Weequay (N), Houk
- **Starport:** Four stellar-class
- **Population:** 380,000 Weequay, 35,000 Houks
- **Planet Function:** Homeworld, Houk colony
- **Government:** Clans
- **Tech Level:** Space
- **Major Exports:** None
- **Major Imports:** None

**System Data**

- **Region:** Outer Rim Territories
- **Sector:** Periphery
- **System Name:** Sriluur
- **Star Name:** Sriluur
- **Star Type:** Yellow

**Orbital Bodies**

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<th>Name</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcru</td>
<td>desolate searing rock</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quay Lyn</td>
<td>asteroid belt</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyntra</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sriluur</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siquay</td>
<td>gas giant</td>
<td>18</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Capsule:** Sriluur is the capital of the Periphery. Once a popular trading point, it has been avoided the last decade or so due to the Weequay-Houk conflict. A self-sustaining planet, it has only recently considered returning as a part of galactic trade.

Sriluur is a forbidding planet of burning wastelands and caustic seas. Nearly all of Sriluur’s northern hemisphere is consumed by the Great Cueva Expanse or the Cueva Desert, as outsiders call it; the region is littered with huge craters. Most beings tend to avoid this area, but a particular red marble can be quarried there, and many are willing to risk the badlands to obtain it.

The southern hemisphere, where nearly all the Weequay reside, is dominated by long-dormant volcanoes and rocky fields.

The equator is where most of the life is on Sriluur. Located in the Lesser Cueva expanses near Sriluur are the Houk Territories, claimed by the Houk colony ships 20 years ago. On one border of the Lesser Cueva is Dnalvec, the largest urban center near the Houk and currently the capital city. On the other side of the Lesser Cueva is Meirm City—Sriluur’s industrial center—which is also sided up on the Copper Coast of the Meirm Sea.
Meirm Sea—the largest body of water on Sriluur—has an acid content so high it is caustic to most beings. The Copper Coast got its name from the copper particles which dominate the beach like sand and leave a coppery cast on everything. On the other side of the Meirm Sea is an area called the Cupric Islands. This invaluable agricultural resource is not a lake with many islands but rather a section of land dotted with thousands of lakes. Many flow into each other, and the fresh water is pH-balanced, allowing many plants to flourish.

**Equipment**

- **Personal Energy Shield**
  - **Model:** Simcronics MagnaForce Personal Energy Shield
  - **Type:** Personal defensive field generator
  - **Scale:** Character
  - **Cost:** 25,000 (frontal protection only), 50,000 (full protection), 2,500 (custom power cells)
  - **Availability:** 4, F, R or X
  - **Game Notes:** This unit is used much like starship shields, except that it is character scale. The shield is maintained by a powerbox worn around the waist, usually under the clothing. The shield has a score of 5D to deflect blaster bolts and other energy weapons (use the protection rules on page 63 of the *Star Wars Roleplaying Game, Revised and Expanded*). Any further damage affects the target as indicated in the chart “Cover Modifiers.” The power cells work for one standard hour before being completely drained.

Capsule: A politician’s dream, the personal energy shield is Simcronics’ answer to the growing need for defense against assassinations. The creators of the MagnaForce Security Shield, Simcronics embellished on the original idea, giving the shield an hour’s worth of time instead of two minutes, and stronger defenses against attack. These shields are very popular with crime lords, bounty hunters and bill collectors, but are extremely expensive to purchase and maintain.

- **Sensor Jammer**
  - **Type:** Custom-made Sensor/scanner jammer
  - **Scale:** Character
  - **Skill:** Security
  - **Availability:** 4, X
  - **Game Notes:** To build this device, the technician must first make a Moderate Technical roll and a Difficult security roll to build the jammer. The jammer camouflages the passive emissions given off by energy weapons, giving users +3D to their hide rolls when trying to conceal them from electronic weapons scanners (which often have the equivalent of a search skill of 5D or 6D).
The Strange Acquisitions Sourcefile: Entry One
By Charlene Newcomb, with Steve Miller

Illustrations and Maps by Steve Bryant

"Hi, Red."

Crimson Durasha frowned. Flat on her back under the lower hydraulics controlling the landing struts of the Starlight Red, she peered past her toes. All that was visible from her vantage point was a pair of black boots. Relieved that she wasn't seeing Imperial gray, the young woman flicked a switch on the repulsor sled and guided it from beneath her YT-1300.

Sitting up, Crimson eyed her visitor. He was about medium height, blondish hair, piercing blue eyes, perhaps in his early

Editor's Note: This is the first in a series of articles that will flesh out the setting of the popular Alex Winger stories for use as a campaign setting for the Star Wars® Roleplaying Game."
forties. He was dressed like a hundred other free-traders on Byblos: dark slacks, a light-blue shirt with a vest of brown hide. A DL-44 heavy blaster hung low around his hips. It struck her that perhaps he looked too much like the free-traders around Byblos...almost as if he was making a conscious effort to be inconspicuous.

"My name is Captain Durasha," she said.

"I know."

Crimson stood up and rested one hand atop her own blaster. "Then maybe someone forgot to tell you, I don't like to be called 'Red.'"

Nodding, he smiled. "Guess you're right, Captain. My name is Matt Turhaya."
Crimson ignored the hand he extended in greeting. "Can I help you with something?" She asked. "You need to hire a ship?"
"No, I don't need a ship. Just some information."
Crimson's green eyes narrowed. "Information? I probably can't help you. Try the Star—"
He raised a hand and interrupted her. "I understand you recently returned from a run for the Imperial Replenishment Fleet to a world called Garos IV?"
"Where'd you hear that, Turhaya?" Crimson asked. She wasn't in the habit of talking to anyone about past jobs.
"That isn't important, Captain Durasha. I just want to know about your supply run. I have the feeling you want to share what you've seen."
"I don't know what you're talking about."
Turhaya looked around the docking bay obviously checking to see no one was within earshot. "I wonder if the New Republic knows what's going on here...."
As her face flushed with anger, Crimson's hand closed on her blaster. "You downloaded my log from my ship!"
Turhaya nodded.
"You don't work for the Empire. If you did, I'd be under arrest by now for that little comment, wouldn't I?" Crimson ran a hand through her red-gold hair. "So, who sent you?"
"I work with New Republic Intelligence," Turhaya replied, "an
organization you’ve done a bit of work for in the past, according to
the reports I’ve seen. What can you tell me about Garos?”

Crimson took a deep breath then released it. It had been almost
two years since she’d given up running information and supplies to
the New Republic. It was on Garos IV that she discovered that time
had eased some of her bitterness and pain. Perhaps it was time to
help out her old friends again.

“Come aboard,” she said, wiping the dust off her trousers.
Crimson escorted him up the entrance ramp and to the ship’s
cluttered lounge. “Wait here,” she said. “And don’t touch that
computer terminal.”

“I wouldn’t think of abusing your hospitality,” he said, grinning.
“Yeah. It’s not as if you have to anymore,” she replied, a sour
expression on her face. She left the lounge and went to bridge. Once
satisfied that Turhaya hadn’t followed her, she pushed a concealed
button on the bottom of the navigator’s chair. A panel on the seat’s
back slid aside, revealing several datapads. She retrieved one,
closed the hidden compartment, and returned to the lounge.
Turhaya was where she had left him, even if he had helped himself
to a glass of her Savareen brandy. A second glass stood on the table
in front of the couch, probably waiting for her. She put the datapad
next to the glass of brandy. “This is what you were looking for,” she
said. “I don’t have much beyond some basic system data, but what
I’ve got paints an interesting picture. I think the Empire is trying to
hide something there, but they also need so many supplies that
they’re having a hard time at it.”

Turhaya leaned back in the couch with a datapad in one hand
and his brandy in the other, settling in to digest the information.

A Brief History of the Garos System

The history of human settlements in the Garos system has been
very carefully maintained from the earliest colonists to the current
day. Humans are the only sentient species existing in the system—
although there is evidence that a non-spacefaring civilization of
aliens lived on Garos IV long ago—so theirs is the only perspective
on the events that have brought the system and its people to the
present day.
The Early Years

Garosian historians refer to the discovery of their homeworld as one of the fortunes of war. Records from the Archives at the University of Garos in Ariana indicate that spacers had been unaware of the existence of habitable worlds in the section of space beyond the Nyarikan Nebula. Few attempts had been made to pass through the nebula, and hyperspace routes bypassed it completely.

However, approximately 4,000 years ago, a group of human refugees, fleeing from their war- and famine-ravaged homeworld in 10 colony ships, entered the Nyarikan Nebula in an attempt to evade a pirate attack. For several days, the interstellar travellers journeyed blindly through the nebula, their sensors and nav computers virtually useless. Finally emerging into clear space, they headed for the nearest star, which they called Gariisa, in homage to their leader, Trae Garos.

Drawn toward the fourth planet orbiting the star because of its blue-green appearance, the refugees found the world inhabited by abundant wildlife and covered with verdant river valleys. They quickly decided to explore the planet for possible settlement, and the ships landed in what is now called the Morcur Valley.

From that base, survey teams fanned out across the northern continent. They were delighted to discover a mostly intact city, the only remaining evidence of an ancient, long-extinct humanoid civilization. Old stone turrets lined Zila’s waterfront. Ancient cannons, corroded from the elements, pointed south across the ocean defending the presidio against attack from sea-going vessels. What happened to the original inhabitants of Zila is unknown—except for the structures they left behind, there is no trace of them anywhere else in the Garos system.

While one group settled in Zila, a second band, comprised mostly of farmers, found the soil of the Morcur Valley ideal for agriculture. The city of Garan, bisected by the Salc River, was established on the southwestern edge of the valley and serves, even to this day, as the distribution point for foodstuffs.

Further west, along the awe-inspiring Tahika Cliffs, Ariana was settled by those who sought solitude to pursue the more philosophical arts. It seemed only natural that educational interests spring from this group; Garos’ first institution of higher learning was opened within five years of colonization. Eventually a planetary government modeled after the Republic Senate was established in Ariana.
Garos System Overview

System Datafile Entry

**System:** Garos  
**Star:** Gariisa (yellow)

**Orbital Bodies:**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Planet Type</th>
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<td>Berusa</td>
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<td>Chaila</td>
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<td>Regar II</td>
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The Garos system consists of six worlds, two of which are suitable for humanoid lifeforms.

The outermost planet, Regar II, is a ball of ice that is moonlike in size. Its atmosphere consists mostly of methane and ammonite. Regar I, its neighbor more than 100,000,000 kilometers distant, is a gas giant with thick clouds and violent storms. The two innermost planets, Berusa and Chaila, are super-hot worlds devoid of life. Chaila has an abundance of raw materials, but neither the Empire nor private enterprises have attempted to exploit them because of the costs involved.

The third planet in the system is Sundari. Covered by vast deserts, sandstorms rage across its surface. However, this world is habitable and, although it was initially passed up by early settlers, the world has supported thriving colonies for many centuries. Sundari's economy revolves almost exclusively around the mining of granite, thietosine, marbelite, and muroriam—raw materials that are exported for use in construction.

Garos, the fourth planet in the system, was named after Trae Garos, leader of the refugees who decided to settle here after discovering the vast riches of this lush blue-green world.

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**The Colonization of Sundari**

Exploration of Sundari began approximately 200 years after colonists settled nearby Garos IV. The colonies on Garos IV were
thriving, and markets for recreational activities and technologies were beginning to boom.

The Sundari efforts started with Reutal Associates, Garos IV's first major entertainment conglomerate. The company had interests in everything from children's holovids to resort hotels. It was Reutal Associates that created the Sundar Corporation, a venture to develop Sundari as an unusual vacation destination for the more adventure-minded Garosians.

While scouts combed the massive Escasada mountain range for suitable construction sites for starports and hotels, scouts discovered an abundance of granitite, theltosine, marbelite, and muroriam—construction raw materials that were relatively rare and hard to extract on Garos IV, yet ones that could be mined cheaply on Sundari. Seeing a tremendous potential profit and an opportunity for diversification, Reutal swiftly converted the Sundar Corporation to a mining company and started a corporate-sponsored colonization program.

Sundar's first settlement consisted of 2,000 miners and their families. Two domed population centers, Reutal City and Sundar City, were built to house 8,000 people. The cities were actually a series of interconnected domes—thousands of them—that covered the valleys between the hillsides. As the population grew, the domes were enlarged. Nonetheless, the miners and the business people who migrated to Sundari to set up shop became a tight-knit group.

Realizing that living conditions would be harsh, the Sundar Corporation provided everything from housing to food to entertainment for those first settlers. This was done at minimal cost to the corporation, and it helped them gain a strong edge as the parliamentary-elected rulers of Garos were more than willing to trade foodstuffs and other necessities for raw materials. Further, the new, high-paying jobs on Sundari boosted their approval ratings with the populace. In the long term, however, the Sundari Corporation's relationship with the Garosian government created so firm a business foundation that no other company could effectively compete with Sundari in the mining arena.

As mining operations expanded over the centuries, thousands of people from Garos migrated to the planet. Within five years, the colony had grown to 40,000. Over the course of several centuries, 20 different mining companies established operations in the Escasada moutain range. The Sundar Corporation, which survived
the bankruptcy of its parent company intact even while absorbing some of Reutal's most profitable entertainment ventures, slowly bought out each one. This monopoly on Sundari mining was what started the spiral toward civil war between Garosians and Sundari.

The Civil War

For more than 3,500 years Garosians and Sundari maintained commercial dealings prosperous to both sides. Business was conducted informally; a handshake sealed many a deal. But when the Sundar Corporation sold its interests in the mining operations on Sundari to Ostaga'a Associates (OA), the new owners were more concerned with increasing the already considerable profits than old friendships. One way to profit was to cut out the middleman—in this case, the Garosian businessman.

Over a period of 200 years, OA bought out several farms in the Morcur Valley. A bakery here, a machine tool plant there. Virtually any Garosian company that had commerce with Sundari became a target for buyout. Soon, the newly held OA businesses had a monopoly on trade with their brethren on Sundari.

Sundari began emigrating en masse to Garos IV, settling in Northlan in the Upper Morcur Valley (the heart of Garos' agricultural and manufacturing districts, where over one-third of goods were destined for Sundari markets). Problems began as one Garosian business after another suffered from the new competition and tempers began to flare. There were numerous isolated incidents of violence against area residents and private property was destroyed.

When an accident at a grain-processing facility on the outskirts of Garan occurred, the violence escalated. The explosion at the plant killed 25 people, including its owner, who was quite outspoken about his feelings toward what he referred to as a "Sundari plot" to take over Garos. Radical Garosians claimed the explosion was a deliberate act of sabotage and murder. They destroyed a Sundari microelectronics plant in retaliation, and a vicious, ever-escalating cycle of vengeful actions eventually erupted into a full-fledged war between the two planets.

Open warfare between Garos and Sundari continued unabated for 82 years, until the Garosian Assistant Minister of Defense Tork Winger and noted Sundari engineer Tionthes Turi finally managed to arrive at cease-fire terms that the military leaders of both worlds could accept. Peace negotiations followed, but they were ham-
pered by continued violence. Two incidents stand out in recent history: the now-infamous Whahalla Massacre, and the assassination of key business leader and advocate of peace, West Haslip.

**The Civil War Ends and Imperial Rule Begins**

Though Winger and Turi worked feverishly to resolve the conflict between their people, it was the Empire's establishment of an official presence on Garos IV that brought fighting between Garosian and Sundar to an abrupt halt.

An Imperial Survey Team discovered the hibrildium deposits on
Garos IV, and suddenly the Garos system was of value to the Empire. In order to effectively mine the substance and safely export it from the system, the Empire felt it needed to force a total and lasting peace between Garos and Sundari.

Under Imperial edict, thousands of people were arrested and executed. Those "radicals" who remained were driven underground and united against a new enemy—the Empire.

The death of Emperor Palpatine, and the more recent loss of Coruscant to the New Republic, has done little to affect Imperial operations on Garos IV. The Empire’s presence on the planet continues to increase. To protect its interests in the mines and to combat the resistance movement, nearly 10,000 troops have been deployed in and around the city of Ariana.

The Imperial presence in the Garos system is limited almost exclusively to Garos IV and Sundari. The Nyarikan Nebula isolates the system from most hyperspace lanes, thus neither free-traders, crime lords, nor smugglers have seen any profit in the system, so the Imperial Navy has not had any reason to patrol the area. No planetary defense platforms have been constructed yet, and the biggest vessels on permanent assignment are a pair of Carrack-class cruisers. A number of Skipray blastboats and system patrol craft complete the Imperial Navy’s presence in the system. Additionally, the standard TIE fighter compliment are stationed at the garrisons on Garos IV and Sundari. Star galleons pass through on a regular basis to transport hibridium and other raw materials out-of-system, while the Imperial-class Star Destroyer Judicator makes infrequent visits to the system, to either provide its crew with leave or to resupply from Garos IV’s abundant food sources.

The Worlds in Detail

Both the inhabited worlds of the Garos system have their own unique nature. Garos IV is by far the most friendly of the pair—if one doesn’t fear potential encounters with Imperial authorities and patrol vessels. Sundari is virtually free of any Imperial presence, but one must deal with that world’s harsh environment.

Sundari

Sundari is the third planet in the Garos system. Orbited by a single moon, it is a harsh desert world that was initially ignored
when colonists first arrived in the Garos system. Despite having been settled for millennia, the world still remains very much a "frontier planet" where only those who are hearty of body and spirit prosper, or even survive, for any length of time.

**Sundari**

- **Type:** Terrestrial  
- **Temperature:** Hot  
- **Atmosphere:** Type I (breathable)  
- **Hydrosphere:** Arid  
- **Gravity:** Standard  
- **Terrain:** Deserts, mountains  
- **Length of Day:** 22 standard hours  
- **Length of Year:** 276 local days  
- **Sapient Species:** Humans  
- **Starports:** 1 limited services  
- **Population:** 205,000  
- **Planet Function:** Mining colony  
- **Government:** Colonial Executive Council  
- **Tech Level:** Space  
- **Major exports:** Metals, minerals  
- **Major imports:** Foodstuffs, high technology, medicinal goods

**The Land**

Eighty-three percent of the planet is covered with sandy, barren plains that are swept by savage windstorms. A few mountainous regions dot the landscape. The largest one, known as Escasada, is the only densely populated area on the world, and is located in the southern hemisphere. The mountains cover nearly one million square kilometers.

The largest city on the planet remains Reutal City, which is also the site of the planet's only public spaceport. The port is little more than a loading zone for bulk transports; any major repairs must be affected on Garos IV. Smaller ports exist in other communities and at the larger mining installation, but these are little more than landing strips for shuttle craft, and cannot handle vessels larger than a light transport.

Reutal City is the seat of the Colonial Executive Council (CEC), the planetary government, as well as the Imperial Administration Office. Sundari is officially under the jurisdiction of the Imperial Governor on Garos IV, but Governor Winger knows that if he were to attempt to undermine the authority of the CEC, he might inflame the civil war again—something which would force another military crackdown in the Garos system. The officials at Imperial Administration Office are primarily concerned with the ongoing construc-
tion project on Sundari's moon, Ebon. They secure planet-side housing for the Army engineers and troops who are working on the project. The office is manned by a dozen functionaries, and security is provided by five troopers and a pair of stormtroopers.

Water is perhaps the most precious commodity on Sundari. No water exists on its surface. The mountain range where the minerals exist is virtually devoid of water, and what little rainfall the planet sees is not enough to sustain the city. The water that exists below the desert's surface is so deep and so scarce that it is impractical to attempt to pump it to the cities on the mountain ranges.

Large processing plants have been built to supply the colonies
with water by creating it artificially, although several of them were either damaged or destroyed during the civil war. Reconstruction efforts are still underway, and the CEC is making restoring the water supply a top priority. In the meantime, they are importing water from off-planet, primarily by paying Garosian traders to carve ice from their celestial neighbors' poles and transport it to Sundari.

Native plant life exists in isolated pockets in the desert. They are either cacti or small, scrubbish bushes, with roots that sometimes extend as much as 100 meters into the ground in order to reach the deep water deposits.

Native animal life is even rarer than the plants. Sundari is home to several breeds of small lizards and perhaps 100 different variety of insects. All of these beings spend long periods in hibernation, and when they are active spend most of their time underground, tunnelling downward to the water.

Typically, where there is plantlife in the desert, there is also a shadowport. Deep wells can be drilled in these areas, and small communities can exist without the need to either import or manufacture water. Most of these settlements presently serve as homes to die-hard militants who dream of someday restarting the conflict with Garos IV. Garosian traders will be exposing themselves to great risk if they land at any of these settlements. Spacers from outside the Garos system will be at an even greater risk—these militants hate the Empire more than they hate the people of Garos IV, and anyone who is not a Garosian is an Imperial in their eyes.

**Climate**

Temperatures during the day regularly approach 46 degrees Celsius. At night, it is not uncommon for temperatures to plunge to single negative digits. The atmosphere is very dry and humans quickly dehydrate when traveling unprotected on the planet's surface. Few Sundari ever venture out-of-doors without protective gear.

**Natural Resources**

Sundari's Escasada range is rich in raw materials needed for construction of planet-based buildings. Also, a fair number of rare gems can be mined in some of the deeper valleys. Garos IV remains the only market for many of Sundari's exports, although recent years have seen a resurgence in small-scale companies centered
around gem mining and producing souvenirs and jewelry for the small Imperial presence on Sundari.

**Sundari's Moon**

Sundari's moon, Ebon, is a dull, black rock devoid of life and atmosphere. Brief scientific investigations of the satellite have revealed no exploitable resources.

Ebon is generally invisible from the surface of Sundari, since it blends with the blackness of space and reflects no light from the sun. The only way to track its progress through the night sky with the naked eyes is to watch for areas of stars that seem to wink out and then wink back into existence a while later.

The moon has recently become the sight of a military construction project. It is unknown why the Empire has chosen such a desolate, seemingly worthless place upon which to build an installation, and the Empire is being very secretive about what is being built there—a system patrol craft is always on station in a far orbit around Ebon now, warning off ships that might get within scanning range of the moon. Not even the Imperial Governor is aware of what is being built on Ebon, and inquiries made by his staff and even the governor himself has been met with instructions to contact the office of the Moff. The Moff has yet to respond to any inquiries, much to Governor Winger's chagrin.

**Garos IV**

Orbited by twin moons, Garos IV is the fourth planet of six in the Garos system. For most of its history, Garos IV has been a self-supporting planet, establishing intrasystem trade (which, in the recent past, had been haphazard at best because of the Garosian Civil War) with the neighboring world of Sundari. Intergalactic trade has been insignificant, as free-traders prefer markets that are more easily reached and less volatile.

- **Garos IV**
  - Type: Terrestrial
  - Temperature: Temperate
  - Atmosphere: Type I (breathable)
  - Hydrosphere: Moderate
  - Gravity: Standard
  - Terrain: Forests, mountains, valleys
  - Length of Day: 25 standard hours
  - Length of Year: 382 local days
Sapient Species: Humans  
Starports: 2 standard class  
Population: 24 million (20 million human Garosians, 4 million human Sundars)  
Planet Function: Agriculture, manufacturing  
Government: Imperial governor  
Tech Level: Space  
Major Exports: Foodstuffs, metals, minerals  
Major Imports: High technology

The Land

Garos IV is a world of diverse and breathtaking landscapes. Her highest elevations are located on Reyfej, in the southern hemisphere, where some of the planet’s most magnificent mountain...
ranges are located (highest peak: Mt. Ekim, elevation 1.78 kilometers). The central and southern sections of the continent are pockmarked with hundreds of thousands of craters, formed millions of years ago when meteorites struck the planet. The largest one, known as Simjak’s Crater, is 187 kilometers in diameter and 2,250 meters at its deepest. Additionally, volcanic eruptions played a part in the Reyfej’s formation, and even today tectonic activity is widespread, with thousands of geysers and hot springs dotting the landscape.

No one calls Reyfej a permanent home. The adventurous treat it as a playground, scientists study its features looking for ways to utilize its natural resources and archaeologists study a ship that crashed near the coastline less than 25,000 years ago. Even more fascinating is the small group of beings from that ship who unwillingly made Garos their home.

Studies have proven that a series of cataclysmic earthquakes wiped out the group; their stay on Garos was not long: more than a month, but likely less than one year. Excavations of the ship indicate they were an extremely advanced space-faring species. The cruiser was large: 650 to 750 meters in length. There are indications that it was armed, but not enough to lend to its identification as a warship. So much of the ship was destroyed, so much lies buried beneath a thousand meters of volcanic debris, that learning more about this group’s technology has proven to be a very slow process.

Archaeologists brave continued volcanic eruptions to study the skeletal remains of these beings because they are unlike any others found on Garos. Obviously, the group never left Reyfej and never ventured across the sea to find a more habitable climate.

Four thousand kilometers to the north across the Cabalia Sea, Garos’ only other large land mass, the continent known as Jenda, is characterized by a mountain range extending the length of the western coastline. The mountains sweep east toward the Morcur Valley, an agricultural district spanning more than 900,000 square kilometers. The Valley produces enough foodstuffs to feed the entire population of Garos IV and its neighbor, the planet Sundari. Most recently, agricultural goods have been garnered by the Empire to supply its fleet. Further to the east, broad plains rise slowly to an area the natives call the Highland. This series of mountainous plateaus and sandy desert basins are a popular retreat for vacationers seeking adventure in an untouched wilderness.
East of the Highlands, plateaus give way to rolling plains that wind down toward the Sea of Garos. Here, the coastline is very irregular, and on its southernmost front, inlets lined by steep cliffs cut deeply inland. Small farms and isolated settlements are scattered across the region. The lowlands are crisscrossed with waterways, both natural and artificial, and dotted with lakes. People who live here tend to ignore events on the rest of the planet, and prefer to be left alone.

There are three main centers of population on Garos IV: Zila, Garan and Ariana.

Zila, located on the continent’s southcentral coast, is a resort city, known for its architectural diversity. Garan is a bustling metropolis sitting on the edge of the fertile Morcur Valley some 40 kilometers inland from the Locura Ocean. It serves as a center of manufacturing and agriculture. The capital city Ariana, on the southwestern coast of Jenda, is an intellectual and business center dominated by the prestigious University of Garos. Ariana is also the main base of Imperial operations on the planet.

**Climate**

Temperate climates prevail in the most densely populated regions of Jenda, with desert and semiarid regions in the central interior and a small area of tropical climate in the extreme southeast. In the winter, winds from the polar regions bring low temperatures to the south and west. The central Highlands are quite cold and experience numerous snowfalls, while the east remains relatively warm. Summers are mild in the west, warm in the south and east, and hot in the southeast.

**Natural Resources**

The two most important resources of Garos IV are agricultural products and raw materials. The Morcur Valley boasts land ideal for crop farming and animal husbandry. Mineral deposits of lasodite, dentonite and gold are found in limited quantities and have provided a basis for manufacturing. However, it is the ore hibridium which has sparked Imperial interest. Difficult to extract, and found only along the western coastline near the capital Ariana, hibridium has properties that confound sensors and may be useful in the construction of cloaking devices. The Empire now ships hibridium off-world for study.
Garos' Twin Moons

K'Sta and Uesef orbit Garos IV in elliptical paths. Geologically similar, both satellites are characterized by extremely high mountain ranges and canyons whose sheer walls reach heights of three kilometers. Their landscapes are heavily cratered from meteorite impacts millennia ago.

Uesef has subterranean caverns with underground lakes, the largest of which covers an area 3,325 square kilometers. Polar regions on both bodies are capped by thick glaciers and the axial tilt causes long and bitterly cold winters. Extremely thin, unbreathable atmospheres meant that artificial means would have been necessary for large-scale settlement to occur. The satellites were explored for natural resources in the early years of Garos' colonization. Results of that exploration pointed toward yields deemed insufficient to warrant the credits or manpower needed to exploit them. Therefore, the twin moons remained virgin territory.

For a thousand years, tour guides offered sightseeing trips to the moons. Only the wealthiest citizens took advantage of the spectacular views. In a galaxy where spaceflight was common, less than one percent of Garos' population had ever left their homeworld, so trips such as this were seen as exotic.

In those early days, tours usually consisted of fly-bys occasionally at low altitudes. Shuttles landed on the moons three or four times a year. Guides provided their guests with environment suits and led small expeditions teams across the terrain.

It wasn't until approximately 300 years ago that adventurous entrepreneurs decided to gamble that even bigger credits could be made off the moons. In addition to continuing the "adventure tours" (which by this time had also expanded to include diving expeditions on Uesef), businessman Cleef Ridal engaged a dozen architects to design an enclosed dome near the summit of Mount Peritiva on K'Sta. Ridal, who also was founder of the company that set up the Cabalia Inn in Zila, oversaw every phase of construction of the dome which covers five square kilometers and houses the largest casino complex in the Garos system.

Called the "Fly Me to the Moons Casino," the facility includes more than 100 gaming rooms, 25 restaurants and three theaters featuring a variety of entertainment—singers, cabaret acts, dramatic productions and holovids. But as one recent guest put it, "the best show is sitting on one of the observation decks and watching the planet-rise."
"You're right," Turhaya said, putting aside the datapad. "There isn't much here—other than it's obvious the Empire is up to something in the Garos system. And it's more than just mining this hibridium stuff."

Crimson shrugged. "Have your friends in NRI send in some sniffers. I'm sure they'll come up with something."

Turhaya nodded, looking at Crimson thoughtfully. "But we'd first have to get someone in there. Someone who wouldn't cause the Imperials to get suspicious. Someone who has authorization to be in the system. Someone who's face they've seen before." His look turned meaningful.

Crimson shifted in her seat, an uncomfortable expression on her face. "Look, I stopped running information for the New Republic two years ago."

"I know. And NRI has been poorer for it, Captain Durasha."

Crimson's expression hardened. "Hopefully NRI has learned from that loss and has started devoting more resources to counter-intelligence."

A sympathetic look appeared on Turhaya's face. "What happened to your brother and partner should not even have been possible. NRI blew it. There's no two ways about it. I understand your grief, Captain, I truly do, but we're looking at something here that's bigger than a botched operation." He picked up the datapad again, calling sections of the text back to the screen. He handed it to Crimson. "Garos IV sounds like it's a beautiful world."

"It is," Crimson said softly, looking at the datapad.

"There's a growing resistance movement there. You say so yourself right there. Do you know what has happened to some of the worlds that have resisted the Empire?"

"Yes."

"NRI has received reports that the resistance on Garos IV is preparing to overthrow the Imperial rule there. But they can't possibly win without outside help, and if they don't win, you know what will happen to that beautiful world?"

"Yes." Crimson had seen with her own eyes what happened to worlds that resisted the Empire and failed. She had heard that
Froozli and Derilyn had both been spectacular worlds whose beauty probably exceeded that of Garos IV before the Empire destroyed virtually all life on them through orbital bombardments and the unleashing of chemical weapons, killing both the resistance movements and the planets themselves in a single blow. Of course, she’d also heard of the atrocity that finally pulled the Rebel Alliance into a unified front against the Empire—the total destruction of Alderaan. She had no love for the Empire or the New Republic—both had robbed her of much—but she knew she couldn’t sit by and let some idealists on Garos IV bring doom onto themselves. She also couldn’t allow incompetent NRI operatives to indirectly do the same. She had to go back to the Garos system. She looked back at Turhaya, a steely glint in her green eyes. “I want the same rates I was paid two years ago, and I will be working alone, Turhaya. You understand that?”

“Yes, Captain.”

“You’re going to provide me with a list of potential contact agents, but I choose which one of them I funnel the information through, if any of them. I may use my own contacts to get the information to you. And I’ll get it to you at my own pace.”

“Captain Durasha, we don’t have forever on this. The Empire is up to something, and there are people in the High Command who—"

“I won’t take forever. I just don’t want a repeat of what happened to—two years ago. If you want me to work with NRI on this, you’re going to have to do it on my terms.”

Turhaya looked at Crimson for a moment, a slight frown on his face. Crimson knew what he was thinking: “Can I trust her? She’s been hauling cargo for both the Empire and the New Republic. Where exactly to her loyalties lie?” She fully expected him to make a veiled accusation of her planning to betray the NRI contacts he would give her, and she was preparing to throw him forcibly off her ship, but then his expression melted into a smile. “Done,” he said. “It’ll take me a few days to organize your contacts, Captain, but when I’m done we’ll have a nice little network set up. And then you’ll be ready to return to the Garos system.”
Old Horizons

In January, 1998, the staff at West End Games prepared what they thought was to become the next addition to a growing body of work called The Official Star Wars Adventure Journal. Each of the fifteen former volumes were comprised of novellas, short stories, RPG articles (that's roleplaying game material to those of us who've been around awhile) and lots of great illustrations. Though many new writers (and illustrators) appeared in these pages, luminaries in the Star Wars pantheon, authors like Tim Zahn, Kathy Tyers, Kevin J. Anderson, Barbara Hambly, John Whitman and Michael Stackpole, would often contributed new tales and help make the Adventure Journal a popular title amongst the West End Games' canon of ever-growing Star Wars material.

The Adventure Journal ran from 1994 to 1997 when the company's financial woes cost them the Star Wars license (due in no small part to the fact that they were tied into a failing shoe distributor just as the Star Wars franchise was gearing up to launch into the prequels). Fans bemoaned the loss of the magazine as it often presented smaller stories of unknown characters and places far removed from the Heroes of Yavin (you know them as Luke, Han, Leia, Chewie and the droids.) In truth, the magazine filled a nice niche in the market that catered to a more specialized Star Wars reader. And at a nearly 300 pages of material for $12.00, fans got a lot of bang for their buck! In truth, the Adventure Journal's stories weren't always stellar. It may be that the editorial team - while always striving to make the magazine as professional as they could (and succeeding) - favored stories that read rather too technical or dry. The "hard sci-fi" aspect may have been appealing for some readers, but others found the style off-putting and not in keeping with the space-opera milieu of Lucas' creation, and without the known cast of heroes and villains to root for or against, simply stopped buying.

Despite these criticisms, there were quite a number of gems to be found in the Journal's vast pages. "The Galaxy-Wide Newsnets" were an in-universe news report from across the galaxy, which eventually gave birth years later to the Holonet News which broadcast Clone Wars news in the pages of the Star Wars Insider and on the Official Site. The interior artwork was often a fantastic grab-bag of styles of various artists, and it's always been classy to read a story interspersed with illustrations (a tradition that goes back to before the paper shortages of WWII.) Del Rey should take note. Among the roster of writers, it wasn't uncommon to see works by now-famous Star Wars freelancers and employees, Pablo Hidalgo, Dan Wallace, Rich Handley, and others from the editorial staff, Bill Smith, Peter Schweighoffer, Eric Trautmann, Paul Sudlow, etc. And aside from the big names in Bantam's roster who often contributed a story or two, some of the Journal's best works came from the female branch of fan-turned-author, in particular Charlene Newcomb and Patricia Jackson who consistently supplied excellent stories (often involving the same milieu or characters) in each issue.

It's gratifying to see the tales of the Adventure Journal find a new home in the Official Site's Hyperspace section. This way both old and new fans can enjoy these off-the-beaten path adventures from over a decade ago. For with the publication of issue #15, the Adventure Journal was to be no more. The presentation you see here on this site is part and parcel of what would have become issue #16. The materials that were given me were in a rough state, and I've done my best to present them in as readable a form as possible. But it's hardly perfect, and you'll have to forgive me for slightly slanting, mismatched-sized pages. I've eliminated most of the ads and tried to clean up obvious problems with the limited tools at my disposal. Both the cover and the Table of Contents page are of my own design (there is no remaining materials indicating what they would have looked like.)

With issue 17, while a mock-up cover in b&w was provided (and is presented here for the first time albeit in rough form), much of the Journal's back-up features and ancillary material is no longer extant. And of the four main stories provided, only Jean Rabe's "Shifting Gears" is presented here exclusively for the first time. ("Love is a Warm Blaster" has been available on the SWFA's site for some years now.) Nevertheless, this is the only place you'll find the stories presented as they would have appeared, with the original artwork intact. Enjoy!
About the Authors

Kathy Burdette is a freelance writer and artist living in Virginia enjoying the life of a shiftless science fiction addict. In her spare time she writes short fiction, plays in a band, works at the Institute of Early American History and Culture, and rescues her wayward Rebel friends from secret Imperial garrisons.

James L. Cambias is a freelance writer and game designer who lives in upstate New York. He has worked for numerous game companies, including Iron Crown Enterprises, Game Designers Workshop and West End Games. In addition to roleplaying games, he also writes non-fiction about history and aviation.

Chris Cassidy is a freelance writer specializing in corporate communications, which is probably where she picked up her knack for fiction. She has spent the past year living with her husband and their border collie/terrier on Yavin IV, more commonly known as Guatemala (where the Rebel base in Star Wars: A New Hope was filmed). She is counting the days until she can brush her teeth without bottled water again back in her beloved Toronto.

Greetings from the Mid-Rim. Charlene Newcomb here, surviving the perils of full-time employment—meetings, cataloging journals, supervising, meetings, attending conferences, swearing in Old Corellian at computers that don’t work...did I mention meetings? But in the midst of it all, she squeezes in time to write.

In real life, Tish Pahl is an attorney, specializing in food and drug law. The judges, federal regulators and Congressmen who have been her primary audience would maintain that after 10 years of law practice, her legal briefs and documents are clever fiction. Opposing counsel are even less charitable—they consider Tish’s legal constructs closer to fantasy. She lives in the Washington, D.C., area with her husband, the long-suffering Tom, and two labrador retrievers.

Peter Schweighofer is West End’s Senior Creative & Editorial Director, a position he reached after four years of editing The Official Star Wars Adventure Journal. He still contributes regularly to the Journal (writing “Galaxywide Newsnets” as of issue #13, and numerous “Smuggler’s Logs”), and freelances for other West End projects. His latest game book, Platt’s Smuggler’s Guide, a players handbook
for smuggler characters, was published in November. Before entering the roleplaying game industry, Peter was a reporter and editor for a weekly, hometown newspaper in Connecticut.

Jennifer Selden is the illustrious *Paranoia* Creative Director at West End Games. When the Computer is not looking, she moonlights as a *Star Wars* editor and writer. She is also very active in the local library, Society for Creative Anachronisms and herbalism. Jen was recently engaged to Eric Trautmann; a wedding is planned for June of 1998. They now have two psychotic felines in their apartment in Honesdale.

George R. Strayton recently moved to Burbank, California, where he’s begun to build his entertainment empire. Otherwise, he enjoys hanging out at the Hard Rock in Universal City.

**About the Artists**

"Who do I have to kill?" was Steve Bryant’s response when asked if he wanted to do *Star Wars* work for West End Games—leading to his work in *Galaxy Guide 12: Aliens—Enemies and Allies, Heroes and Rogues*, and *The Official Star Wars Adventure Journal*. In addition to the movie trilogy, Steve cites Al Williamson’s seminal *Star Wars* work as a major influence. A former art director for Game Designers Workshop, Steve currently works freelance and lives in the suburban wilds of Chicago with his wife and four companion animals.

Matt Busch began drawing "stick" TIE fighters at the age of four. Aside from the *Star Wars Adventure Journal*, Matt has contributed to other *Star Wars* sourcebooks for West End Games. As an entertainment illustrator living 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 my family..."

Joe Corroneney is the art and design coordinator for an educational textbook publisher in Columbus, Ohio, and a freelance artist whose work has appeared in publications from DC Comics, ICE, West End Games, and others.
Jeff Menges has been working in the field of fantasy illustration since 1987. His work has appeared all over the American gaming market. Jeff lives on the northern shore of Long Island with his wife Lynne, son Matthew, and their rampant dachshund, Buddy. When not shackled to his drawing table, he likes to roam the shore or park looking for scenes for his next piece.

Doug Shuler has been a freelance artist for ten years and has done work for many prominent game companies, including GDW, Steve Jackson Games, ICE, TSR, White Wolf, FASA, and West End Games. His illustrations continue to appear on new cards for Magic: The Gathering and BattleTech by Wizards of the Coast. A Star Wars fanatic, he lives in Boulder, Colorado, with his wife Jordi and daughters Brianna and Ashley.

Will Warren is a freelance artist who graduated from the Joe Kubert School of Cartoon and Graphic Arts. He’s originally from Connecticut, but now finds himself living and working in New Jersey. When Will is not laboring diligently at the drawing table, he’s usually busy catching some “Z’s.”
Liadden stumbled into the Rebel Alliance starship cockpit, where her mentor, the Twi'lek To'iir, had just activated the hyperdrive motivator. She breathed a sigh of relief as the stars lengthened and the ship shot into hyperspace.

"I dusted the last of Roff's Z-95 Headhunters," she said, flopping into the co-pilot's seat. "They did a good job on us, though. I'm surprised the hyperdrive's still working."

"I would say we came out of that scrap with only minor damage," To'iir said, gazing over his old-fashioned reading spectacles at the blinking damage control board. "Not bad for an encounter with Roff's heavies."

"Your little blinkie board there doesn't tell you the rest of the bad news," Liadden said, trying to decipher the readout. "When the shield power coupling blew, it took out the water tank flow valve. There's stale water dripping all over the hold. It's beginning to smell really rank in there. Then when the sensors overloaded, the autochef went haywire—spewed that yellow glop it passes off as food all over the galley. Let's face it, To'iir, we need a better ship...and a vacation."

The elderly Twi'lek leaned back in his chair and let go a
long sign. "Do not worry, young one," he said, his eyes closing with sleep.

"What? Are we heading for one of those planets you're always talking about? You know, the really remote and primitive ones?"

"Not this time," To'iir said, "We need supplies and minor repairs, but cannot risk running into any more of Roff's men. We need one of my safe holes."

"Safe hole?" Liadden asked. "What is it, and why haven't you told me about it yet?"

"All in good time," To'iir said. "The apprentice cannot expect the master to teach her everything at once. We are going to a remote world where I have stashed some much-needed supplies. A good place to hide and rest for a while. At least until you have repaired the shields."

**Smuggler Safe Holes**

As smugglers, we're always on the run. The Empire is constantly showing up and demanding to board our freighters, crime lords are chasing us down for credits they claim we owe, and some bounty
hunter manages to appear just when you’re already having a bad day.

Where do we go to get away from it all? Your average shadowport is a good bet. Whether the place is run by fellow smugglers, pirates or neutrals, these shadowports maintain low profiles in discreet locations and still provide supplies and repair facilities people in our line of business often need. But shadowports have their drawbacks. Keep in mind that other down-and-out elements of the fringe are hiding out there, too. Some are there for the same reasons we are. Others, however, hang over shadowports like a bad cloud of Gelgelar shvash gas—they seem like our type, but they’re really around for their own good. These are the kinds of vagrants who snatch on their partners, cheat their colleagues, swindle free-traders, double-deal crime lords, and turn informant for the Empire. If you’re lucky, they’ll just cheat you at a sabacc game in the shadowport watering hole. If you’re not so lucky, they’ll turn you into the Empire after selling off your cargo and chopping up your freighter for scrap.

So, as you can see, there are some times when hiding out in a shadowport is not exactly the safest option. What you really need is a remote place only you know about, where nobody’s going to bother you and you can relax for a while. That’s why any smuggler worth her ship maintains a handful of safe holes.

What’s A Safe Hole?

Call it what you like: safe hole, haven, cache, bolt hole, hideout. A safe hole is someplace you can run to when you need cover. It is a place only you (and maybe your crew) know of where you can lie low for a while. Ideally you should be able to completely conceal your ship there. Some smug-
Smugglers stuff their safe holes with extra supplies, consumables and spare starship parts. Others often make these hiding places as comfortable as possible, creating a small base where they can hide out indefinitely.

I usually keep several safe holes in each sector I visit frequently. Whenever I'm flying through and expecting trouble, I keep the astrogation coordinates for my safe-hole systems on hand, just in case. With a few hideouts in a sector, you're only a few hours' hyperspace jump from relative security.

**How Do I Find One?**

Choosing a safe hole isn't like shopping for a new freighter. Some you find on your own quite by accident, while others you hear about from fellow smugglers who are exceptionally trusting to have told you. Most you just pick because they look like good hiding places. The ones you keep are the hiding places that actually work.

Most safe holes are in remote areas, far from starports, settlements, and travel lanes. Geographical features—like caves, craters and canyons—make the best hiding places because they conceal your ship, have areas where you can store extra supplies, and are relatively secret. Look far from civilization. Find someplace that's hard to reach on foot—and make sure you can safely land your ship there.

Sometimes you need to put in some extra work to hide your ship in a safe hole. Smugglers often keep some kind of camouflage or camo-netting on hand to be sure. (For information on camo-netting, see the *Shadows of the Empire Sourcebook*, pages 110–112.) Most keep spare parts, supplies and food there to support an extended stay. You can also booby-trap the area around your safe hole to keep out unwanted visitors or creatures.
You can have an urban safe hole, but with all those people and troopers wandering around, it's rarely safe for very long.

**Remembering Where It Is**

Although your safe hole should remain hidden from everyone else, make sure it's not so well-concealed that even *you* can't find it. Obviously you're going to keep accurate astrogation records of where your safe hole system is. Once you're there, though, you can't exactly follow the landing beacon down to your hideout.

The good smugglers memorize their safe hole locations. This is an easy trick—just take some mental notes of other geographical landmarks leading to your hiding place. If there's a cliffside cave, memorize which continent and mountain range the cliff is on. Is it near a lake? Does a valley point toward it? Can you follow a river to the cave? If your haven's location is committed to memory, it's much more difficult for others to discover it. And it's easier for you to access when you really need to remember how to find it.

If you like artwork, you could always record a hologram of the area leading to your safe hole, then display it prominently in your quarters or crew lounge as a classic "landscape piece." Who would know it's really a shot of the landmarks showing the location of your hiding place?

Some of us aren't as good at information retention and retrieval as others. You can always keep safe hole navigation notes in your computer—just make sure nobody else looks at them. Put them under bogus file names you'd never
use, like "Lamuud Docking Protocol," "Good Places to Eat on Ralltiir," or "Pre-Flight Checklist." Use something you won’t mix up with something else, and a name that won’t arouse the suspicions of any Imperial Customs officers who go mucking through your ship’s computer.

Lazy smugglers mark their safe holes with landing strobes which can be activated when a particular comm channel is used. This idea is often more work than it’s worth. You need to find (or in most cases, steal) a few starport landing strobes, then hook them up to a complex circuit with a power pack, comlink and passive sensor. You need to place them near the safe hole where they won’t be casually spotted, but where the strobe will be visible to your airborne ship. This setup always runs the risk that a passerby will accidentally activate the strobes when he uses that comm channel purely by chance.

**Stocking Your Safe Hole**

A safe hole isn’t just someplace you can hide your ship, it’s a haven where you can restock supplies, effect repairs, and recuperate after that last run-in with the Empire. You don’t just find a safe hole and hang out there—that’s called a cave. You scout it out before you really need it, then stock it with goods you’ll want later when you’re really under the gun.

Don’t waste too many credits stocking a safe hole unless it’s very secure and you’re planning on staying there a while. Skim off a some credits here and there to buy a few extra medpacs, a tank of water and a crate full of food. Buy a few extra power capacitors and spare breakers when you stock your engineering spaces. Keep just enough material here so you can get by for a few days.

Don’t just hide this stuff in some rocky niche or hole. Protect your supplies against tampering from hungry little
varmints and deterioration from the elements. Your standard plastic or metal cargo crate works best for this. Just dump everything into the crate, keeping the consumables in a separate, airtight canister or another crate altogether. When stowed in some dark corner of your safe hole, your spare supplies look just like an old cargo container.

You shouldn’t go overboard on stocking your bolt hole. But there are several things you should make sure you have stowed away:

- **Extra Food and Water.** A few plastic jugs of water and a box of nutrient bars can go a long way. You don’t want to be hiding from bounty hunters on an empty stomach. Some smugglers keep enough consumables here to restock their ship—this is easy if food and water are readily available from the area around the safe hole.

- **Spare Set of Starship Tools.** Most ships have a tool kit stowed somewhere in the engineering spaces. When put under stress, though, some of these can break, melt, or become lost. Keep a spare set in your safe hole, especially since you’ll probably need to make repairs if you’re hiding there. If you haven’t lost the set aboard your starship, you’ve got some extras the crew can use to speed up the work.

- **Basic Replacement Parts.** We’re not talking entire shield generators and sensor dishes...you just need to worry about the little parts that tend to blow when you stress out your ship. Surge capacitors, power couplings, hydraulic
valves, and control circuits are cheap and don't take up much space.

- **Medical Supplies.** A spare medpac is only going to cost you 100-200 credits. The more substantial medkits cost more, but might be better long-term investments when stocking a safe hole. Once you're medpac's gone, it's gone. A medkit will last longer, and can take care of more serious injuries. For more information on the medkit, check out the appropriate entry in my "Smuggler's Log" (*Star Wars Adventure Journal* #4, datapages 165–166).

**My Favorite Safe Holes**

So you want more, eh? To give you some idea what a decent safe hole looks like, I've detailed a few sample hideouts I've used in the past. I've pretty much abandoned these by now—a good smuggler isn't going to give away any current information, is she? I'm not handing out any important data here, just system names, basic directions, and what you might find there (some of these I haven't used in a while). If you can locate them, feel free to make yourselves at home.

**Coastal Caves of Wroona**

The main planetside starport on Wroona is situated along the coast of its largest ocean. The capital city sprawls inland and along the coast for quite a distance—beyond that the countryside is sparsely populated by small enclaves of Wroonians. The coastline here is idea for hiding out, since it contains many concealed caves whose entrances are submerged at high tide. These are especially good for waiting out the frequent Imperial patrols which stray from Wroona's orbital stardock to harass smugglers.

Before you try landing in any of these caverns, scout
them out carefully. You can do this in your spare time when in Wroona starport conducting business. The Wroonians love the sea, so sail barge tours often skirt the coast, or you can rent a waveskimmer to do some exploring on your own. Find some natural landmarks to aid you in navigating to your safe hole. Jutting promontories, coral reefs and the occasional Wroonian coastal settlement work well. When you find a cave, make sure the entrance is large enough for your ship. There should be enough room inside for you to land and open the entry hatch. Watch the rise and fall of the tide. Some cavern floors rise as they go deeper, providing a flat landing area several meters above high tide. Others aren’t so conveniently designed—you’ll still be able to land, but getting out of the ship will get you pretty wet.

Most caves have enough room so you can move around beneath your freighter, though the edges and top might be a little tight. Be careful—the cavern floor can often be slick with seaweed, salt-water lichens and slime. You’ll also want to watch out for some of the local wildlife, particular the well-camouflaged and ever-hungry Wroonian flycatchers (briefly mentioned in Star Wars Adventure Journal #5, pages 285–286).

If you need to store extra supplies here, make sure you keep them in water-tight containers. Wedging them in crevasses high up in the cave wall helps keep the salt water from slowly corroding them, and hides them from prying eyes and hungry creatures.

If you don’t have supplies here, or what you’ve stocked has been stolen or scavenged, you might be able to get some help from one of the Wroonian settlements nearby. First you have to get out of your cave. Sometimes this means swimming, though at low tide you can usually walk out of the cavern mouth and scale the rough cliff. A few caves have natural passages which lead to the surface, but don’t count
on it. The Wroonian settlements are not too far from the coast. The homesteaders here are more than happy to help out luckless smugglers, providing food, medical aid and other services in exchange for any profitable goods spacers have on hand.

**Volcanic Craters**

Any location with geothermal activity is a good place to hide. Your enemy's sensors are easily fouled by steam vents, recently erupted ore deposits, geysers, dormant volcanoes, and lava floes. Although these are ideal for masking your ship's location, they don't always provide perfectly sheltered safe holes. Most of the time you can only afford to hide out here until your pursuers pass by—effecting repairs or staying longer than a day can do more damage to you and your ship than your adversaries.

Duroon, a world in the Corporate Sector, has a good example of volcanic safe holes. A volcanic ridge cuts across the planet's east-west axis. The crest is a trough of active volcanic fissures which often spew lava and emit high levels of heat and radiation—enough to obscure sensor readings for a few kilometers in both directions. The farther away you go from the central ridge, the more calm the volcanic activity becomes. Metal magma rivers soon turn into pure ore deposits, which give way to hot springs and thermal vents on relatively stable ground.

All this volcanic activity not only makes your adversary's sensors useless, but makes it impossible for you to use sensors when landing. Steam and smoke also obscures vision. Make sure every crew member is peering out some transparisteel viewport, warning of any nearby peaks and looking for good landing spots. Avoid any lava pools which could erupt and shoot a fountain of superheated magma into the air.
Be careful where you land. The closer to the central ridge you set down, the more enemy sensors will be obscured—and the more volcanic activity you'll need to worry about. Frequent earthquakes can swallow a light freighter in a second. Lava floes can both crawl and run, and there's rarely any warning.

Your best bet is to land in the more stable area with lighter geothermal activity. Here your only worries are toxic gases, hot springs and a few minor tremors. Just take a slow approach and look for a clearing. If you set down and sink a few meters, engage the throttle, lift out of the unstable ground, and try someplace else. The air in these areas is so clouded with sulfur and other noxious fumes that you should never leave the ship without a breath mask. Don't wander too far from your vessel. Geothermally unstable regions are riddled with hidden hot springs and brittle rock. Small holes in the ground might turn out to be geysers which can scald you to death with one burst. Don't spend too much time outside the ship.

If you're closer to lava floes or pools, you should wear some kind of thermally cooled suit—never touch metal surfaces like your ship's hull.

Although these volcanically active areas are great for evading sensor scans, they're not the best long-term safe holes. Crates of supplies hidden here often disappear within the shifting earth or newly sprung geysers. There isn't anywhere to find food, and most of the water is contaminated with sulfur or radiation. Repairing your ship is no problem, as long as you don't spend more than an hour or two outside.

Volcanic safe holes are great for hiding out, but don't rely on them too much. You have to choose the least risky alternative—facing your adversaries, or evading them in a dangerous and unstable environment.
Dead Bantha Gulch

Canyons always make good hiding places. If you can find a secure ravine, you can stock it as a reliable safe hole. Dead Bantha Gulch is one Tru'eb and I used when we had business on Tatooine. Why the colorful name? When we first discovered this canyon, there was a dead, rotting bantha in one of the gullies leading from the gulch deeper into the Jundland Wastes. You can still find the large ribs, skull and horns if you look. The skeleton still looks creepy, and it might frighten away the locals, so we haven't moved it.

Dead Bantha Gulch is a little hard to find unless you have directions: head for the Western Dune Sea, fly low-level until Tosche Station is due east, then set your course heading for 090 until you reach the jagged badlands of the Jundland Wastes. If you ship is lined up correctly, the canyon is dead ahead. Slowly enter the ravine. About 100 meters in you'll emerge from the rough-cut gorge into a
wider valley bordered on most sides by towering cliffs. Two light freighters can land comfortably here. The entry canyon is twisted enough that anyone peering inside from the desert won’t notice the ships. Low-flying patrols won’t spot you, either, unless they fly almost directly overhead. Anyone brave enough to enter the ravine will spot you about 75 meters in. You’ll want to stash some camo-netting in one of the gulch’s caves to help conceal your freighter, just to be safe.

The canyon walls are riddled with shallow caves in which you can hide a few crates of supplies. Tru’eb and I never tried this, but you enterprising smugglers out there can try making one of the larger caves as homey as you can afford. The valley is a good place to stay over time, especially if you take extra measures to camouflage your ship. Don’t worry much about Tusken Raiders ambushing you, or Jawas wandering in to scrap your ship. Both species avoid this ravine, maybe because they think it’s haunted, or perhaps it’s some kind of tribal taboo. At night the faint winds blow through the caves, creating eerie, low moans. If you can stand that—plus the oppressive heat during the day—this might be the perfect safe hole for you.

Make sure you stock the caves with basic safe hole supplies before you really need to use the gulch. There’s no water here, though the caves offer effective shelter from Tatooine’s twin suns. If you need any provisions, you’d better have some repulsorcraft handy. Hiking south along the Jundland Wastes to Wayfar—the nearest settlement—isn’t a good idea. Some of the gulch’s caves are large enough to hide a landspeeder or a few speeder bikes. Even with a beat-up old landspeeder, the moisture farmers’ settlement is a few hours away. The folks there are always willing to trade for the goods you need, but the items they have to
Dead Bantha Gulch

Dead Bantha

Supply Caves

To Jundland Wastes
offer are limited. If you round the southern tip of the Jundland Wastes, you can head for Anchorhead or Tosche Station, but it'll take longer.

(For more information on Dead Bantha Gulch, check out *Imperial Double-Cross*, a stand-alone game adventure from West End Games.)

*This issue's "Smuggler's Log" was created by Peter Schweighofer.*
SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION HONORS GEORGE LUCAS

By Tish Pahl

Did you know that Artoo-Detoo was inspired by a Swiss Army knife? Or that the sound of a speeder bike changing gears came from a recording of a stone caught in a road repairman’s hose? Those were just a couple of the interesting tidbits which came to light when the Smithsonian Institution honored George Lucas for his contributions to the depiction of timeless values in film.

The United States Smithsonian Institution awarded Mr. Lucas the James Smithson Bicentennial medal on October 29, 1997. Past recipients of this award have included Jacques Costeau, Richard Leaky, Helen Hayes, Jim Henson, and Walter Cronkite.

The ceremony was the culmination of Washington, D.C.’s week-long Star Wars celebration. It also marked the opening of the year-long exhibit, Star Wars: The Magic of Myth at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum (see sidebar for more information).

Thousands of people attended the awards ceremony, which was held at the Lisener Auditorium in Washington, D.C. Although the audience was young and predominantly male, there were a large number of families. No doubt many were parents who had seen the movies when first released, and were now passing their passion on to their children. Smithsonian staff searched for families seated in the upper rafters of the auditorium, and brought them forward to front rows so that the children could be closer to the stage where Mr. Lucas was to speak.
In addition to Mr. Lucas, Ben Burtt, the Sound Designer for the Star Wars Trilogy and the Special Editions, and Dennis Murren, Senior Visual Effects Supervisor at Industrial Light and Magic attended. Rick McCallum, Producer of the Special Editions and the Star Wars prequel, was unable to attend due to production requirements on the prequel, which is scheduled for release in 1999.

**DOCUMENTARY FILM PREMIERES**

The event began with the premiere of the 30-minute film, Star Wars: The Magic of Myth, which Lucasfilm and the Air and Space Museum produced jointly for the museum exhibit. Featuring interviews with George Lucas, composer John Williams, Carrie Fisher, Harrison Ford, Mark Hamill, Ben Burtt, and others, the film provided an overview of the importance of myth in the Star Wars films.

Mr. Lucas spoke at length about the importance of myth to the development of his films. *Star Wars* is grounded in and a product of myth, he explained. In his trilogy, Mr. Lucas sought to build a replacement for the myths he felt had been lost.

According to Mr. Lucas, myths teach and educate. As a consequence, storytelling is an enormous responsibility: a film maker has an obligation to embrace and depict the values we hold dear. *Star Wars*, Mr. Lucas said, is an embodiment of the universals which encompass all religions—explained in spiritual rather than religious terms.

Mr. Lucas also described the inspirations which influenced his vision of Star Wars, including old Westerns, Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa, World War II air battles, and old science fiction adventure movies. In one hilarious moment, the film showed a clip of a Flash Gordon movie, with enormous titles scrolling across a star-filled space. "Chapter II" it pronounced, with titles which would look very familiar to any who have seen the opening sequence of a Star Wars movie.

**A "LIVED-IN" UNIVERSE?**

In discussing the creation of the galaxy far, far away, Lucas emphasized that he wanted a place that looked "lived in," thus creating the feel of a real place like the "immaculate reality" of
Kurosawa films. In the *Star Wars* universe, things look old and used and the audience is thrown into the environment without explanation for every little detail.

Harrison Ford gave examples of this “immaculate reality.” When they were shooting in the *Millennium Falcon* cockpit, Ford would ask “Well, how do you fly it?” Mr. Lucas would only shrug in response.

Some of this “lived-in look” was accidental. Ford said the toggles and switches filling the *Millennium Falcon* cockpit were so cheap, they did not have springs. When hangar doors were supposed to shut during filming, Ford recalled hearing crews cursing as they dragged wooden doors across concrete sound stages.

**AVISIONARY**

Everyone interviewed for the film described Mr. Lucas as a visionary who has surrounded himself with talented people charged with translating his visions into reality. For example, Mr. Lucas told his production artist, Ralph McQuarrie, “I want two droids, one sort of human, sleek, and the other small, boxy, and very technical.”

Through art and inspiration, McQuarrie then made these visions real. McQuarrie designed Threepio after seeing the work of a popular late 1970s sculptor, while a Swiss Army knife inspired Artoo’s design.

McQuarrie’s art, now on display at the Air and Space Museum, was fundamental to the realization of George Lucas’ visions. At first, the storyboards were intended to help sell *A New Hope* to the studio. McQuarrie’s work, however, was so wonderful and vivid that the goal became to capture in the film what McQuarrie had depicted in a storyboard.

At the conclusion of the documentary, Mr. Lucas answered questions from the audience. He said that his favorite “good” characters are Artoo and Threepio. His favorite “bad” characters are Darth Vader and Boba Fett.

A mother asked this question for her 8 year old daughter: “Why aren’t there many girls in *Star Wars*?” Mr. Lucas replied that, “Women and war don’t work together.” He made a war movie, and he did not see women belonging in that milieu. On the other hand, Lucas went on to explain, *Star Wars* tells a story of compassion, peace, and relationships. Within this context, *Star Wars* is about Leia and her struggle, and these two clowns (his words for Han and
Luke) are just along for the ride. Similarly, the prequels will be about a girl, Leia's mother, in a similar position, caught amidst galactic conflict.

Coveted prequel information was otherwise limited. John Williams will be doing the prequel score. Contrary to rumors, prequel trailers are unlikely to appear until the fall of 1998.

In addition, Mr. Lucas urged protection of "artists' rights" in the films they make. He said that legislation is needed to prevent tampering with or altering films. He also encouraged better preservation of films and mentioned that if he had waited another few years to begin the restoration of *A New Hope*, it might have been too late to save the negative.

Dennis Murren and Ben Burtt also answered questions from the
audience. Murren stated that digital technology had been the most significant advancement and that for the next few years, efforts will focus on perfecting it to be faster and more powerful. He also said that Industrial Light and Magic will continue to use real models in the future. Computer-generated modeling has its limitations, he explained. Pyrotechnics, for instance, do not work well in computer simulations.

Burtt related interesting anecdotes about his wandering throughout California with a tape recorder searching for Star Wars sounds. Blaster fire came from the sound of a guy wire on a radio tower. The sound of a speeder bike changing gears came from a recording of a stone caught in a road repairman’s hose. Artoo’s speech began with recordings of human voices cooing, babbling, and sighing which were then synthesized and sped up to create the droid’s not-quite-human expressive voice.

Burtt would not say what “Etchoota” means except that it is Huttese, very rude, and does not include an obscene gesture.

**ADVICE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE**

Mr. Lucas, Mr. Burtt, and Mr. Murren were all asked variations on the same questions: “How do I grow up to be you?” or “How can I get a job at ILM?”

All three men delivered the same message—to work successfully in their field, a person should obtain a broad, liberal arts education, with grounding in art, science, anthropology, computers, English, history, and other disciplines. The technical aspects of filmmaking, sound creation or visual effects can be taught; but inspiration and creativity come from a broad life experience.

Watching movies and television and learning the computer may provide basic skills. They cautioned that this limited background will not develop vision or ideas. A person may know how to say or do something, but will he or she have anything to say?

Mr. Lucas expressed his deep appreciation to the Smithsonian and to the hundreds gathered in the auditorium. Mr. Lucas was, it seemed, surprised and a bit abashed by the thunderous ovation from the enthusiastic crowd. Perhaps the best and only answer to Mr. Lucas’ mystification over the enduring popularity of his films may be found in the title of the Smithsonian exhibit, *Star Wars: The Magic of Myth*. To millions, *Star Wars* is, and remains, magic.
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THE STAR WARS EXHIBIT AT THE AIR AND SPACE MUSEUM

Star Wars: The Magic of Myth will be at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum through November 1, 1998. Over 200 characters, models, pieces of art, costumes, and props from the Star Wars trilogy are on display.

Thematically, the exhibit is based upon Joseph Campbell's story, Hero With A Thousand Faces, with the pieces on display used to explain the hero's journey. That odyssey is described in different "units": The Call to Adventure, The Wise and Helpful Guide, The Threshold, into the Labyrinth, Hero Deeds, The Dark Road of Trials, Into the Belly of the Beast, The Sacred Grove, Sacrifices, The Path of Atonement, The Hero's Return, The Shadow Rises, The Heart of Darkness, The Final Victory, and Journey's End.

An audio tour of the exhibit, narrated by James Earl Jones, explains the hero's journey and the items displayed.

Those wishing to attend the Star Wars exhibit must obtain tickets in advance. Tickets are free, and are handed out each day at the Air and Space Museum on a first come, first serve basis, beginning at 9:45 a.m.

A ticket entitles the holder to enter the museum at a particular time on that day. When all the tickets are distributed for the morning and early afternoon (between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m.) the ticket booth closes. It reopens at 2 p.m., to distribute tickets to enter the exhibit between 2:15 p.m. and 4:45 p.m.

There is a limit of four tickets per person. No ticket is required for children under age two. The museum will not distribute tickets to attend the exhibit on a future date.

Although not available through the museum, advance tickets may be purchased through ProTix at (800) 529-2440. The cost is $2.25 per ticket, plus a $1.00 handling fee per order. There is limit of 10 tickets per order. For those wishing to avoid the uncertainty of waiting in early morning lines for tickets at what is likely to be a very popular exhibit, purchasing tickets in advance to guarantee entry on a particular future day, at a particular time, is an excellent option.

For more information about the exhibit, contact the Smithsonian at (202) 786-2122.
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