

Han Solo Adventure Trilogy
Han Solo At Stars End 2

Chapter 1

ITS a warship all fight. Damn!

Instrument panels in the Millennium Falcons cock-pit were alive with trouble lights, warning flashers, and the beeps and hoots of the sensor package. Read-out screens were feeding combat-information displays at high speed.

Han Solo, crouched forward in the pilots seat, coolly flicking his eyes from instrument to screen, hast-fly assessed his situation. His lean, youthful face creased in a frown of concern. Beyond the cockpit canopy, the surface of the planet Duroon drew stead-fly nearer. Somewhere below and astern, a heavily armed vessel had detected the Falcons presence and was now homing in to challenge her. That the warship had, in fact, picked up the Millennium Falcon first was a matter of no small worry to Hah; the ability to come and go without attracting notice, especially of. ficial notice, was vital to a smuggler.

He began relaying fire-control data to the ships weapons systems. Charge main batteries, Chewie, he said, not taking his eyes from his part of the con-sole, and shields-all. Were in prohibited space; cant let era take us or identify the ship. Particularly, he added to himself, with the cargo were hauling.

To his right, Chewbacca the Wooldee made a sound halfway between a grunt and a bark, his furry fingers darting to his controls with sure dexterity, his large, hairy form hunched in the oversized coptlots seat. Wooldee-style, he showed his fierce fighting teeth as he rapidly surrounded the starship wth layers of de-fensive energy. At the same time, he brought the Fal-cons offensive weaponry up to its maximum charge.

Bracing his ship for battle, Han berated himseN for ever having taken on this job. Hed known full well it could take him into conflict with the Corporate Sector Authority, in the middle of a steer-clear area.

The Authority ships approach left Han and Chew-bacca just seconds for a clutch decision about the mission and head for parts unknown, or try to pull off their delivery anyway. Hah surveyed his console, hop-ing for a clue, or a hit off the Cosmic Deck.

The other ship wasnt gaining. In fact, the Falcon was pulling away. Sensors gauged the mass, arma-ments, and thrust of their pursuer and Hah made his best guess. Chewie, I dont think thats a ship of the line; looks more like a bul job, with augmentative weapons. She mustve just lifted off when she got wind of us. Hell, dont those guys have anythin8 better to do? But it figured; the one major Authorit installa-tion on Duroon, the only one with a full-dress port layout, was on the far side of the globe, where the dawn line would just be lightening gray sky. Han had planned his landing for a spot as far away from the port as possible, in the middle of the night-side.

We take her down, he decided. If the Falcon could shake her follower, Hah and Chewbacca could make their drop and, with the luck of the draw, es-cape.

The Wookiee gave a grumpy growl, black nostrils flaring, tongue curling. Han glared at him. You got a better idea? Its a little late to part company, isnt it? He took the converted freighter into a steep dive, throwing away altitude in return for increased veloc-ity, heading deeper into Duroons umbra.

The Authority vessel, conversely, slowed even more, cllmbing through the planets atmosphere, trad-ing speed for altitude in an attempt to keep the MiUennium Falcon under sensor surveillance. Han ig-nored the Authoritys broadcast order to halt; tele-spenders that should have automatically given his starships identity in response to official inquiry had been disconnected long ago.

Hold deflector shields at full capacity, he ordered. Im taking her down to the deck; we dont want our skins cooked off. The Wookiee complied, to shed thermal energy generated by the Falcons rapid pas-sage through the atmosphere. The starships controls trembled as she began to buck the denser air. Han worked to put the planet between himseft and the Authority vessel.

This he soon accomplished, as indicators registered increased heat from the friction of the freighters dive. Between watching sensors and looking through the canopy, Han quickly found his first landmark, a vol-canically active crevasse that ran on an east-west axis, like a stupendous, burning scar on the flesh of Duroon. He brought the Falcon out of her swoop, her control systems rebelling against the immense

strain. He leveled off only meters above the planet's surface.

Let's see them track us now, he said, self-satisfied. Chewbacca snorted. The meaning of the snort was clear: this was temporary cover only. There was little danger of being detected either optically or by instrument over this seam in Duroon's surface, for the Falcon would be lost against a background of ferrous slag, infernal heat, and radioactive discord. But neither could she remain there for long.

In the vivid orange light of the fissure that illuminated the cockpit, Han conceded that fact. At best, he'd broken trail so the Authority ship would be unable to spot the Falcon should the pursuer gain enough altitude to bring her back into sensor range. He poured on as much airspeed as he dared in an effort to keep Duroon's mass between himself and the vessel hunting him while he sought his landing site. He cursed the fact that there were no proper navigational beacons; this was seat-of-the-pants flying, and no chance of leaning out the cockpit and stopping a passerby for directions.

In minutes the ship had neared the western end of the fissure. Han was compelled to dump some velocity; it was time to look for road signs. He reviewed the instructions given him; instructions he'd committed to memory alone. Off to the south a gigantic mountain range loomed. He banked the Falcon sharply to port, slapped a pair of switches, and bore straight for the mountains.

The ship's special Terrain Following Sensors came on. Han kept the freighter's bow close above a surface of cooled lava and occasional active rifts, minor off-spring of the great fissure. For whatever small edge it might give against detection, he trimmed the Falcon off at virtual landing altitude, screaming over eddied volcanic flatlands. Anybody down there better duck, he advised, keeping one eye pinned to the Terrain Following Sensors. They beeped, having located the mountain pass for which he'd been searching. He adjusted course.

Funny. His information said the break in the mountains was plenty wide for the Falcon, but it looked mighty narrow on the TFS. For a second he debated going for altitude fast, hurdling the high peaks, but that just might put him back onto the Authority's scopes. He was too close to his delivery point, and a payday, to risk having to cut and run. The moment of option passed. He shed more airspeed, committed now to taking the pass at low level.

Sweat collected on his forehead and dampened his shirt and vest. Chewbacca uttered his low rumble of utmost concentration as both partners synched to the running of the Millennium Falcon. The image of the pass on the TFS grew no more encouraging.

Han tightened his grip on the controls, feeling the press of his flying gloves against them. Pass, nothing ---that things a slot! Hold your breath, Chewie; we'll have to skin through.

He threw himself into a grim battle with his ship. Chewbacca caterwauled his dislike for all unconventional maneuvers as he cut in braking thrusters, but even those would not be enough to avert disaster. The slot began to take on shape, a slightly lighter area of sky lit by bright stars and one of Duroon's three moons, set off by the silhouette of the mountains. It was, just barely, too narrow.

The starship took some altitude, and her speed slackened. Those extra seconds gave Han time to pilot for his life, calling on razor-edge reflexes and instinctive skills that had seen him through scrapes all across the galaxy. He killed all shields, since they'd have struck rock and overloaded, and wrenched his controls, standing the Millennium Falcon on her port-side. Sheer crags closed in on either side, so that the roar of the freighter's engines rebounded from the cliffs. He made minute corrections, staring at rock walls that seemed to be coming at him through the canopy, and rattled off a string of expletives having nothing whatsoever to do with piloting.

There was a slight jar, and the shriek of metal torn away as easily as paper. The long-range sensors winked out; the dish had been ripped off the upper hull by a protrusion of rock. Then the needle's eye was threaded sideways, and the Falcon was through the mountains.

Perspiration beading his face, dampening his light brown hair, Han pounded Chewbacca. What'd I tell you? Inspirations my specialty!

The starship soared over the thick jungle that began beyond the mountains. Han leveled off, wiping a gloved hand across his brow. Chewbacca emitted a sustained growl. I agree, Han replied soberly in the wake of his elation. That was a stupid place to put a mountain. He took up scanning for the next

land-mark and spied it almost at once a winding river. The Falcon skimmed in low over the watery coils as the Wookiee lowered the ships landing gear.

In seconds theyd reached the landing area near a spectacular waterfall that dropped two hundred meters to the river in a flume like a blue-white, ghostly scrim under stars and moonlight. Han, reading the TFS, found a clearing in the heavy cover of vegetation and settled the ship slowly. The broad disks of the landing gear sank a bit in soft humus; then the hydraulics sighed briefly as the Millennium Falcon made herself comfortable.

Han and Chewbacca sat at their controls for a mo-ment, too drained to do more. Outside the cockpit canopy, the jungle was an irregular darkness, tangles of indefatigable growth topped by a roof of fernlike plants that stretched up twenty meters and more. Gauzy grou nd fog rolled through the undergrowth and clearing.

The Wookiee gave a long, gusty, bass-register ex-halation. I couldnt have said it better, Han con-curred. Lets get at it. Both removed headsets and left their seats. Chewbacca picked up his crossbow weapon and a bandolier of metal ammo containers, which also supported a floppy carryall pouch at his hip. Han already wore his side arm, a custom-model blaster with rear-fitted macroscope, its front sight blade filed off to facilitate the speed draw. His hol-ster was worn low, tied down at the thigh, cut so that it exposed the weapons trigger and trigger guard.

According to directories, Duroons atmosphere would support humanoid life without respirators. The two smugglers moved directly to the ships ramp. The hatch rolled up and the ramp lowered silently, letting in smells of plant growth, of rotting vegetation, of hot, humid night and animal danger. The jungle was filled with sounds, calls, clacks, and cries of prey and pred-ator, and, over all, with the monumental spillage of the waterfall.

Now its up to them to find us, Han said. Check-ing the jungle, he saw no sign of life. Not surprising. The freighters landing had probably frightened most wildlife out of the area. He turned to his shaggy first mate/copilot/partner. Ill wait for them. Turn off sensors, shut down the engines, the works; kill all sys-tems so the Authority cant spot us. Then see how much structural damage she suffered topside when she got her back scratched.

Chewbacca barked acknowledgment and shambled off. Han stripped off his flying gloves, tucked them in his belt, and stepped down the ramp, which stretched down and out from the ships starboard side, astern the cockpit. He thumbed his guns sights to set it for night shooting, then glanced around. A lean young man dressed in spacemans high boots, dark uniform trousers with red piping, and civilian shirt and vest, Han had cast aside his uniform tunic, stripped of its rank and insignia, years ago.

He ran a quick check of the Falcons underside, as-suring him.self that she had taken no damage there and that the landing gear had come to rest properly. He also made certain that the interrupter-templates had automatically slid into place along the servo-guides for the belly turret, so that the quad-mounted guns wouldnt accidentally blow away the landing gear or ramp if he had to fire them while the ship was grounded.

Satisfied, he wsnt back to the foot of the ramp. He gazed up at the empty sky and the stars beyond, thinking Let the Authority look for me; this whole part o! Duroons spotted with hot springs, thermal vents, heavy-metal magma seepages, and radiation anomalies. ltd take them a month to find me, and in an hour or three, Ill be gone like a cool breeze.

He sat at the end of the ramp, wishing for a mo-ment that hed brought along something to drink; there was a flask of ancient, vacuum-distilled jet juice un-der the cockpit console. But he didnt feel like going for it. Besides, he still had business to conduct.

Duroons nocturnal life forms began reappearing in the mossy clearing. Lacy white things swam through the air with ripples of their thin bodies, resembling flying doilies, while nearby fern-trees held creatures that looked like bundles of straw, making their slow way along the wide fronds. Han kept an eye on them but doubted theyd approach the alien mass of his starship.

As he watched, a smallish green sphere sailed out of the undergrowth in a high arc, landing with a boink. It appeared perfecfity smooth at first, but then extruded an eyelike bump that studied the Falcon with jerky motions. But when it noticed the pilot, it flinched. The eye-bump disappeared, and the sphere things

underside compressed. With another boink the thing bounced away into the jungle.

Han returned to his musing as he listened to Chew-bacca tramping around on the ships upper hull. The unfamiliar constellations here were how many light-years from the planet of Hafts birth? He couldnt even make a close guess.

Being a smuggler and a flyer-for-hire had its dan-gers, and those he accepted with a philosophical shrug. But a run into a prohibited sector with a cargo that would earn him a summary execution if caught, those were different table stakes altogether.

The Corporate Sector was one wisp off one branch at the end of one arm of the galaxy, but that wisp contained tens of thousands of star systems, and not one native, intelligent species was to be found any-where. No one was sure why. Han had heard that neutrino research showed abnormalities in the solar convective layers of every sun hereabout, something that might have spread like a virus among the stars in this isolated sector.

In any case, the Corporate Sector Authority had been chartered to exploit-some called it plunder- the uncountable riches here. The Authority was owner, employer, landlord, government, and military. Its wealth and influence eclipsed that of all but the richest Imperial Regions, and the Authority spent much of its time and energy insulating itself from out-side interference. Competition, it had none; but that didnt make the Corporate Sector Authority any less jealous or vindictive. Any outside ship found off es-tablished trade corridors was fair game for the Au-thoritys warships, which were manned by its feared Security Police.

But what do you do, Han asked himself, when your backs to the wall? How could he have said no to a nice, lucrative run when usurious Ploovo Two-For-One described the riches that were to be had.

I could always hit the beach, he thought. Find a nice planet somewhere, go native. Its a big galaxy.

But he shook his head. No use fooling himself. If he were grounded, he might as well be dead. What could one planet, any planet, offer someone who had knocked around among the stars? The need for the boundless provinces of space was now a part of him.

And so when, broke and in debt, he and Chew-bacca had been approached for a run deep into Au-thority steer-clear territory, theyd jumped at the job. In spite of all the perils and uncertainties, the run still let them raise ship again and experience the freedom of star-travel. Risk of death or capture had been, in their eyes, the lesser of two evils.

But that brought up another point. The Authority ship had somehow picked up the Millennium Falcon before her own sensors had detected the other. No doubt the Security Police had something new in the way of detection equipment, thereby making Hans and Chewbaccas lives more complicated by an order of ten. This situation would require immediate future attention.

Han kept a close watch on the jungle around him wishing he could have left the ships floodlights on. So, when a voice at his side announced, We are here, he twisted around with a yelp, his blaster ap-paring in his fist as if conjured there.

A creature, barely out of anns reach, was calmly standing next to the ramp. It was almost Hans height, a biped, with a downy, globular torso and short arms and legs boasting more joints than a humans. Its head was small, but equipped with large, unblinking eyes. Its mouth and throat were a loose, pouchy affair; its scent was the scent of the jungle.

That, Han grumbled, recovering his composure and putting his blaster away, is a good way to get yourself roasted.

The creature ignored the sarcasm. You have brought what we need?

Ive got cargo for you. Beyond that, I know zero, which is the way I want it. If you came alone, youve got your work cut out for you.

The creature turned and made an eerie, piping noise. Figures seemed to grow up out of the ground, dozens of them, motionless, regarding the pilot and his ship with silent gazes. They held short objects of some sort, which he assumed to be weapons.

Then he heard a growl from above. Stepping for-ward, Han looked up and saw Chewbacca standing out on one of the ships bow mandibles, covering the newcomers with his bowcaster. Han gave a signal. His hairy first mate put up the bowcaster and headed back inboard.

Times wasting, Han told the creature. It moved toward the Falcon, taking its companions with it. Han stopped them with upheld hands. Not the whole choir, friend. Just you, for starters. The first one bur-bled to its fellows and came on alone.

Inside the ship, Chewbacca had turned up the blackout lights to a minimal glow in strategic parts of the interior. The towering Wooldee was already draw-ing cover plates off the hidden compartments, con-cealed and shielded to be undetectable, under the deck near the ramp. Into this space, where he and Han usually hid whatever contraband they were car-rying, Chewbacca lowered himself to stand with his waist at deck level. Releasing clamps and strapping, the Wooldee began lifting out heavy oblong cases, the huge muscles beneath his fur bulging with effort.

Han pulled the end of a case around and broke its seals. Within the crate weapons lay stacked. They had been so treated that no part of them reflected any of the scant light. Han took one up, checked its charge, made sure the safety was on, then handed it to the creature.

The firearm was a carbine-short, lightweight, un-complicated. Like all the others in the shipment, this one was fitted with a simple optical scope, shoulder sling, bipod, and folding bayonet. Though the creature obviously wasn't used to handling an energy weapon, its ready acceptance, grip, and posture showed that it had seen them often enough. It shifted the carbine in its hands, peered down the barrel, and examined the trigger carefully.

Ten cases, a thousand rifles, Han told it, taking up another carbine. He flipped up its butt plate, point-ing out the adapters through which the weapons power pack could be recharged. These were obsolete weapons by current standards, but they had no inter-hal moving parts and were extremely durable, so much so that they could safely be shipped or stor ed without Gel-Coat or other preservative. Any one of these carbines, left leaning against a fern in the jungle, would be fully operable ten years from now. Those advantages would be important on this world, where the carbines new owners would be able to provide lit-fie maintenance.

The creature nodded, understanding how the re-charging worked. We have already stolen small gen-eratom, it told Hah, from the Authority compounds.

We came here because they promised us jobs and a good life, and we celebrated our good fortune, for our world is poor. But they worked us like slaves and would not let us leave. Many of us escaped to live in the wilds; this world is not unlike our own. Now, with these weapons, we will be able to fight back-

Stop! Han snarled with a slashing gesture of his hand, and a violence that made the creature recoil.

Reining in his temper, he went on, I dont want to hear it, get me? I dont know you, you dont know me. Its none of my business, so dont tell me/

The large eyes were fixed on him. He looked away. I got half my pay on account when I lifted off. The other half comes when I get out of here, so why dont you just take your stuff and scratch gravel? And dont forget no firing those things until Ive left. An Au-thority ship just might register the noise.

He recalled that advance, paid in glow-pearls, fire nodes, diamonds, nova-crystals, and other precious gems smuggled off this mining planet at terrible risk by whatever sympathizers the contract-slaves had found. Rather than buy their own freedom in a quick dash aboard the Falcon, these fugitives were about to throw themselves into a doomed rebellion against the power of the Corporate Sector Authority.

Morons.

He stepped out of the creatures way. It watched him for a moment, then went and piped at the open hatch. Others of its kind came scampering up, crowd-ing around the hatch. Their weapons could be seen now, primitive spear-throwers and blowguns. Some carried daggers of volcanic glass. They had clever hands, all three fingers of which were mutually op-posable. They filed inboard, surrounding the rifle cases and straining to lift them in teams of sixes and sevens. Chewbacca looked at them in amusement. The cases, being borne away down the ramp and into the jungle, reminded Han of some bizarre funeral procession.

Remembering something, he took the solemn leader aside. Does the Authority have a warship stationed

here? Big-big ship, with lots of guns?

The creature thought for a moment. One big ship, which carries cargo, carries passengers. It has big guns on it, and meets other ships up in the sky, to load and unload them, sometimes.

Just as Han had thought. He hadn't encountered a true combat vessel, but rather a heavily armed lighter. Bad, but not as bad as he'd thought. But the creature wasn't finished. We will need more, it said; more weapons, more help.

Consult your clergyman, Han suggested dryly, helping Chewie replace the deckplates. Or fix up a deal through your own channels, like this run. I'm out; you won't see me again. I'm just doing business.

The creature cocked its head at him as if trying to understand. Han thrust aside the thought of what life must be like in a forced-labor camp, a driven, joyless existence if ever there was one. That was a common pattern in the Corporate Sector, naive outworlders lured by false promises, signing on only to become prisoners once they reached the compounds. And what could these few fugitives hope to accomplish?

The luck of the draw, he reminded himself. Hits off the Cosmic Deck didn't always make things Right, but Right wouldn't fill an egg timer on Tatooine. You played the cards you got, and Han Solo liked to be on that end of things with the largest profit margin.

But Chewie was staring down at him. Hah sighed; the big lug was a good first mate, but a soft touch.

Well, the tip about the Authority ship was worth something—a hint, maybe, a useful lesson. Han snatched the carbine from the leader irritably.

Just remember this, you're prey. Got me? You've got to think like prey, and use your brains.

The creature understood and moved closer, standing on tiptoe to see what Han was doing with the carbine.

It's got three settings, see? Safety, single shot, and constant fire. Now, the Security Police here use those riot guns, right? Sawed-off, two-handers? They're real fond of using constant fire, because they can afford to waste power, just hosing it around. You can't. What you do is, lock all your carbines on single shot. And if you get into a firefight at night or in the deep jungle where visibility's poor, shoot at the constant-fire sources. You'll know it's none of your people, so it must be Security Police. You've got to start using your brain.

The creature looked from the man to the carbine and back again. Yes, it assured him, retrieving the weapon, we will remember. Thank you.

Han sniffed, knowing how much they still had to learn. And they'd have to learn it on their own, or the Authority would grind them under its vast heel. And on how many worlds, he asked himself, was the Authority doing just that?

His thoughts were interrupted by distant sounds of blaster fire off in the jungle. The creature had moved to the hatch, with its carbine leveled at them. I am sorry, it told them, but we had to test some of the weapons here, now, to make certain they work.

It lowered the carbine and fled down the ramp, heading for the jungle. So much for world-saving. I take it all back, Han said to Chewie as they leaned on the open hatch. They might do all right at that.

Their long-range sensors had been knocked out by the destruction of the Falcon's dish antenna on the approach run. The ship would have to make a blind lift-off, taking her chances on running into trouble. Han and Chewbacca stood atop the Falcon for nearly an hour, straining to patch the damaged antenna mount. Han didn't begrudge the time; it had been a worthwhile effort and, if nothing else, had given the fugitives time to leave the rendezvous area. Because, sure as stink in a spacesuit, the Falcon's lift-off would be plotted and its point of origin thoroughly searched.

They could wait no longer. The first lightning of the sky would bring every flitter, skimmer, and armed gig the local Authority officials could lay hands on, in a tight visual search grid. Chewbacca, sensing Han's mood, made a snarling comment in his own language.

Hah lowered his macrobinoculars. Correct. Let's raise ship.

They adjourned below, buckled in, and ran through a preflight-warming up engines, guns, shields. Han declared, I'm betting that lighter will be holding low, where his sensors will do him the most good. If we come up any distance away from him, we can outrun him and dive for hyperspace.

Chewbacca yelped. Hail poked him in the ribs. Whats eating you? We just have to play this hand out. He realized he was talking to hear himself. He shut up. The Millennium Falcon lifted, hovering for just a moment as her landing gear retracted. Then Hah tenderly guided her up through the opening in the jungles leafy ceiling.

Sorry, he apologized to his ship, knowing what abuse she was about to take. He fired her up, stood her on her tail, and opened main thrusters wide. The starship screeched away into the sky, leaving the river steaming and the jungle smoldering. Duroon fell away quickly, and Han began to think they had the problem licked.

Then the tractor beam hit.

The freighter shook as the powerful, pulling beam fixed on her. High above, the Authority captain had played it smart, knowing he was looking for a faster, more maneuverable foe. Having outwitted the smuggler, he now brought his ship plummeting down the planets gravity well, picking up enough speed to compensate for any dodge the Falcon might try in her steep climb. The tractor pulled the two ships inexorably into alignment.

Shields-forward, all. Angle era, and get set to fire! Han and Chewbacca were throwing switches, fighting their controls, struggling desperately to free their ship. In moments it became clear their actions were futile.

Ready to shift all deflectors astern, Hah ordered, bringing his helm over. Itll have to be a staring match, Chewie.

The Wooldees defiant roars shook the cockpit as his partner swung the freighter onto a new course, straight at the enemy vessel. All the Falcons defensive power was channeled to redouble her forward shields. The Authority ship was coming at them at a frightening rate; the distance between ships evaporated in seconds. The Authority lighter, making hits at extreme range, jounced the two around their cockpit but did no major damage.

Hold fire, hold fire, Han chanted under his breath. Well train all batteries aft and kick him going away. The controls vibrated and fought in their hands as the Falcons engines gave every erg of effort. Deflector shields struggled under a salvo of long-range blaster-cannon fire, lances of yellow-green annihilation. The Falcon ascended on a column of blue energy as if she lusted for a fiery double death in collision with her antagonist. Rather than fight the tractor beam, she threw herself toward its source. The Authority ship came into visual range and, a moment later, filled the Falcons canopy.

At the last instant, the warships captains nerve gave. The tractor faded as the lighter began a desperate evasion maneuver. With reflexes that were more like precognition, Han threw everything he had into an equally frantic bank. The two ships shields couldnt have left more than a meter or two between them in that blindingly fast near miss.

Chewbacca was already shifting all shields aft. The Falcons main batteries, trained astern, hammered at the Authority vessel at close range. Han scored two hits on the lighter, perhaps no more than superficial damage, but a moral victory after a long, bad night.

The Authority ship rocked. Chewbacca howled, and

Han exulted, Last licks!

The lighter plunged downward, unable to halt her steep dive quickly. The freighter bolted out of Duroons atmospheric envelope, out into the void where she belonged. Far below her, the Authority vessel was just beginning to pull out of her dive, all chance of pursuit lost.

Hah fed jump data into the navicomputer as Chewbacca ran damage checks. Nothing irreparable, the Wookiee decided, but everything would have to have a thorough going-over. But Hah Solo and Chewbacca the Weeklee had their money, their freedom, and, for a wonder, their lives. And that, Han thought, should be enough for anyone, shouldnt it?

The starships raving engines carved a line of blue fire across infinity. Han engaged the hyperdrive. Stars seemed to fall away in all directions as the ship out-raced sluggard Light. The Millennium Falcons main drive boomed, and she disappeared as if shed never been there.

THEY knew theyd be watched, of course, from the moment they docked their battered freighter.

Etti IV was a planet open to general trade, a world where dry winds swept amber, moss-covered plains

and shallow, saline seas beneath vermilion skies. It had no remarkable resources in and of itself, but was hospitable to humans and humanoids and occupied a strategic spot on star-routes.

On Etti IV, great wealth had been gathered by lords of the Corporate Sector, and with this wealth had come its universal corollary, a thriving criminal element. Now, Han and Chewbacca made their way down a street of fusion-formed soil, between low buildings of press-bonded minerals and tall ones of permacrete and shaped formex. They wove through the spaceport toward the Authority Currency Exchange, with the Wooldee guiding a rented repulser-lift hand-truck. On the handtruck were cases resembling strong-boxes, and it was for that reason that the two assumed they'd be watched. The boxes were just the sort of thing to pique the curiosities of assorted criminal types.

But the duo also knew that any watchers would weigh risk against revenue. In the risk column would be Han's gunnery rig and his loose, confident gait, plus Chewbacca's looming presence and ready bowcaster, not to mention the strength and ferocity to twist any attacker's body into new and different shapes.

So they went their way in confidence, knowing that, as targets, they would appeal to neither the good business sense nor the survival instincts of any would-be stickup artist.

The Authority Currency Exchange had no idea it was abetting a transaction involving gunrunning and insurrection. Han and Chewbacca had already managed to unload the gems with which they'd been paid, exchanging them for precious metals and rare crystal-line vertexes. In a Corporate Sector encompassing tens of thousands of star systems, the kind of record-keeping that could keep track of every debt and payment was beyond even the most sophisticated data system. So, without a hitch, Han Solo, tramp freighter captain, smuggler, and freelance law-bender, had converted most of his payment into a nice neat Authority Cash Voucher. If he'd had a hat, he'd have tipped it to the chirping disbursements auto-clerk that spat the voucher at him. He tucked the little plastic chit into a vest pocket.

When they'd left the Exchange, the Wooldee let out one of his long, hooting barks. Han answered, Yeah, yeah, we'll pay Ploovo Two-For-One, but first we've got one stop to make.

His sidekick growled loudly, startling bystanders with his displeasure and inviting a dangerous sort of attention. A detachment of Security Police appeared out of the swirl of humans, droids, and nonhumans moving along the street.

Hey, lighten up, pal! Han murmured out of the side of his mouth. The brown-uniformed Security Police, their suspicious eyes darting beneath battle helmets, sauntered along four abreast, their weapons held ready, as pedestrians moved quickly out of their way. Han saw two of the black batfie helmets bob, and knew they'd heard the Wookiees' outburst. But the disturbance apparently didn't merit their attention, and the detachment went its way.

Han stared after them, shaking his head. There were all kinds of cops in the galaxy, some of them good, some not. But the Authority's private Security Police—Espo, in slangtalk—were among the worst. Their enforcements had nothing to do with law or justice, but only with the edicts of the Corporate Sector Authority. Han had never been able to figure out what turned a man into an unquestioning Espo bully-boy; he merely tried to insure that he didn't cross trails with any of them.

Remembering Chewbacca, he resumed their conversation. Like I say, we'll pay Ploovo. This stop-off won't take a minute. We'll meet him right after, like we planned, square things, and go our way free and clear.

The placated Wooldee carped noncommittally but fell in beside his partner again.

Because Etti IV's monied classes required conspicuous means of demonstrating their wealth, the spaceport harbored several exotic pet stores, featuring rare or unique stock from the immeasurable expanses of the Empire. Sabodor's was, by general consensus, the best of them. It was there that Han went.

The store's muting system, expensive as it was, couldn't mask all the scents and sounds of the curious life forms somewhat loosely collected there under the dubious classification Pets. Among the species on display were such premium specimens as the spidery night-gliders of Altarn, the iridescent-feathered song serpents from the deserts of Proxima Dibal's single planet, and the tiny, tubby, clownish marsupials from Kimanan that were commonly called furballs. Cages and cases, tanks and environmental bubbles,

teemed with glowing eyes, restless tentacles, clicking chelae, and wobbling pseudopodia.

The proprietor instantly appeared, Sabodor himself, a denizen of Rakrir. His short, segmented, tubular body scuttled along on five pairs of versatile limbs, his two long eyestalks moving and rotating constantly. Seeing the pair, Sabodor rose up on his last two sets of limbs, his uplifted eyestalks reaching nearly to the level of Hans chest, inspecting him from all angles.

Ever so sorry, Sabodor's voice twittered from the cantilevered vocal organ located at the center of his midsection. I don't deal in Wookiees. They're a sentient species; can't use them as pets. Illegal. I've got no use for a Wooldee.

Chewbacca cut loose with a furious roar, showing his fearsome teeth, stamping a hairy foot the size of a platter. Display racks shook and cases vibrated. Emitting a squeal, the terrified Sabodor scooted past Hah, his foremost limbs clapped over his hearing orifices. The pilot tried to calm his big friend, while dozens of pets began chorusing their answering chitters, hums, screams, and tweets, bouncing around their respective confinements in fear and agitation.

Chewy, easy! He didn't mean it, Han soothed, blocking the Wooldee from a violent laying of hands upon the quivering shopkeeper.

Sabor's trembling eyestalks appeared, one to either side of Hans knees. Tell the Wookiee no offense. An honest mistake, was it not? No insult intended.

Chewbacca quieted somewhat. Han, remembering all the Security Police in port, was grateful. We came in to buy something, he told Sabodor as the proprietor rippled away from him in reverse gear. Hear me? Buy.

Buy? Buy! Oh, come, sir, and see-see-see! Any pet worth having is to be had at Sabodor's, best in the Sector. We have---

Hah had waved him to silence. He laid a friendly hand on the spot where the overwrought little shopkeepers shoulder would have been, if he had one. Sabodor, I'm going to make this transaction easy.

What I want is a Dinko. You have one?

Dinko? Sabodor's tiny mouth and olfactory cluster somehow cooperated with his recoiling eyestalks to convey disgust. What for? A Dinko? Revolting, ugh?

Hans mouth tugged in a wry smile. He produced a handful of cash, riffling it invitingly. Got one for me? Can do! Wait right here! Sabodor, undulating excitedly, flowed away into a back room. Han and Chewbacca barely had time to gaze around before the proprietor was back. In his upper two pairs of appendages he held a clear case. Inside was the Dinko.

Few creatures enjoyed the dubious notoriety accorded to Dinkoes, whose temperament came quite close to pure psychopathy. One of the mysteries of the zoological world was how the little terrors tolerated one another long enough to reproduce. Small enough to fit in a man's palm if that man were indiscreet enough to pick it up—the Dinko glowered out at them. Its powerful rear legs moved constantly, and the twin pairs of grasping extremities on its chest pinched the air, longing for something upon which to fasten. Its long tongue flickered in and out between wicked, glittering fangs.

Is it de-scented? Han asked.

Oh, no! And it's been in rut ever since it was trans-shipped. But it's been de-venomed. Chewbacca grinned, his black nose wrinkling.

Han asked, How much?

Sabor named an exorbitant sum. Han counted through his sheaf of cash. I'll give you exactly one half that, agreed?

The eyestalks, flopping about in distress, seemed close to tears. The Wookiee, snorting, leaned down at Sabodor, who shrank again behind the dubious safety of Hans knees. Admit it, Sabodor, Han invited cheerfully, it's a good deal.

You win, waded the proprietor. He proffered the case. The Dinko threw itself from side to side of its container, foaming at the chops.

One more thing, Han added blithely. I want you to give it a light sedation dosage so I can handle it for a

moment. Then you can give it to me in a different box, something opaque.

That was really two things, but Sabodor agreed dejectedly, eager to have the Wookiee, the human, and the Dinko all out of his establishment as soon as possible.

Ploovo Two-For-One, loan shark and former robber, smash-and-grab man, and bunko-steerer out of the Cron Drift, looked forward with pleasure to collecting the outstanding debt from Han Solo.

He was elated, not only because the original loan would reap a splendid profit for himself and his backers, but also because he thoroughly hated Solo, and an interesting form of revenge had materialized.

The message from Solo, promising repayment, had stipulated a meeting here on Etti IV, in the spaceports most elegant bistro. That had been all right with Ploovo Two-For-One; his creed was that toil and enjoyment should be combined whenever feasible. The Free-Flight Dance Dome was more than satisfactory; it was opulent. Ploovo himself was far from charming, a bad-tempered hulk of a man whose face was subject to a nervous tic; but his income gave him a certain conspicuous social viability.

He sprawled onto a conform-lounger at a corner table, joined by the three retainers he'd brought along.

Two of these were humans, hard-bitten men with a number of weapons concealed on and about their persons. The third was a long-snouted, scaly-skinned bi-ped, native of Davnar II, who possessed a true flair for execution.

Ploovo, flashing more than enough currency to create an inspired sense of hospitality in the waitress, primped at his black, oily topknot. While he waited, he gloated over his anticipated revenge on Han Solo. Not that the pilot wouldn't repay. The loan shark was certain of getting his money. But Solo had long been an irritant, always ready with some dazzling evasion of payment, jeering Ploovo and bewildering him at the same time. On a number of occasions Ploovo had lost face with his backers because of run-ins with Solo, and his backers weren't the sort to be mused by that. The code of ethics necessary to the conduct of illegal enterprises kept Ploovo from turning in the captain-owner of the Millennium Falcon to the law; nevertheless, a convenient local circumstance would serve the loan shark's purpose just as well.

Entering with Chewbacca beside him, a metal case in hand, Han Solo appraised The Free-Flight Dance Dome with a great deal of approval.

As on almost any civilized planet, many species mixed and mingled here in a taxonomic hodgepodge, their appearance familiar or alien by turns. Having seen about as much of the galaxy as a man might reasonably expect to, Han still found he couldn't identify half the nonhuman types he saw here. That wasn't unusual. The stars were so many that no one could catalog all the sentient races they'd spawned.

Han had lost count of the times he'd entered a room like this one, filled with a kaleidoscope of strange shapes, sounds, and odors. Without straining, he could spot a dozen types of respirators and life-support apparatus being used by entities whose biology wasn't compatible with standard human atmosphere.

Han particularly appreciated those human and near-human females dressed in shimmerfiks, chroma-sheaths, and illuminescences. One swept up to him fresh from the bank of coin-games that offered such diversions as Mind-Jam, Senso-Switch, Reflex Races, and Starfight. She was a tall, lithe girl with a wine-dark cast to her skin and hair like plaited silver, wearing a gown that seemed to have been knit from white mist. Welcome down, spaceman, she laughed, throwing an arm around him. How about a turn through the dance dome?

Han shifted his burden to his other arm as Chewbacca looked on disapprovingly; several of their less auspicious adventures had begun just this way. Sure? Han responded enthusiastically. Let's dance, let's snuggle up, let's get grafted together? He gently pushed her away. A little later.

She showed him a truly stunning smile---to let him know it was nothing personal---and moved on to greet another customer before he'd moved out of earshot.

The Free-Flight Dance Dome was a first-class trough. It was equipped with a top-of-the-line gravity field, its console visible among the bottles, spigots and taps, and other paraphernalia encircled by the bar. The field permitted the management to alter gravity anywhere on the premises, and so the dance floor and the dome over it had become a low-g acrobatic play-ground in which singles, couples, and groups looped, floated, and spun with effortless grace. Han also spotted individual booths and tables where species from low-gravity worlds were taking their ease in comfort, the specific gravity of their area

having been low-ered for them.

Han and Chewbacca moved further into the twilight of the place, hearing the clink of drinking vessels of many kinds and the interweaving of any number of languages over the blast from the sound system. They breathed in the aromas of diverse inhalants and aero-sols; a profusion of smoke and vapors of various hues, defying the ventilation unit, had drifted by thermo-clines into multicolored strata.

He had no problem spotting Ploovo Two-For-One; the big glom had found a large table in the corner, the better to watch for his debtor. Han and Chewbacca sauntered over. Ploovo applied a labored, unconvincing smile to his well-upholstered face. Solo, old col-league. Come, sit.

Spare us the guano, Two-For-One. Han sat down next to Pieeve. Chewbacca slung his bowcaster over his shoulder and took a place across the table so that he and Hah could watch each others backs. Hah set down the box he carried. Ploovos greedy eyes caressed it. Feel free to drool, Hah bade him.

Now, Solo, Ploovo chided, volubly ready to ignore any insult in the heady presence of money, thats no way to talk to your old benefactor. Ploovo had al-ready been informed by contacts here that these two freighter bums had exchanged a large quantity of ne-gotiables for cash. His hand went for the box. Halls got there first.

The pilot challenged the loan shark with a raised eyebrow. Your payments in there. With interest. Were quits after this, Pieeve.

Strangely unperturbed, Ploovo nodded, his topknot jiggling along with his jowls. Han was about to ques-tion this when Chewbaccas warning snarl interrupted. A detail of Security Police had entered The Free-Flight. Some stationed themselves at the doors while the others made their way around the room. Han snapped the retaining strap off his holstered blaster. The sound made Ploovo turn. Now, tun, Solo, I swear I had nothing to do with this. We are, as you so recently pointed out, quits. Even I wouldnt pre-sume to turn informer and risk my livelihood. He put a fat, covetous hand on the box. I believe those gen-tlemen in institutional brown are seeking a man who answers your description. While I no longer have any interest in your well-being, I suggest that you and your fuzzy comrade absent yourselves from here at once.

Hah didnt waste time wondering how the Authority had gotten on his tail after hed obtained new registra-tion for the Falcon and identification certificates for himself and Chewbacca. He leaned close to Pieeve, right hand still close to his blaster.

Why dont we just sit here awhile, colleague? And as long as were at it, he addressed Ploovos flunkies, you all have my permission to put your hands right up on the table here, where Chewie and I can see them. Now/

Ploovos upper lip beaded with sweat. If anyone made a play now, he would certainly become corpse number one. He stuttered an order; his men complied with Hans proposal.

Compose yourself, Solo, Ploovo implored, though Han was quite serene; it was Ploovos face that had become pasty white. Dont let that, er, renowned temper get the better of you. You and the Weekice can be so irrational at times. Take the occasion when Big Bunji was careless enough to forget to pay you, and you two strafed his pressure dome. He and his staff barely had time to get into their survival suits. Things like that give a man a bad reputation, Solel Ploovo was shaking now, having very nearly forgot-ten his money.

The Security Police had been circulating. They stopped by the table, two rankers and a sergeant. Their timing couldnt have pleased Ploovo less. Everyone at this table, produce identification. Chewbacca had assumed his most innocent expres-sion, his big, soft blue eyes upturned to the soldiers. He and Han offered their falsified IDs. The pilots hand hovered near his weapons grip, even though a shootout now, in this position and at these odds, with the door firmly held by reinforcements, held little promise of survival.

The Espo sergeant ignored the credentials of Ploovo and his gang. Skimming Halls, he asked, These are correct? Youre the master-owner of that freighter that made planetfall today?

Hah saw no margin for deception there. And if the Authority had already connected his new persona with

events surrounding the illegal landing on Duroon, he was as good as dead. Still, he managed to look faintly amused and somewhat bewildered by all this interrogation.

The Sunfighter Franchise? Why, yes, Officer. Is anything wrong? Guileless as a newborn, he gazed up at them.

We got your description from the docking bay supervisor, the Security Police sergeant answered. Your ships been impounded. He threw the IDs back on the table. Failure to conform to Authority safety standards.

Hans mental processes switched tracks. Shes got all her approvals, he objected, thinking he ought to know, having forged them himself.

The Espo waved that away. Thosere outdated. Your ship fails to meet new standards. The Authority redefined ships performance profiles, and from what I heard, buddy, your freighter violates hers about ten different ways and doesnt appear on the Waivers List. Just on external inspection, they found her lift/mass ratio and armaments rating way out of line for non-military craft. It looks like a lot of radiation shielding got removed when the thruster ducting was chopped and rechanneled. Also, shes got all that irregular dock-ing tackle, augmented defensive shields, heavy-duty acceleration compensators, and a mess of long-range detection gear. Thats some firecracker youve got there.

Han spread his hands modestly; this was one tune when he didnt feel like boasting about his pride and joy.

The Espo sergeant went on. See, when you run a hot rig like that, small payload, overmuscled, the Corporate Sector Authority starts thinking you might take a notion to do something illegal with it. Shell have to be refitted to original specs; youll have to appear and make arrangements.

Hah laughed airily. Im positive theres some error. He knew hed been lucky they hadnt forced the locks for an inboard search. If theyd seen the anti-sensor equipment, jamming and countermeasures apparatus, and broad-band monitoring outfit, this would have been an arrest party. And what if they had found the contraband compartments?

Ill drop by the portmasters office as soon as my business is done, Hah promised. He now realized that this was why Ploovo Two-For-One had been so content. The loan shark hadnt even had to violate criminal protocol or risk his own rank hide going against Hah and Chewbacca; Ploovo had known the Millennium Falcon, under any name, would run afoul of these Authority regulations.

No good, the Espo sergeant was saying. My orders are to escort you down as soon as youre found. The portmaster wants this matter cleared up right away. The Espos were suddenly more alert.

Hans smile became pained and sympathetic. Platitudes of understanding rolled from him. Meanwhile, he considered his dilemma dispassionately. The Authority would want a full accounting of ships papers, log, masters credentials. When those showed discrepancies, there'd be a full ID scan pore patterns, retinal and cortical indexes-the whole routine. Eventually, they'd find out who Han and his first mate were, and then the trouble would really start.

It was axiomatic to Han Solos philosophy that you never go one step closer to jail than necessary. But seated here, he could offer no decent resistance. He shot a glance at Chewbacca, who was amusing himself by showing his teeth to the wary Security Police in a frightening smile. The Wookiee caught Hans look, though, and reclined his head slightly.

Whereupon the pilot rose. Shah we get this unpleasantness taken care of, then, Sergeant, so we can all go our way? Chewie shied away from the table, his attention on Hah, one paw on the sling of his bow-caster. Han leaned down for a last word with Ploovo.

Thanks for the good time, old colleague. Well get back to you as soon as we can, I promise. And before I forget, heres your payment. He flipped down the bexs front end and stepped back.

Ploovo dug into the box, expecting to fill his itchy palm with wonderful, sensuous money. Instead, sharp little fangs clamped down on the fleshy part of his thumb. Ploovo screamed as the enraged Dinko swarmed out and sank its needlelike claws into his pudding of a stomach. Fastened to the Dinkos dorsal vane was the Authority Cash Voucher, Hans thoughtful way of repaying debts both financial and personal with interest.

The Espos attention switched to the table as the criminal boss howled. One of Ploovos henchmen tried

to tear the Dinko off his employer while the others gaped. The Dinko wasn't having any; it slashed the fumbling hands with the serrated spurs on its rear legs, then sprayed everyone at the table with vile squirts from its scent sac. Few things in nature are more repugnant than a Dinko's defensive secretion. Men and humanoid fell back, coughing and gagging, forgetting their boss.

The Security Police were trying to understand what was happening as beings stumbled from the table, lurching past them, leaving Ploovo to the mercies of the rabid little beast. The Dinko was now trying energetically if overoptimistically to devour him, starting with his nose, which rather reminded it of one of its many natural enemies.

Yahhld Ploovo complained, wrenching at the determined Dinko. Get it off of bel

Chewie was all Han had time to yell. He punched the nearest Espo, not wanting to shoot at close quarters. The Espo, caught off guard, fell back-ward, thrashing. Chewie did better, picking up the other two by their harnesses and bashing them together helmet to helmet, eliciting a gonging sound from the ultrahard surfaces. Then the Weekice ducked into the crowd with notable agility, following his friend. The Espos at the doors were unlimbering wide-bore, shoulder-fired blasters, but the confused crowd was milling around and no one had a clear idea yet of just what was going on. The antigrav dancers began alighting as beings raised their attention from assorted in-toxicants, stimulants, depressants, psychotropics, and placebos. The room buzzed with a sort of befuddled, franslingual Huh?

Ploovo Two-For-One, having finally dissuaded the Dinko from his abused nose by main force, flung it across the room. The Dinko landed upon the dinner of a wealthy dowager, destroying the appetite of every-one at that table.

Ploovo, still caressing his wounded snout, turned just in time to see Han Solo vault the bar. There he is? the underworld boss exclaimed. The two bartenders rushed to stop Han, swinging the stun-staves they kept behind their bar for the preservation of order. He met the first with crossed wrists intersecting the bartenders, stopping the descending stun-stave, brought his knee up, and elbowed the first mixologist into the second. Chewbacca, following his partner over the bar with a joyous bellow that made the lighting fixtures tinkle, fell on top of the bartenders.

A blaster bolt, fired by one of the Espos at the doors, shattered a crystalline globe of four-hundred-year-old Novanian grog. The crowd bleated, most of them diving for the floor. Two more shots blew fragments out of the bar and half slagged the cash repository.

Han had struggled past the vigorous tangle of Chewie and the bartenders. He grabbed for his blaster and threw down on the Espos, peppering their general location with short bursts. One dropped, his shoulder smoking, and the others scattered for cover. Off to one side, Han could hear Ploovo and his men clubbing their way through yelling, charging customers. He headed for the bar.

Han turned to his objective, the gravity controls. With no leisure to analyze them, he frantically began moving indicators toward maximum. Luckily for everyone not within the insulated area of the bar, he noticed when he happened on the general field override, and there were no longer any free-flight dancers in the air. Thus, no one was crushed, or dashed to smithereens.

As it was, Han ran the places gee-lead up to three-point-five Standard. Entities of all descriptions sank to the carpets, borne down by the staggering weight of their own bodies, proving there were no heavy-gee natives here today. The Espos flopped with the rest. Ploovo Two-For-One, Han noted in passing, strongly resembled a beached bloatfish.

There was silence except for the grunts of determined breathing and the smothered groans from those who suffered some minor mishap in hitting the deck. No one seemed badly hurt, though. Han put his smoking blaster away, studying the gravity-fields controls, telling himself, Yo, now; what we need is a tight corridor out of here. But he was biting his lip, and his fingers poised indecisively over the adjustments.

With an impatient hoot, Chewbacca, who had put away both bartenders, picked Han up by the shoulders and set him aside. The Weekice stood over the console, his long fingers moving with nimble precision, peering frequently from his work to the door. In moments the bodies of the two or three patrons lying along his corridor of lighter gravity stirred weakly. Everyone else, the Espos and Ploovos underworld

contingent included, remained pasted to the floor.

Chewbacca eased himself carefully back over the bar and into the normal-gee passageway. He clamored smugly to Hah.

Well, I was the one who thought of it, wasn't I, the pilot grouched, trailing after his friend. Outside the Free-Flight, he discreetly closed the doors behind him and straightened his clothes, while Chewie gave himself a fastidious brushing.

Hey, Chewie, you were slow with your left just now, weren't you? Han queried. Is your speed going, old-timer? Chewbacca belched savagely; age was a standing joke between them.

Hah stopped a group of laughing revelers who'd been about to enter the Free-Flight. This establishment is officially closed, he proclaimed with weighty importance. It's quarantined. Franks Fever.

The merrymakers, intimidated by the sinister sound of that imaginary malady, didn't even think to question.

They left at once. The two weary partners grabbed the first robe-hack they saw, and sped off toward their ship.

Things are getting tough for the independent businessman, Hah Solo lamented.

SEVERAL minutes later, the robo-hack deposited Han and Chewbacca around the corner from their docking bay, Number 45. They'd decided it would be wise to scout the landscape to determine whether the forces of law, order, and corporate dividends had gotten there first. Peering cautiously around the corner, they saw a lone portmaster's deputy dutifully locking an impoundment-fastener on their bays blast door. Han pulled his first mate back into concealment for a conference. No time to wait until the coast is clear, Chewie; they'll be sorting things out back at the Free-Flight any time now. Besides, that geck is about to lock up the bay, and Espo patrols would get kind of curious if they saw us burning our way through the blast doors.

He peeked out again. The deputy had nearly finished making connections between alarms and the blast-door solenoids. No doubt the bays other door was fastened as well. Hah looked around and noticed an Authority liquor and drugs outlet to his rear. He took his partner's elbow. Here's the plan...

A minute later, the portmaster's deputy had wrestled the massive lock halves into place and finished securing the impoundment-fastener. The blast doors slid shut with a shrinking of diamond-shaped opening that disappeared with a clang. The deputy pulled a molecularly coded key from its slot in the fastener, and the device was activated. Now if it were disturbed or damaged, it would instantly inform Espo monitors.

The deputy tucked the key into his belt pouch and prepared to report his errand completed. Just then a Wooldee, a big, leering brute, came wandering past in a drunken stagger, with a sloshing ten-liter crock of some vile-smelling brew cradled in his thick, hairy arm. Just as the Wooldee drew even with the deputy, a man coming from the other direction failed to avoid the shambling creature's dipsomaniacal lurches. There was a rapid, complicated three-way collision, resulting in the Wookiees stumbling into, and spilling his liquor all over, the luckless deputy.

The instant pandemonium included accusation and counteraccusation, all in raised voices. The Wooldee gobbled horribly at both men, shaking knotted fists and gesturing to the spilled crock. The portmaster's deputy was brushing uselessly at his soaked tunic. The other participant in the accident did his best to be of help. Oh, say, that's really a shame, Hah asked with a sad, solicitous tone. Hey, that stuff's really in there, huh, he said as he tried to wring some of the brew out of the tunic fabric. The deputy and the Wooldee were swapping imprecations and contradictory claims about whose fault the accident had been. The occasional passerby kept right on moving, not wishing to become involved.

Fella, you better get that tunic washed right away, Han advised, or that smell'll never come out.

The deputy, with a last threat of legal action against the Wookiee, stalked off. His pace quickened as he realized with apprehension that a supervisor might happen by at any time and catch sight of or even worse, a whiff of him. He hurried on, leaving the other two to argue liabilities and culpabilities.

The argument stopped as soon as the deputy was gone. Han held up the key he'd lifted from the deputy's belt pouch during the confusion. He handed it to Chewbacca. Go warm up the ship, but don't call for clearance. The portmaster's most likely got us posted for grounding. If there's a patrol ship, it'd be on our

necks in no time. He estimated that eight minutes had passed since theyd fled the Free-Flight; their luck couldnt hold much longer.

Chewbacca ran a hasty preflight while Han dashed off along the row of docking bays. He passed three before he came to the one he wanted. In it was a stock freighter, not unlike what the Millennium Falcon had once been, but this one was clean, freshly painted, and shipshape. Her name and ID symbols were proudly displayed on her bow, and labor droids were busily loading general cargo under the supervision of her crew, who looked nauseatingly honest. Han leaned through the open blast doors, waving a friendly hand. Hi there. You guys still raising ship tomorrow?

One of them waved back, but looked confused. Not tomorrow, bud; tonight, twenty-one hundred planetary time.

Hah reigned surprise. Oh? Well, clear skies. The crewman returned the traditional spacers farewell as Han strolled away casually. As soon as he was out of their sight, he took off at a run.

When he got back to Bay 45, he found Chewbacca finishing locking the impoundment-fastener on the in-ner sides of the blast doors, reconnecting them. Hah nodded approvingly. Bright lad. Are we rewed up?

The Wookiee yipped an affirmative and slid the blast doors shut. Locking them again, this time from the inside, he threw the molecularly coded key away.

Han had already reached his seat in the cockpit. Taking his headset, he called port control. Using the name and ID code of the freighter down in Docking Bay 41, he requested that liftoff time be moved up from twenty-one hundred planetary time to immedi-ately, not an unusual request for a tramp freighter, whose schedule might change abruptly. Since there wasnt much traffic and clearance for that ship had al-ready been granted, immediate liftoff was approved at once.

Chewbacca was still buckling in when Hah raised ship. Her thrusters flared, and the Falcon made, for her, a moderate and restrained departure from Etti IV. When the Espos showed up at Docking Bay 45 and cut their way in, Han reflected, theyd have one interesting time trying to figure out how somebody had sneaked a starship out from under the portmasters nose.

The starship parted company with Etti IVs gravi-tational field. Chewbacca, elated over what had been a fairly nifty escape, was in high spirits. The Wooldees leathery muzzle was peeled back in a nice-hideous smirk, and he was singing-or what passed among his people as singing-at the top of his capacious lungs. The volume of it, in the confides of the cockpit, was incredible.

Cmon, Chewie, Hah implored, rapping a gauge with his knuckle, youre making all the instruments mp. With a behemothish sort of yodel, the Wooldee ceased. Besides, Han continued, were not out of the heavy weather yet.

Chewbacca lost his placid look and lowed an in-terrogative. Han shook his head. Naw, Ploovos got his money; no matter how torqued off he is, his back-ersll never unpocket for a contract on us now. No, what I meant was, the long-range dish we patched together wont last forever. We need another, a top-of-the-line model. Besides, the Espos and, I guess, most other folks who like to arrest people have some kind of new sensor that evades detection on old equip-ment. We need one of those, too, to get back over with the smart money. One more thing-we need one of those Waivers if weve going to operate around here; we have to wrangle ourselves onto that list somehow. Damreit, the Corporate Sector Authoritys wrung out thousands of solar systems; I can almost smell that money! We aint passing up on fat picldns just because somebody around here doesnt like our lift/mass ratio.

He finished plotting his hyperdrive jump and turned to his parmer with a sly grin. Now, since the Author-ity doesnt owe you and me any personal favors, whats that leave?

The long-pelted first mate growled once. Hah spread a hand on his chest and pretended to be shocked. Outside the law, did you say? Us? He chuckled. Right you are, pal. Well take so much money off the Authority well need a knuckle-boom to haul it all away.

The hyperdrive began to cut in. But first, its time to meet and greet old friends. After that, everybodyd best hang on to their cash with both hands! Hah fin-ished.

They had to do it in steps, of course. A hyperspace jump took them to an all-but-deserted, played-out mining world where the Authorin didnt even bother to maintain offices. A lead there, from an old man

who had once seen better days, put them in touch with the captain of a long-orbit ore barge. After some fina-gling, during which their bona fides were checked, with their lives forfeit if that check had turned up the wrong answers, they were given a rendezvous.

At that rendezvous they were met, in deep space, by a small ship's gig. When an onboard search by armed, wary men revealed that the Falcon carried no one but her pilot and copilot, the two were led to the second planet of a nearby star system. The gig parted company with them, and they came in for a landing, tracked by the upraised snouts of turbo-laser cannons. The site was a huddle of quickly assembled hanger domes and habitation bubbles. Parked here and there was a wide assortment of ships and other equipment, much of it gutted and decaying, cannibalized for spare parts.

When Hah stepped down the starship's ramp, his face lit with that intense smile that had been known to make men check up and see what their wives were doing. Hello, lessa. Its been too long, doll.

The woman waiting at the foot of the ramp looked back at him scornfully. She was tall, her hair a mass of heavy blond ringlets, and her shape did extremely pleasant things to the techs coveralls she wore. Her upturned nose held a collection of freckles acquired under a variety of suns; Jessa had been on almost as many planets as Han. Just now, her large brown eyes showed him nothing but derision.

Too long, Solo? No doubt you've been busy with religious retreats? Mercantile conferences? Mild deliveries for the Interstellar Children's Aid Fund? Well, its no wonder I haven't heard from you. After all, what's a Standard Year, more or less, hey?

A lifetime, kid, he answered smoothly. I missed you. Coming down to her, he reached for her hand.

Jessa eluded him, and men with drawn guns came into view. They wore coveralls, fusion-welders masks, tool belts, and greasy headbands, but they were plainly comfortable with their weapons.

Hah shook his head mournfully. Less, you've really got me wrong, you'll see. But he knew he had just received an explicit warning, and decided he'd better turn the conversation to the matter at hand. Where's Doe?

The scowl left Jessa's features, but she ignored his question. Come with me, Solo.

Leaving Chewbacca to watch the Falcon, Han accompanied her across the temporary base. The landing field was a flat expanse of fusion-formed soil (almost any sort of solid material would do for fusion forming, Han knew; minerals, vegetable matter, or any old enemies for whom you had no further use). Male, female, human, and nonhuman techs scrambled over vehicles and machinery of every category, aided by a wild assortment of droids and other automata, engaged in repair, salvage, and modification.

Han admired the operation as he walked. A tech who'd do illegal work could be found almost anywhere, but Dec, Lessa's father, had an operation that was famous among lawbreakers everywhere. If you wanted your ship repaired without questions as to why you'd been through a firefight, if you needed a vessel's ID profile and appearance changed for reasons best left unmentioned, or if you had a hot piece of major hardware to buy or sell—the person to contact, if you met his rigorous background check, was Doe. If something could be done with machinery, he and his outlaw-techs could do it.

Several of the modifications done on the Millennium Falcon had been performed through the outlaw-techs' good offices; he and Hah had dealt with each other on a number of occasions. Hah admired the shifty old man because he'd been sought by Authority and other official forces for years but never apprehended. Doe had kept himself well buffered, and piped into as many crooked bureaucrats and scuttlebutt sources as anyone Han knew. More than one strike unit had moved against the outlaw-techs only to capture a target area empty of everything but abandoned buildings and useless junk. Dec had joked that he was the only felon in the galaxy who'd have to set up an employee pension plan.

Threading among disassembled hulks and humming repair docks, Lessa led Han through the largest hangar on the base. At one end, slabs of Permex had been joined into a stark cube of an office. But when its door slid up at her command, Han could see that Dec's taste hadn't coarsened. The office featured carpets of Wrodlan weave, glittering in rich colors, each one representing generations work. There were shelves of rare books, lavish hangings, and paintings and sculpture, some by history's greatest artists and others by unknowns who'd simply struck Dec's fancy. There was a monolithic, hand-carved scentwood desk with only one item on it, a holo-cube of Jessa. In it she was wearing a

stylish evening gown, smiling, much more like a pretty girl at her first formal reception than a top-flight outfiaw-tech genius.

Wheres the old man? Han asked, seeing the room was empty. Jessa slid into the conform-lounger behind the desk. She clenched her hands on the loungers thick, luxurious arms until her fingers made deep in-dentations.

Hes not here, Solo. Dees gone.

How informative; Id never have guessed it just from seeing the rooms empty. Look, Jess, I have no time for games, no matter how much youd like to play. I want-

I know what you want! Her face was bitter; it took him by surprise. No one comes to us unless we know what they want from us. But my fathers not here. Hes disappeared, and nothing Ive tried has turned up a hint. Believe me, Solo, Ive tried it all.

Han eased down into a seat across the desk from her. Jessa explained, Doc went off on one of his buy-ing trips-you know, shopping for stuff that would fit the market, or for some customers special order. He made three stops and never arrived at the fourth. Just like that. He, three crewmen, and a star yacht just dropped out of sight.

Han thought for a moment about the old man with work-hardened hands, a quick, crusty grin, and a halo of frizzy white hair. Han had liked him but if Doc was gone, that was that. Few people who vanished under circumstances like that ever showed up again. Luck of the draw. Han had always traveled light, with emotional baggage the first thing he jettisoued, and grief was far too heavy to lug around among the stars.

So that only left thinking, Goodbye, Doc, and deal-ing with Jessa, the old mans only surviving kin. But when his brief distraction broke, he saw that shed studied the entire play of his thoughts on his face. You got through that eulogy pretty fast, didnt you, Solo? she asked softly. Nobody gets too far under that precious skin of yours, isnt that so?

That pricked him. If it was me whod checked out, would Doc have gone on a crying jag, ess? Would you? Im sorry, but life goes on, and if you lose sight of that, sweetheart, youre asking to be dealt out. Her mouth opened to reply, but she thought better of it and changed tack. Her voice became as sharp as a vibroblade. Very well. Lets do business. I know what youre looking for, the sensor suite, the dish, the Waiver. I can take care of all of it. We got our hands on a sensor suite, powerful, compact, a military pack-age built for long-range scoutships. It found its way to us from a supply depot; got misrouted by a happy co-incidence I arranged. I can handle the Waiver, too. That only leaves-she gazed at him coldly-the question of price.

Han wasnt crazy about the way shed said it. The moneys got to be right, Jess. Ive only got-

She cut him off again. Who said money? I know just how much you have, high roller, and where you got it, and how much you gave Ploovo. Dont you think we hear everything sooner or later? Would I assume an imbecile whos been gunrunning would be flush? She leaned back, interlacing her fingers.

He was confused. Hed planned to arrange long terms with Doc, but doubted if he could with Jessa. If she knew he couldnt meet a decent price, why was she talking to him? Are you going to explain, Jess, or am I supposed to do my famous mind-reading act?

Give your jaws a rest, Solo, and pay attention. Im offering you a deal, a handwash.

He was suspicious, knowing thered be no generos-ity from her. But what were his alternatives? He needed his ship repaired, and the rest of it, or he might as well go somewhere out on the galactic rim and bid on a contract to haul garbage. With exagger-ated sweetness, he answered, Im hanging on your every word. By what, I wont mention.

Its a pickup, Solo, an extraction. There are details, but thats basically it; you make contact with some people and take them where they want to go, within reason. They wont be expecting you to drop them anywhere risky. Even your stunted attention span ought to suffice for that. Wheres the pickup?

Orron III. Thats mostly an agricultural world, ex-cept that the Authority has a data center there. Thats

where your passengers are.

An Authority Data Center? Han exploded. And how do I get into a place like that? It'll look like the Espos Annual Picnic and Grand Reunion. Listen, toots, I want that stuff from you, but I want to live to a ripe old age, too; I plan to sit in a rocker at the Old Spacemens Home, and what you're suggesting will definitely exclude that option.

It's not so terrible, she replied levelly. Internal security's not especially bad, because only two types of vessels are cleared to land on Orron III--drone barges for the crops and Authority fleet ships.

Yeah, but in case you haven't noticed, the Falcons neither.

Not yet, Solo, but I'll change that. We have a barge shell, hijacked it in transit. That wasn't much of a trick; they're robot hulks, and they're pretty dumb. I'll fit the Millennium Falcon with external control couplings and set her in where the command/control module usually goes, and partition into the hold space. My people can mock up the hull structure so it'll con the Espos, port officials, or anybody else. You land, contact the parties in question, and off you go. Average ground time for a barge is about thirty hours, so you'll have plenty of leeway to get things done. Once you're in transit, you ditch the barge shell and you're home free.

He thought hard about that one. He didn't like any-one messing with his ship. Why pick me for this thrill-ing honor? And why the Falcon?

Because you need something from me, for one thing, so you'll do it. Because, for another, even though you're an amoral mercenary, you're the hottest pilot I know; you've flown everything from a jetpack to a capital ship. As for the Falcon, she's just the right size, and has computer capacity to spare, to run the barge. It's a fair deal.

One thing had him puzzled. Whos the pickup? It sounds like you're going to an awful lot of trouble for them.

No one you'd know. They're strictly amateurs, and they pay well. What they're doing's no concern of yours, but if they feel like telling you, that's their decision.

He gazed up at the ceiling, which was patterned with glow-pearls. Jessa was offering everything he needed to make the Authority ripe for the plucking. He could give up gunrunning, petty-cash trips to back-water worlds, all that low-ante stuff.

Well, coaxed Jessa, do I tell my techs to get busy, or do you and the Woollee plan to teach the galaxy the folly of crime by starving in poverty?

He brought his chair upright. You better let me break the news to Chewie first, or your wrench jockies will be nothing but a mound of spare parts for the or-gan banks.

Docs organization--now Jessa's was nothing if not thorough. They had the factory specs for the Millennium Falcon, plus complete design photos on every piece of augmentative gear in her. With Chewbacca's help and a small horde of outlaw-techs, Han had the Falcons engine shielding removed and her control systems exposed in a matter of hours.

Service droids trundled back and forth while energy cutters flared, and techs of many races crawled over, under, and into the freighter. It made Han jittery to see so many tools, hands, tentacles, servo-grips, and lift-locks near his beloved ship, but he gritted his teeth and simply did his best to be everywhere at once--and came close to succeeding. Chewbacca covered the things his partner missed, startling any erring tech or droid with a high-decibel snarl. No one doubted for a moment what the Wookiee would do to the being or mechanical who damaged the star-ship.

Han was interrupted by Jessa, who had come up to inspect his progress. With her was an odd-looking droid, built along human lines. The machine was rather stocky, shorter than the woman, covered with dents, scrapes, smudges, and spot-welds. Its chest region was unusually broad, and its arms, hanging nearly to its knees, gave it a somewhat simian aspect. Its finish was a flat brown primer job, peeling in places, and it had a stiff, snapping way of moving. The droid's red, unblinking photoreceptors trained on Han. Meet your passenger, Jessa invited. Han's features clouded. You never said anything about taking a droid. He looked at the aged mechanical. What's he run on, peat?

No. And I warned you there'd be details. Bollux here is one of them. She turned to the droid. Okay, Bollux, open up the fruit stand.

Yes, maam, Bollux replied in a leisurely drawl. There was a servomotor hum, and the droids chest plastron split down the center, the halves swinging away to either side. Nestled in among the goodies that were the droids innards was a special eraplacement; secured in the eraplacement was another unit, a sep-arate machine entity of some kind that was approxi-mately cubical, with several protrusions and folded appendages. Atop it was a photoreceptor mount, monocular lensed. The unit was painted in deep, pro-TECTIVE, multilayered blue. The monocular came on, lighting red.

Say hello to Captain Solo, Max, Jesse instructed it.

The machine-within-a-machine studied Han up and down, photoreceptor angling and swiveling. Why? it demanded. The pitch of its vocal mechanism was like that of a child.

Jessa countered frankly, Because if you dont, Max, the nice man is liable to chuck your teensy iron behind out into deep space,--thats why.

HelloF chirped Max, with what Han suspected to be forced cheer. A great pleasure to make your ac-quaintance, Captain?

The parties youre picking up need to collect and withdraw data from the computer system on Orron III, Jessa explained. Of course, they couldnt just ask the Authority there for probe equipment without raising suspicions, and your walking in with Max un-der your arm might cause a few problems, too. But riobodys going to bother much about an old labor droid. We named him Bollux because we had so many headaches restructuring his gut. We never did get his vocal pattern up to speed.

Anyway, that cutie in Bolluxs chest cavity is Blue Max; Max because we crammed as much computer capacity into him as we could, and blue for reasons that even you, Solo, can see, Im sure. Blue Max was a piece of work, even for us. Hes puny, but he cost plenty, even though hes immobile and we had to leave out a lot of the usual accessories. But hes all theyll need to tap that data system.

Han was studying the two machines, hoping Jessa would admit shed been joking. Hed seen weirder gizmos in his time, but never on a passenger roster. He didnt like droids very much, but decided he could live with these.

He bent down for a better squint at Blue Max.

You stay in there all the time?

I can function autonomously or in linkage, Max squeaked.

Fabulous, Han said dryly. He tapped Bolluxs head. Button up. As the brown segments of plastron swung shut on Max, Han called up to Chewbacca, Yo, partner, find a place and stow this mollusk, will you?

Hes with us. He turned back to Jessa. Any-thing else? A marching band, maybe?

She never did get to answer. Just then klaxons went off, sirens began to warble at deafening levels, and the public-address horns started paging her to the bases command post. Everywhere in the hangar, outlaw-techs dropped their tools in a ringing barrage and dashed off frantically for emergency stations.

Jessa sprinted away instantly. Han took off after her, yelling back for Chewbacca to stay with their ship.

The two crossed the complex. Humans, nonhumans, and machines charged in every direction, necessitat-ing a good deal of dodging and swerving. The com-mand post was a simple bunker, but at the bottom of the steps leading to it, Jessa and Hah entered a well-equipped, fully manned operations room.

A giant holo-tank dominated the room with its phantom light, an analogue of the solar system around them. Sun, planets, and other major astronomical bodies were picked out in keyed colors.

Sensors have painted an unidentified blip, Jessa, said one of the duty officers, pointing out a yellow ing and receiving of frantic messages, she still heard his voice among all the others.

Jess? She stared, confused, at his lopsided smirk. Got a flight helmet for me? He pretended not to see the sudden softening of her expression. Something sporty, in my size, Jess, with a hole in it to match the one in my head.

HAN tagged after Jessa in another quick run across the base. They entered one of the lesser hangar domes where the air was filled with the whine of high-performance engines. Six fighters were parked there, their ground crews attending them, checking out power levels, armaments, deflectors, and control systems.

The fighters were primarily for interceptor service--- or rather, Han corrected himself, had been a

generation ago. They were early production snubships; Z-95 Headhunters; compact, twin-engined swing-wing craft. Their fuselages, wings and forked tails were daubed with the drab spots, smears, and spray-splotches of general camouflage coats. Their external hardpoints, where rockets and bomb pylons had once been mounted, were now bare.

Indicating the snubs, Han asked Jessa, Whatd you do, knock over a museum?

Picked them up from a planetary constabulary; they were using them for antismuggling operations, matter of fact. We worked them over for resale, but hung on to them because theyre the only combat craft weve got right now. And dont be so condescending, Solo; youve spent your share of time in snubs.

That he had. Han dashed over to one of the Head-hunters as a ground crewman finished fueling it. He took a high leap and chlnded himself on the lip of the cockpit to eyeball it. Most of its console panels had been removed in the course of years of repair, leaving linkages and wiring exposed. The cockpit was just as cramped as he remembered.

But with that, the Z-95 Headhunter was still a good little ship, legendary for the amount of punishment it could soak up. Its pilots seat-the easy chair, in parlance---was set back at a thirty-degree angle to help offset gee-forces, the control stick built into its arm-rest. He let himself back down.

Several pilots had already gathered there, and another, a humanoid, showed up just then. There was little enough worry on their faces that Han concluded they hadnt flown combat before. Jessa came up beside him and pressed an old, lusterless bowl of a flight helmet into his hands.

Whos flown one of these beasts before? he asked as he tried the helmet on. It was a bad fit, too tight. He began pulling at the webbing adjustment tabs in its sweat-stained interior.

Weve all been up, one pilot answered, to prac-tice basic tactics.

Oh, fine, he muttered, trying the helmet on again. Well rip em apart up there. The headgear was still too tight. With an impatient click of her tongue, Jessa took it from him and began working on it herself.

He addressed his temporary command. The Au-thoritys got newer ships; they can afford to buy what-ever they want. That fighter spread coming in at us is probably made up of IRD ships straight off the gov-ernment inventory, maybe prototypes, maybe produc-tion models. And the guys flying those IRDs learned how at an academy. I suppose itd be too much to hope that anybody here has even been to one?

It was. Han went on, raising his voice over the in-creasing engine noise. IRD fighters have an edge in speed, but these old Headhunters can make a tighter turn and take a real beating, which is why theyre still around. IRDs arent very aerodynamic, thats their nature. Their pilots hate to come down and lock horns in a planetary atmosphere; they call it geo. These boysll have to, though, to hit the base, but we cant wait until they get down here to hit them, or some might get through.

Weve got six ships. Thats three two-ship elements. If youve got anything worth protecting with those flight helmets, youll remember this stay with your wing man. Without him, youre dead. Two ships to-gether are five times as effective as they would be alone, and theyre ten times safer.

The Z-95s were ready now, and the IRDs arrival not far off. Han had a thousand things to tell these green flyers, but how could he give them a training course in minutes? He knew he couldnt.

Ill make this simple. Keep your eyes open and make sure its your guns, not your tail, thats pointed at the enemy. Since were protecting a ground instal-lation, well have to ride our kills. That means if youre not sure whether the opposition is hit or faking, you sit on his taft and make sure he goes down and stays down. Dont think just because hes nosediving and leaving a vapor trail that hes out of it. Thats an old trick. If you get an explosion from him, fine. If you get a tamer, let him go; hes finished. But other-wise you ride your kill all the way down to the cellar. Weve got too much to lose here.

He made that last remark thinking of the Falcon, shutting out human factors, telling himself his ship was the reason he was about to hang his hide out in the air. Strictly business.

Jessa had thrust his helmet into his hands. He tried it on again; it was a perfect fit. He turned to say thanks and noticed for the first time that she was carrying a flight helmet, too.

Jess, no. Absolutely not.

She sniffed. Theyre my ships, in the first place. Dec taught me everything; Ive been flying since I was five. And who dyou think taught these others the basics? Besides, theres no one else even nearly qualified.

Training exercises are different! Of all things, he didn't want to have to worry about her up there. Ill get Chewie; hes done some,--

Oh, brilliant, Solo! We can just build a dormer onto the canopy bubble and that hyperthyroid dust-mop of yours can fly the ship with his kneecaps?

Han resigned himself to the fact that she was the logical one to fly. She turned to her other pilots. Solos right; this one'll be a toughie. We don't want to engage them out in space, because all the advanced stages out there are theirs, but we don't want to let them get too close to the surface, either. Our ground defenses couldn't cope with a fighter spread. So somewhere in the middle we'll have to draw the line, depending on how they play it when they come at us. If we can buy time, the ground personnel will have a chance to complete evacuation.

She turned to Hah. Including the Falcon. I gave orders to finish her and close her up as soon as possible. I had to divert men to do it, but a deal's a deal. And I sent word to Chewie what's happened. She pulled her helmet on. Hah's flight leader. Ill assign wing men. Lets move.

With high screeches the six Z-95 Headhunters, like so many mottled arrowheads, sped off into the sky. Hah pulled down and adjusted his tinted visor. He checked his weapons again, three blaster cannons in each wing. Satisfied, he maneuvered so that his wing man was above and behind him, relative to the plane of ascent. Seated in his sloped-back easy chair, situated high in the canopy bubble, he had something near 360-degree visibility, one of the things he liked most about these old Z-95s.

His wing man was a lanky, soft-spoken young man. Han hoped the guy wouldn't forget to stick close when The Show started.

He thought, The Show-fighter-pilot jargon. Hed never thought hed be using it again, with his blood up and a million things to keep track of, including allies, enemies, and his own ship. And anything that went wrong could bow him out of The Show for good.

Besides, The Show was the province of youth. A fighter could hold only so much gee-compensation equipment, enough to lessen simple linear stress and get to a target or scrap in a hurry, but not enough to offset the punishment of tight maneuvering and sudden acceleration. Dogfighting remained the testing ground of young reflexes, resilience, and coordination.

Once, Hah had lived, eaten, and slept high-speed flying. Hed trained under men who thought of little else. Even off-duty life had revolved around hand-eye skills, control, balance. Drunk, hed stood on his head and played ring-toss, and been flung aloft from a blanket with a handful of darts to twist in midair and throw bulls-eyes time and again. Hed flown ships like this one, and ships a good deal faster, through every conceivable maneuver.

Once, Hah was by no means old, but he hadn't been in this particular type of contest for a long time. The flight of Headhunters was pulling itself into two-ship elements, and he found his hands had steadied.

They drew their ships wings back to minimize drag, wing camber adjusting automatically, and rose at high boost. They would meet their opposition at the edge of space.

Headhunter leader, he announced over the comnet, to Headhunter flight. Comnet check.

Headhunter two to leader, in. That was Hah's wing man.

Headhunter three, check, sang Jessa's clear alto. Headhunter four, all correct. That had been Jessa's wing man, the gray-skinned humanoid from Lafra who, Han had noticed, had vestiges of soaring membranes, suggesting that he had superior flying instincts and a fine grasp of spatial relationships. The Lafrarian, it had turned out, had over four minutes actual combat time, which was a good sign. A good many fighter pilots were weeded out in the first minute or so of combat.

Headhunters five and six chimed in, two of Jessa's grease slingers who were brothers to boot. It had been inevitable that they'd be wing men; they'd tend to stick together, and if paired with anyone else, would have been distracted anyway.

Ground control came up. Headhunter flight, you should have a visual on your opposition within two minutes.

Hah had his flight tighten up their ragged formation. Stay in pairs. If the bandits offer a head-on pass, take them up on it; you can pitch just as hard as they can. He thought it better not to mention that the

other side had a longer reach, however.

He had Five and Six, the brothers, drop far back to field any enemies that might break through. The two remaining elements spread out as much as they could without risking separation. Their sensors and those of the approaching ships identified one another, and complex countermeasures and distortion systems switched on. Hah knew this engagement would be conducted on visual ranging; all the complicated sensor-warfare apparatus tended to cancel out, no longer to be trusted.

Short-range screens painted four blips. Go to Heads-Up Displays, Han ordered, and they all cut in their holographics. Transparent projections of their instrumentation hung before them in the canopy bubbles, freeing them of the need to divert their eyes and attention from the task of flying in order to take a reading.

Here they corner someone shouted. At one-zero-alash-two-five!

The enemy ships were IRD models all right, with bulbous fuselages and the distinctive engine package that characterized that latest military design. They were IRD prototypes. As Han watched, the raiders broke formation into two elements of two ships each in perfect precision.

Elements break! he called. Take em! He led his wing man off to starboard to face that brace of IRDs as Jessa and her humanoid wing man banked to port.

The net came alive with cries of warning. The Espo flyers had disdained evasive tactics, coming head-on, meaning they were out to put some blood on the walls. Their orders, Han thought, must've been to hit the outlaw-techs as hard as they could.

The IRDs began firing from extreme range with yellow-green flashes of the energy cannon in their chin pods. Deflector shields were up. Hah ground his teeth, his hand tight on the stick, disciplining himself not to fire until it could do some good. He fought the urge to rubberneck and see how his other element was doing; each two-ship pair was on its own for the moment. He could only hope everybody would hold together, because the pilot who became a straggler in a row like this seldom came out of it.

Han and the opposing wing leader squared off and bore in on each other. Their wing men, keeping out of the way, were too busy holding position and adapting to their leaders' actions to do any shooting.

The IRDs' beams began to make hits, rocking the smaller Headhunter. Han came within range and still held his fire; he had a feeling about this one. The IRD pilot might not even be sure about the old Z-95's reach, but Hah suspected he knew what the man would do as soon as he returned fire. Riding the jolting Headhunter through the hail of incoming shots, he bided his time and hoped his shields would hold.

He played it for as long as he dared, only a matter of an extra moment or two, but precious time and vital distance. He let one quick burst go. As he'd suspected, the enemy never intended to face off to the very end. The IRD rolled onto its back, still firing, and Han had the snap shot he'd hoped for. But the IRD fighter was into his gunsight ring and out again like a wraith, so although he scored, Han knew he hadn't done it any damage. The Authority ships were even faster than he'd thought.

Then all bets were off because, despite everything taught in classrooms, the IRDs split up, the wing man peeling away in an abrupt bank. Han's wing man went after him, exclaiming excitedly, "I'm on him!" Han hollered for him to come back and not throw away the security of a two-ship element.

The IRD leader swept by underneath Hah. He knew what that meant, too; the enemy was almost certain to split-S, loop under, and try for a tail position—the kill position. What Hah should have done with the slower Headhunter was to fire-wall the throttle and go for clear space until he knew what was what. But the interchange of chatter between Jessa and her wing mate told him that the other pair of IRDs had split up as well, drawing her and her companion out of their pairing.

Han sent his Headhunter into a maximum-performance climbing turn, trying to look everywhere at once, still yelling to his wing man, "Stick with me! They're baiting you!" But he was ignored.

The IRD leader he'd shot at hadn't split-S. The raiders' whole strategy of drawing the defenders out of formation was clear now, too late. The IRD leader had half-rolled again, half-looped, and come around onto the tail of Han's wing man. The other IRD, the bait, was already racing on toward the backup element, Headhunters five and six. One of the IRDs Jessa had faced joined that one in a new two-ship element.

The Espos had counted on the inexperienced outlaw-techs breaking formation, Han thought. If wed stayed together wed have mopped the floor with them. Jess, damreit, weve been robbed, he called as he came around, but Jessa had her own troubles. Because she and her wing mate had become separated, an IRD had found the opportunity to fasten itself on her tail.

Han saw that his own wing man was in trouble, but just didnt have the speed to intervene. The IRD leader had attached himself to the Headhunter in the kill position, and the lanky young outlaw-tech was pleading, Help me, somebody! Get him off me!

Still way out of range, Han fired anyway, hoping to shake up the IRD leaders concentration. But the en-emy was steady and undistracted. He waited until he had the Headhunter perfectly set up and hit the firing button on his control grips in a brief burst. The Z-95 was caught by a yellow-green blast and vanished in a nimbus of white-hot gas and debris.

What Han should have done was draw his remain-ing ships together in a weaving, mutually protective string or circle. But even as he breathed profanities to himself, he cut a course for the victorious IRD, his blood up, caution forgotten, thinking, Nobody gets into me/or a wing man, pal. Nobody.

It came to him that he didnt even know that lanky boys name.

Jessas wing man, the Lairarian, shouted, Scissor tight, Headhunter three! Scissor?

Jessa broke right in a flurry of evasive maneuvers while lines of destruction probed for her. She poured on all speed as her wing man came in at a sharp an-gle, decreasing his own velocity so that Jessa and her pursuer came across his vector. The Lairarian settled calmly into the kill position, quickened up, and opened fire.

Lines of red blaster-cannon fire broke from the trailing Headhunters wings. The raider ship shud-dered as pieces of its fuselage were sheared off. There was an explosion, and the crippled IRD went into a helpless flutter, as ff it were dragging a broken wing. It began its long fall toward the planet, sentenced to death by simple gravity.

Far below, Headhunters five and six, the two broth-ers, had engaged the IRDs that had broken through. Off in the distance Han Solo and the IRD leader swept and wove through the permutations of close combat, making their statements in beams of devastation in red, in green.

But Jessa knew where priorities lay, and Five and Six were her weakest flyers. Even now they were call-ing for help. She and her humanoid wing man closed and sped off to rejoin the fray.

A raider was glued to Headhunter fives tail, chop-ping at it and holding position through all the insane turns and evasions, refusing to be unseated. The outlaw-tech shoved his stick up into the comer for a pushover but was too slow. The IRDs beams sliced through his ship, depressurizing it and severing him at the waist. The IRD turned toward the other brother, Headhunter six, as its companion raced on toward the planet and its outlaw base.

Just then Jessa and her wing man arrived, calling for Headhunter six to come under their cover.

I cant; Im latched? the man answered. The IRD that had remained behind had come out of a smooth barrel roll and attached itself to him. Jessas wing man threw himself in to help and she came tight behind.

The sliding, jockeying string of four ships plunged to-ward the planers surface.

The IRD made its kill a moment later. Headhunter six split apart in a blossom of fire and wreckage just as its killer came under Jessas wing mans guns.

The Espo flyer applied more of his ships amazing speed to improve his lead and came up as if he were going into a loop, making the Lairarian misjudge. The IRD flashed out of the maneuver instead, in a lightning-fast turn, banked, and managed to make a high deflection shot.

The IRDs cannon scored, and her wing mans Headhunter shook as Jessa raised her voice in alarm, sheeting off as quickly as she could. She banked and sensed a shadow near. The IRD swooped past. She swerved and shot at it instinctively. The burst scored, penetrating the IRDs shields. As the IRD dropped away in an emergency power dive, its pilot struggling to adjust his crafts thrust bias and avert disaster, Jessa ignored Hans dictum that she tide her kill. She re-turned to see what she could do for her wing mate.

Exactly nothing. The Lairarians ship was damaged but not in danger of crashing. Hed put it into a shal-low glide, extending his wings to their fullest. Can you make it?

Yes, Jessa. But at least one of the IRD has gotten through. The other may manage to rejoin him. Nurse your ship back. I've got to get down there.

Good hunting, Jessa!

She opened her ship's engines in a power dive. Han found out right away that the IRD leader was a good pilot. He discovered it by nearly getting his easy chair shot out from underneath him.

The Espo flyer was hot, accurate with his weaponry, deft with his maneuvers. He and Hah quickly joined in circling, pouncing, cloverleaf baffle, the upper hand alternating between them. Rolling, leaping, doing their best to turn inside each other's turns, sliding into and out of each other's gunsights over and over, they never let their sticks sit still for an instant.

For the third time Hah shook the IRD off, playing on his Headhunters greater maneuverability against the IRDs superior speed. He watched the Espo flyer try to pick him up again. I guess you must be the local champ, huh? The IRD came at him once more. Have it your way, bozo. Let's see what you've really got. He splits down deeper into the planet's atmosphere as the IRE sprang at his tail, gaining in the descent but unable to hold the Headhunter in his sights. Hah pulled up sharply, twisted his ship into a half loop, flipped over, and went into a diving aileron roll with another loop thrown in, coming out of the combo in the opposite direction.

Cannon blasts streaked by over the canopy bubble, barely missing. Man, this Espo can really latch, Han told himself. But he has a few things left to learn. School ain't over yet.

He rammed the stick into the corner for a pushover and began a power dive. The IRD hung in but couldn't quite draw a bead on him. Han pushed the Headhunter to its limits, ducking and slipping as the Espo pilot raked at him. The snubs engines moaned, and every particle of her vibrated as if desiring to fly apart. Han jostled, watching his Heads-Up Display for the reading he wanted. The IRDs shots ranged closer.

Then he had it. He began pulling out of his dive, nosing up slowly and dreading the shot from behind that would end all his problems and hopes.

But the IRD pilot held off, not wanting to waste the opportunity, waiting for the Headhunter to present a spread-eagled silhouette in his gunsight. Hah thought, Sure, he wants this one to be the perfect kill.

He yanked into a turn as the IRD aligned itself, trading him into it and edging for a lead. Hah cheated the turn tighter, and tighter yet. But the IRD pilot clung doggedly, to end the frustrating chase and prove who was the hotter pilot.

And then Han had the turn tighter than ninety degrees, the thing he'd been working toward all along. The Espo hadn't paid enough attention to his altitude, and now the thicker air was working against the IRD, cutting down on its performance. It couldn't hold a turn this tight.

And just as the IRD broke off its run, Han, with the instincts that had given him a reputation for telepathy, threw his Headhunter into a vertical reverse-ment. The IRD was close enough now. Hah fired a sustained burst and the IRD became a cloud of light, throwing out glowing motes and bits of wreckage in every direction.

And as the Headhunter zipped past the showering remains of its opponent, Hah crowed, Happy graduation day, sucker!

The fourth IRD had already made three strafing runs on the outlaw-tee base. The base's defensive guns couldn't keep up with it; they'd been set up for actions against large ships and mass assault, not agile, low-angle fighter attacks.

The raider had concentrated on fiak suppression for his first runs. Now most of the gun emplacements were silent. Outlaws dead and dying lay in a base where several buildings were already holed or ablaze. Then Jessa showed up. Maintaining the velocity she'd picked up in her dive, ignoring the fact that the wings might be ripped off her stubborn little Headhunter at any moment, she threw herself after the IRD just as it came out of its pass. Those people down there were hers, were suffering and perishing because they worked for her. She was absolutely adamant that no more runs would be made at them.

But as she was lining up on the IRD a volley of cannon fire sizzled down from above, nipping at the leading edge of her starboard wing. Another IRD flashed by with speed it had picked up in its own dive,

the ship she had thought to be disabled. Its shots had penetrated her shields and come close to cleaving her wing.

But she held position, determined to get at least one of the raiders before they got her.

Then the second IRD itself became a target. Han had it in his sights for an instant in a side-on, high deflection shot. He jinxed the nose of his ship, laying out sleeper rounds ahead of the Espo, investing in the future. It paid off; the IRD vanished in an outflashing of force and shrapnel.

You're on the last one, Jess! he informed her in a crackle of static. Swat him?

She was lined on the IRD again. She fired, but only her portside cannon worked; the damage to her star-board wing had knocked out its guns. Her target being slightly off to starboard, she missed.

The IRD began surging ahead, capitalizing on its raw ion power, slipping away to starboard. In another split second it would get away. Jessa snap-rolled, sliding to starboard belly-up, and fired again. Her remaining guns reached out with red fingers of destruction and hit. The IRD flared and flamed, breaking apart.

Nice shooting, doll, Han called over the net. Jess! Headhunter continued along, canopy lowermost, not far from the ground. He cut in full power and went after her, saying, Jess, in aerospace circles, what we call what you are is upside down.

I can't get back over! There was desperation in her tone. That damage I took must've started a burn-out creepage. My controls are dead!

He was about to instruct her to punch out but stopped himself. She was too close to the surface; her ejection seat would never have time to right itself. Her ship was losing altitude rapidly. Only seconds were left.

He swept in and matched speeds with her. Jess, get ready to go when I give you the word.

She was mystified. What could he mean? She was dead, crashing or ejecting. But she prepared to do as he said. Han eased the wing of his Headhunter under her overturned one. She saw his plan and her breath caught in her throat.

On three, he told her. One! On that count he brought his wing tip up under hers. Two! They both felt the jar of hazardous contact, knowing the most miniscule mistake would strew them both all over the flat landscape.

Hah rolled left, and the ground that had been streaking by beneath Jessa's dangling head seemed to rotate away as Han's Headhunter imparted spin to hers. He finished his roll with additional force.

Three! Punch out, Jess! He himself was fighting to keep his jostled ship from going out of control.

But before he'd even said half of it, she'd gone, her canopy bubble propelled up and back by separator charges, her ejection seat the easy chair-flung high and clear of her descending ship. The Headhunter plowed into the planet's surface, making a long strip of fiery ruin along the ground, becoming the day's final casualty.

Jessa watched from her ejection seat while its re-pulsor units steadied and eased her down toward the ground on gusts of power. Off in the distance, she could see her Lafrarian wing man nursing his damaged craft in for a landing.

Hah maneuvered his Headhunter through a long turn, coaxing with his retrothrusters until he was at a near stall. He brought his ship down nearby just as Jessa touched down.

The bubble popped up. He removed his helmet and jumped out of the aged fighter just as she slid free of her harness and threw her own helmet aside, feeling around and finding herself generally whole.

Hah sauntered over, stripping off his flying gloves. There's room for two in my ship if we squeeze, he leered.

As I live and breathe, she scoffed. Have we finally seen Hah Solo do something unselfish? Are you going soft? Who knows, you may even pick up a little morality one day, if you ever wake up and get wise to yourself.

He stopped, his leer gone. He glared at her for a moment, then said, I already know all about morality, Jess. A friend of mine made a decision once, thought he was doing the moral thing. Hell, he was. But he'd been conner. He lost his career, his girl, everything. This friend of mine, he ended up standing there while

they ripped the rank and insignia off his tunic. The people who didnt want him put up against a wall and shot were laughing at him. A whole planet. He shipped out of there and never went back.

She watched his face become ugly. Wouldnt any-one testify for-your friend? she asked softly.

He sniggered. His commanding officer committed perjury against him. There was only one witness in his defense, and whos going to believe a Wookiee?

He fended off her next remark by glancing at the base. Looks like they never touched the main hangar. You can have the Falcon finished in no time and still evacuate before the Espos show up. Then Ill be on my way. Weve both got things to do.

She closed one eye, looking at him sidelong. Its lucky I know youre a mercenary, Solo. Its lucky I know you only flew that Headhunter to protect the Falcon, not to protect lives. And that you saved me so I could hold up my end of our bargain. Its lucky youll probably never do a single selfless, decent thing in your life, and that everything that happened today fits in, in some crazy way, with that greedy, retarded behavioral pattern of yours.

He stared at her quizzically. Lucky?

She started for his fighter, walking tiredly. Lucky for me, Jessa said over her shoulder.

WHATD you say, Bollux? Quit whispering?

Han, seated across the gameboard from Chew-bacca, glared at a crate on the other side of the Mil-lennium Falcons forward compartment, where the old droid sat. The compartments other clutter included shipping containers, pressure kegs, insulated canisters, and spare parts.

The Wookiee, seated on the acceleration couch, chin resting on one enormous paw, studied the holo-graphic game pieces. His eyes were narrowed in con-centration and his black snout twitched from time to time. Hed spotted Han two pieces, and was now on the verge of wiping out that advantage. The pilot had been playing poorly, his concentration wandering, fret-ting and preoccupied with the complications of the voyage. The new sensor package and dish were work-ing perfectly, and the starships systems had been fine-tuned by the outlaw-techs. Nevertheless, Hans mind couldnt rest easy as long as his cherished Falcon was hooked up to the huge barge like a bug on a bladder-bird.

Furthermore, the trip was taking far longer than the Falcon alone would have required; the barge wasnt built for speed.

Han could hear the barges engines now, their muf-fled blast vibrating through the freighters deck and his boots, into the soles of his feet. He hated that barge, wished he could just dump it and zoom off; but a bargain was, after all, a bargain. And, as Jessa had explained, the Waiver for the Falcon was being ar-ranged by the people he was to pick up on Orton III, so it behooved him to hold up his end of the agree-ment.

I didnt say anything, sir, Bollux replied politely.

That was Max.

Then what did he say? Han snapped. The two-in-one machines sometimes communicated between themselves by high-speed informational pulses, but seemed to prefer vocal-mode conversations. It always made Han nervous when Bolluxs chest was closed up, with the diminutive eomputers voice rising spectrally from an unseen source.

He informed me, Captain, Bollux replied in his slow fashion, that he would like me to open my plastron. May I?

Han, whod turned back to the gameboard, saw that Chewbacca had sprung a clever trap. While his finger hovered indecisively over the programming keys con-trolling his pieces, Han muttered, Sure, sure, go on, you can fan the air for all I care, Bollux. He scowled at the Wooldee, seeing there was no way out of the trap. Cbewingbacca threw his head back with a toss of red-brown hair and woofed with laughter, showing jut-ting fangs.

With a soft hiss of escaping air-his plastron was airtight, insulated, and shockproof Bolluxs chest swung open as the labor droid moved his long arms back out of the way. Blue Maxs monocular came alive and tracked over to the gameboard just as Han punched up his next move. His gamepiece, a mlnia-rare, three-dimensional monster, jumped into battle with one of Chewies. But Han had misjudged the two pieces subtle win-lose parameters. The Wooldees simulacrum-beastie won the brief fight. Hans

game-piece evaporated back into the nothingness of computer modeling from which it had come. You should have used the Second Hthmar De-fense, Blue Max volunteered brightly. Han swung around with murder in his eye; even the precocious Max recoiled, hastily adding, Only trying to be of assistance, sir.

Blue Max is quite new, quite young, Captain, Bollux supplied, by way of mollifying Hah. Ive taught him a bit about the board game, but he doesnt know much yet about human sensitivities.

Is that so? Han asked, as if fascinated. So whos teaching him, Mr. Pick and Shovel, you?

Sure, Max bubbled. Bolluxs been everywhere. We sit and talk all the time, and he tells me about the places hes seen.

Han swiped at the gameboards master key, clearing it of his defeated holo-beasties and Chewbaccas victorious ones. Do tell? Well, now, that must be some kind of education Slit Trenches I Have Dug- a Trans-Galactic Diary.

The great starship yards of Fondor was where I was activated, Bollux responded, in his slow way. Then, for a time, I worked for a planetary survey Alpha-Team, and after that, for a construction gang on weather-control systems. I had a job as general roust-about for Gan Jan Rues Traveling Menagerie, and as maintenance helper in the Trigdale Foundaries. And more. But one by one, the jobs have been taken over by newer models. I volunteered for all the modifications and reprogramming I could, but eventually I simply couldnt compete with the newer, more capable droids.

Interested now despite himself, Hah asked, Howd Jessa pick you for this ride?

She didnt, sir; I requested it. There was word that a droid would be selected from the general labor pool for some unstated modification. I was there, having been purchased at open auction. I went to her and asked if I might be of use.

Han chortled. And for that they yanked out part of you, rearranged the rest, and stuck that coin bank inside you. You call that a deal?

It has its disadvantages, sir. But its kept me functioning at a relatively high level of activity. There would probably have been some lesser vacancy for me elsewhere, Captain, even if it were only shoveling biological byproducts on a nontechnological world, but at least I have avoided obsolescence for the time being.

Han gaped at the droid, wondering if he were circuit-crazy. So what, Bollux? Whats the point? Youre not your own master. You dont even have a say in your own name; you have to reprogram to whatever your new owner decides to call you, and Bollux is a joke. Eventually youll be of no further use, and then its Scrap City.

Chewbacea was listening intently now. He was far older than any human, and his perspectives were different from a mans... or a droids. Bolluxs leisurely speech made him sound serene as he replied, Obsolescence for a droid, sirs, is much like death for a human, or a Wookiee. It is the end of function, which means the end of significance. So it is to be avoided at all costs, in my opinion, Captain. After all, what value is there to existence without purpose?

Han jumped to his feet, mad without knowing exactly why, except that he felt dumb for arguing with a junk-heap droid. He decided to tell Bollux just what a deluded, misfit chump the old labor droid really was. Bollux, do you know what you are?

Yessir, a smuggler, sir, Bollux responded promptly. Han, confused, looked at the droid for a moment, his mouth hanging open, taken off balance by the reply. Even a labor droid ought to recognize a rhetorical question, he thought. What did you say?

I said, Yessir, a smuggler, sir, Bollux drawled, like yourself. One who engages in the illegal import or export of his metal forefinger pointed down at Blue Max, nestled in his thorax concealed goods.

Chewbacca, paws clasped to his stomach, was rolling around on the acceleration couch, laughing in hysterical grunts, kicking his feet in the air.

Hans temper blew. Shut up! he shouted at the droid. Bollux, again with that strange literalness, obediently swung his chest panels closed. Chew baccas laughter had him close to suffocation, as tears appeared around his tight-shut eyes. Hah began looking around for a wrench or a hammer, or another instrument of technological mayhem, not intending to have any droid one-up him and survive to tell the

tale. But at that moment the navicomputer bleeped an alert. Han and Chewbacca instantly charged for the cockpit, the Wookiee still clasping his midsection, to prepare for reversion to normal space. The tedious trip to Orton III had gnawed at their nerves; both pilot and copilot were grateful for the reappearance of stars that marked emergence from hyperspace, though it was accompanied by a wallowing of the gigantic barge shell. The barges ovoid hull bulged beneath them, a metal can of a ship with a minimum of engine power. Jessas techs had executed their hull mock-up so that the Falcons cockpit re-tained most of its field of vision.

Han and Chewbacca kept their hands off the ships controls, letting the computer do the work, maintaining the role of an automated barge. The automatics accepted their landing instructions, and the composite ship began its ungainly descent through the atmosphere.

Orron III was a planet generous to man, its axial tilt negligible, its seasons stable and, throughout most of its latitudes, conducive to good crop production, and its soil rich and fertile. The Authority had recognized the planets potential as a bread basket and wasted no time in taking advantage of its year-round growing season. Since the planet had more than adequate resources, room, and a strategic location, they had opted to build a data center there as well, thus simplifying logistics and security for both operations.

Orron III was undeniably beautiful, wreathed with strings and strands of white cloud systems, and showing the soft greens and blues of abundant plant life and broad oceans. As they made their approach, Han and Chewbacca ran sensor readings, taking the layout of the Authority installations. What was that? Han asked, leaning forward for a closer look at his instruments. The Wookiee woofled uncertainly. I thought I caught something for a second, big blip in a slow transpolar orbit, but either it went around the planets horizon or weve dropped too low to pick it up. Or both. He worried about it for a moment, then firmly instructed himself not to borrow trouble; whether or not there was a picket ship should make no difference.

Ground features began to resolve into gently rolling country divided precisely into the huge parcels of individual fields. The various shades of those fields reflected a wide range of crops at various states of maturity. Planting, growing, and harvesting must be done on a rolling basis on a large agriworld, for optimal utilization of equipment and manpower.

Eventually they could discern the spaceport, a kilometers-wide stretch of landing area built to the immense proportions of the great robo-barges. The main part of the port, which supported the Authority fleet ships, occupied only a small corner of the installation, even taking into consideration its communications and housing complexes. The majority of the place was simply mooring space for the barges, abysslike berths where maintenance gantries could reach them for repair work and the lumbering mobile silos, aided by gravity, could load them. A constant flow of bulk transports, ground-effect surface freighters, came by special access routes to the port, unloaded their cargoes of foodstuff into the silos, and turned back again, bound for whatever harvest was presently going on.

The bogus barge carrying the Falcon settled to its appointed berth among hundreds of others on the field. They touched down, and the computers stopped their chatter. Han Solo and Chewbacca locked down the console and left the cockpit. As they entered the forward compartment, Bollux looked up. Do we disembark now, sirs?

Nope, Hah answered. Jessa said these people were going to pick up will find us.

The Wooldee went to the main lock and activated it. The hatch rolled up, and the ramp eased down, but didnt admit light or air from Orron IIIs atmosphere; the camouflaging hull design covered most of the Falcons super-structure, and a makeshift outer hatch had been installed just beyond the ramps end. The ramp had barely lowered when there was a clanging on the outer skin there. The Wookiee snorted warily, and Halls hand dipped and came up with his blaster. Chewbacca, seeing his partner was ready, hit the switch to open the outer hatch.

Standing just beyond was a man of incongruities. He wore the drab green coveralls of a port worker and had a tool belt slung at his waist. Yet he radiated a different aura, nothing like that of a contract tech. He was native to a sun-plentiful world, that much was apparent, for his skin was so dark that its black approached indigo. He was half a head taller than Hah, with broad shoulders that strained the seams of

his issue coveralls, and a body that spoke of waiting, abundant power. His tightly curled black hair and sweeping beard were shot through with streaks of gray and white. For all the size and weight of dignity of him, he had a lively glint of humor in his black eyes.

Im Rekkon, he declared at once. He had a direct gaze, and although his tone was moderate, it resonated in the air, its quality deep and full. He replaced at his belt the heavy spanner he'd used to rap on the hatch. Is Captain Solo here?

Chewbacca gestured to his partner, who had just come further down the ramp. The Wookiee hooted in his own language. Rekkon laughed and-to their astonishment-roared back a polite response in Wook-fee. Few enough humans even understood the giant humanoid's tongue; fewer still had the range and force of voice to speak it. Chewbacca boomed his delight in an earsplitting yowl and patted Rekkon's shoulder, beaming down at him.

Now that you're all through with the community sing, Hah interrupted, stripping off his flying gloves, Im Han Solo. When's liftoff?

Rekkon appraised him frankly, but there was still that jovial light to his face. I'd like it to be as soon as possible, as Im sure you would, Captain Solo. But we must make one brief trip to the Center, to cull the data I need and pick up the other members of my group.

Han looked back to the head of the ramp, where Bollux waited, and gestured to him. Lets go, Rusty. You're back in business.

Bollux, his chest plates closed once again, clanked down the ramp, his stride as stiff as ever. He'd explained during the trip that his odd manner of walking came from the fact that he'd been fitted with a heavy-duty suspension system at one point in his long career.

Rekkon was holding out two cards for Han and Chewbacca, bright red squares with white identification codes stamped on them. Temporary IDs, he explained. If anyone asks, you're on short-term labor contracts as tech assistants fifth class.

Us? Hah sputtered. We're not going anywhere, pal. You take the droid, get your gang and whatever else, and you come back. We'll keep the home fires burning.

Rekkon's grin was dazzling. But what will you two do when the decontamination crew arrives? They'll be irradiating the entire barge, and your ship with it, to make sure no parasites feed on the shipment. Of course, you could switch on your deflector shields, but that would surely be noticed by port sensors. The two partners glanced at each other dubiously. It was true that a decontamination treatment would be normal procedure, and that a man and a Wookiee hanging around the landing area while the team did its work would make somebody curious.

And there is another matter, Rekkon continued. The Waiver status for your ship, and its doctored identification codes; I shall be taking care of those, too. Since you and your first mate have a vested interest in that, I had thought you might wish to accompany me.

Han's mouth began watering at the thought of the Waiver, but he always got the sweats in the halls of power, and that Authority Data Center was precisely that. His inbuilt caution came forward. Why do you want us on this side trip? What is it you're not telling? You're right, there are other reasons, Rekkon answered, but I do think it best, for you as well as for me, if you come. I would be much in your debt. Han stared at the tall black man, thinking about the Waiver and the inevitable decontamination team. Chewbacca, get me a tool bag. He unfastened his blaster belt, knowing he couldn't be seen armed in an area of tight security. Chewbacca returned with the bag and his bowcaster. Both dropped their weapons into the tool bag, and the Wookiee slung it over his shoulder.

With Bollux trailing after, they walked through the outer hatch, locked it closed, and followed Rekkon across the maintenance gantry. The barge's hull stretched far below and to either side. A utility skimmer with a work platform and enclosed cab was hovering on the other side of the gantry. The living beings climbed into the cab, Rekkon getting behind the controls and Han crowding next to him, while Chewbacca filled the rear seat. Bollux settled himself on the work platform, securing himself with his servo-grip. The skimmer swung away from the barge. How'd you find us so fast? Han wanted to know. I received word of what markings your craft would have, and its estimated time of arrival. I came as soon as the data systems registered your approach. I've been waiting here for some time, with forged

field-access authorization. I presume this droid is my computer-probe?

Sort of, Han answered as Rekkon upped the skim-mers speed to the legal limit, guiding it between rows of berthed barges. Theres another unit budt into his chest; thats your baby.

The port was surrounded on every side by ripening grain, showing the ripples of the gentle winds of Orton HI. While he glanced about, Hah asked, Whatre you looking for in Authority computers, Rekkon? The man studied him for a moment, then turned back to the controls as he pulled onto a service road. Except for the immediate area of the barges, Hah knew the skimmer would have to adhere to authorized routes, and would be intercepted if it flew too high, too fast, or cross-country. Off in the distance, gargantuan robot agricultural machines moved through the crops, capable of planting, cultivating, or harvesting vast tracts of land in a single day.

Rekkon adjusted the polarization of the skimmers windshield and windows. He didnt make it reflective, or opaque to outside observation, which might have been conspicuous, but darkened it against the sun. The cabs interior dimmed, and Han felt as if he were in one of Sabodors pet environment globes. As they sped along the service road, cutting between seas of bending grain, Rekkon asked, Do you know what my mission here has been?

essa said it was up to you whether or not to tell us. I nearly passed up the bargain because of that, but I figured there must be a fair piece of cash involved for this kind of risk.

Rekkon shook his head. Wrong, Captain Solo. Its a search for missing persons. The group I organized is made up of individuals whove lost friends or rela-tives under unexplained circumstances. Same things begun to happen with suspicious regularity within the Corporate Sector. I found that a number of others were abroad, as I was, seeking their lost ones. Id detected a pattern, and so I gathered about me a small group of companions. We infiltrated the Data Cen-ter in order to carry out our search, with Jessas help. Han tapped his finger on the window, thinking. This explained Jessas commitment to Rekkon and his group, her determination to see that he got all the re-quired assistance. Docs daughter obviously hoped that Rekkon and his bunch, in locating their own lost ones, would turn up her father.

Weve been here for nearly one Standard month, Rekkon continued, and its taken me most of that time to find windows of access into their systems, even though Im rated as a contract computer tech super-visor first class. Their security is diligent, but not ter-ribly imaginative.

Han shifted around on his seat to look at the other.

So whats the secret?

I wont say just yet; Id rather be sure and have ab-solute proof. There is a final correlation of data for which I need a probe; the terminals to which I have access at the Center have governors and security limit-ers built into them. I lack the resources and parts and time to Construct my own device. But I knew Jessas excellent techs could provide what I needed and there-by decrease the risk of detection.

Which reminds me, Rekkon. You havent told us that other very good reason why we should come with you to the Center.

Rekkon looked pained. Youre persistent, Captain.

I selected my companions carefully; each of them was close to a lost one, yet-

Han sat up. But youve got a traitor in there some-where. Rekkon stared hard at the pilot. It wasnt just a guess. Jessas operation got hit while I was there; an Authority corvette dropped a spread of fighters on us. The chances of them just stumbling onto us, out of all the star systems in the Corporate Sector, are so small theyre not even worth talking about. That left a spy, but not one who was there at the time, or the Espos wouldnt have been scouting, theyd have come in force. They mustve been checking out a number of solar systems. He leaned back, serf-satisfied. He was proud of his chain of logic.

Rekkons face was a mask cut from jet. Jessa gave us a contingency list of places where we might be able to contact her ff our lines of communication were broken. Plainly, that solar system was one of them.

That surprised Han. Jessa would never ordinarily have trusted anyone with that sort of information. She must be investing aH hope of finding her father with Reidcon. Okay, so youve got somebody whos on two payrolls. Any idea who?

None, except that it cannot be either of the two members of my group who have already perished. I

believe they discovered who the traitor was. There were indications in the final comlink conversation I had with one of them before she died. And so, of course, I've told no one of your arrival, and came to meet you myself. I wanted your help, to make sure none of them can give the alarm before we depart. I have called each of them to my office, without telling them the others would be there.

Han disliked the idea of going to the Center even more now, but saw it was vital that Rekkon have help, vital to the survival of Han Solo. If the traitor managed to turn in an alarm, chances were that the Falcon would never raise ship again. He made a mental note to bill Jessa and whoever else he could for additional services rendered. He angled around in his seat again. Whore the other people you recruited for Amateur Night?

Driving with only part of his attention, Rekkon responded, My second-in-command is Term, whose cover role is contract laborer. His family controlled large ranges on Kail, independent landowners under the Authority. There was some sort of dispute over land-use rights and stock prices. Several family members vanished when they wouldn't yield to pressure.

Who else?

Atuarre. She is a female of the Trianii, a feline race. The Trianii had settled a planet on the fringes of Authority space generations before the Corporate Sector was chartered. When the Authority finally annexed the Trianii colony world recently, they met with resistance. Atuarre's mate disappeared and her cub was taken from her and placed in Authority custody. They must have used some sort of interrogation procedure on the cub, Pakka, for when Atuarre finally managed to rescue him, he could no longer speak. The Authority is no respecter of ages or conventions, you see. Atuarre and Pakka eventually made contact with me; her cover here on Erron III is that of apprentice agronomist.

The service road, winding through the fields, had met a main artery leading toward the Center. The place was a small city unto itself, handling record keeping, computations, and data flow and retrieval for much of the Corporate Sector. It radiated from an operations complex that rose like a glittering confederation from the rolling farmland.

Rekkon, lips pursed in thought, wasn't finished. The last member of our group is Engret, who is scarcely more than a boy, but has a good heart and a kindly temperament. His sister was an outspoken legal scholar, and she too dropped from sight. He was silent for a moment. There are others abroad searching for their lost ones, and many more, I'm certain, who've been frightened into silence. But perhaps we shall be able to help them, too.

Han half snickered. No way, Rekkon. I'm just here as part of a trade-off. Save the old school fight songs until I'm clear, got it?

Rekkon's face was sculpted in amusement. You only do this sort of thing so that you can become a wealthy man? He eyed Han up and down and went back to his driving, but added, A callous exterior isn't an uncommon way of protecting ideals, Captain; it hides the idealists from the derision of fools and cowards. But it also immobilizes them, so that, in trying to preserve their ideals, one risks losing them. What this big, bluff, amiable man had just said carried so much of hit and of miss, insult and compliment, that Han didn't take time to unravel it. Tin a guy with a hot ship and places to go, Rekkon, so don't let yourself get carried away with the philosophy.

They entered the Center, maneuvering along wide streets between rearing buildings housing the various offices and storage banks, personnel dormitories and recreational areas, shops and commissaries. The traffic was thick with robo-hacks, ground-effect cargo lifters, skimmers, Espo cruisers, and innumerable mechanicals.

Making a final turn, Rekkon entered a subterranean garage and descended more than ten levels. Nosing the skimmer into a vacant spot, he cut the engine and stepped out. Han and Chewbacca followed as Bollux clambered down. The Weekice and his partner affixed their badges to their chests and vests, respectively.

Rekkon slipped out of his coveralls and tool belt and stuffed both into an equipment locker on the skimmer's side. That left him attired in long, flowing robes

of bright, geometric patterns. His supervisors badge was prominent on his broad chest. His feet were shod in comfortable-looking sandals. Han asked him how hed gotten the skimmer and other equipment. Not difficult, once Id made a partial penetration of the computer systems. A false job-request form, an altered vehicle-allocation slip-those things were ele-mentary. Chewbacca took up the tool bag again. Bollux, who hadnt had the chance before, now drew himself up before Rekkon. Jessa has instructed me to place my-self and my autonomous computer module completely at your service.

Thank you-Bollux, isnt it? Your aid will be crit-ical to us. At this, the old droid seemed to straighten with pride. Han saw that Rekkon had found the way to Bolluxs heart, or rather, to his behavioral circuitry matrix.

The Authority had spared no expense on this Cen-ter, and so, rather than to an elevator or shuttle car, it was to a lift chute that Rekkon led them. They stepped into its confluence and, seemingly standing on air, were wafted upward by the chutes field. Two techs drifted into the lift chute on the next level, and con-versation among Hans group stopped. The Wookiee, the two men, and the droid continued to ascend, with others entering or leaving the field, for another minute and more, rising past garage and service levels, the lower bureacratic offices, and at last through the levels where data processing and retrieval operations of one kind and another took place. Most passengers in the chute wore computer techs tunics. Occasiona lly, one would exchange a greeting with Rekkon. Han gath-ered, from the lack of curiosity he and his companions drew, that it wasnt unusual for a supervisor to have tech assistants and droids in tow.

Rekkon eventually tilted himself, to drift into the disembarkation-flow. Han, Chewbacca, and Bollux followed. They found themselves standing in a large gallery. Here, two floors had been combined, the up-per one opening onto a balcony that ran around the gallerys midsection, looking down on the banks of lift and drop chutes.

Rekkon led on, down a hallway of darkly reflective walls, floor, and ceiling. Han caught sight of himself in the tinted mirror of the walls and wondered how he had ever wound up a reckless-eyed predator, contam-inating these antiseptic inner domains of the jugger-naut Authority. What he did know was that he would much rather have been hotting the Falcon along be-tween the stars, unencumbered.

Rekkon stopped at a door and covered its lock face with his palm, then stepped through as the door swished open. The others followed him into a spacious, high-ceilinged chamber, three walls of which were lined with a complex array of computer terminals, systems monitors, access gear, and related equipment. The fourth wall, opposite the door, a single sheet of transparisteel, gave a commanding view of the bounti-ful fields of Orron III from one hundred meters up. Han went over and took a bearing on the spaceport across the gentle rise and fall of the land. Chewbacca, seating himself by the door on a bench that ran the length of the wall there, laid the tool bag down be-tween his long, hairy feet. He watched the chatter and wink of sophisticated technology with only mild curios-ity showing on his face. Rekkon turned to Bollux. Now, may I see what it is that youve brought me?

Han clucked to himself softly, amazed that anyone should be so palsy-walsy with a mere droid.

Bolluxs plastron opened as the stubby droid pulled his long arms back out of the way. The computer-probes photoreceptor came on. Hil he perked. Im Blue Max.

You certainly are, Rekkon answered in his full, amused bass. If your friend here will release you, well have a look at you, Max.

Bollux said an unhurried, Of course, sir. There were minute clicks from his chest, the withdrawal of connector jacks and retaining pins. Rekkon drew the computer forth without trouble. Max was smaller than a voice-writer; he looked unimposing in Rekkons big hands.

Rekkons laughter rang. If you were much smaller, Blue Max, Id have to throw you back! Whats that mean? Max asked dubiously.

Rekkon crossed to one of several worktables. Nothing. A joke, Max. The table, a thick slab rest-ing on a single service pillar, was studded with outlets, connectors, and complex instrumentation. Along its front edge ran an extremely versatile keyboard.

How would you like to do this, Max? Rekkon asked. I have background and programming data to feed you, information on systems-intrusion. Then Ill patch you into the main network.

Can you feed it in Forb Basic? Max piped in his high, childish voice, like an eager kid with a new challenge.

That presents no difficulty; I see you have a five-fine input. Rekkon drew a five-fine plug and line from his table and connected it to Maxs side. Then he took a data plaque from his robes and inserted it into an aperture in the table, punching up the proper se-quence on the keyboard. Maxs photoreceptor dark-ened as the little computer gave his complete attention to the input. Several screens in the room came to life, giving high-speed displays of the information Max was ingesting.

Rekkon joined Hah Solo at the window-wall and handed him another plaque, one hed taken from his worktable. Here is the new ships ID for your Waiver. Alter your other documentation accordingly, and you should have no further problem with mandatory-performance profiles within the Corporate Sector. Han bounced the plaque once or twice on his palm, visualizing enough money to wade through with his pants rolled up, then tucked it away.

The rest of this shouldnt take terribly long, Rek-ken explained. The others in my group are due to show up in short order, and I dont expect someone with Maxs brainpower to find this task too difficult. But Im afraid theres nothing in the way of refresh-ment around here---an oversight of mine.

Han shrugged. Rekkon, I didnt stop off to eat, drink, or observe quaint local ceremonies. If you really want to make me dizzy with delight, just wrap it up here as fast as you can. He glanced around the room, with its perplexing lights and racing equations. Are you honestly a computer expert, or did you get the job on sheer charm?

Rekkon, hands on lapels, gazed out the window. Im a scholar by trade and inclination, Captain. Ive studied a good many schools of the mind and disci-plines of the body, as well as an array of technologies. Ive lost track of my degrees and credentials, but Im more than qualified to run this entire Center, ff thats of any importance. At one point I specialized in organic-inorganic thought interfaces. That notwith-standing, I came here with forged records, playing the part of a supervisor, because I wished to remain in-conspicuous. My only desire is to locate my nephew, and the others.

What makes you think theyre here?

Theyre not. But I believe their whereabouts can be discovered here. And when Max over there has helped me do that, by sifting through the general in-formation here, I shall know where I must go.

You never did get around to mentioning your own lost one, Han reminded him, thinking that he was beginning to sound like Rekkon. The man was infec-tious.

Rekkon paced to the opposite wall, stopping near Chewbacca. Han came after him, watching the man lost in thought. Rekkon took a seat, and Hall did the same. I raised the boy as if he were my son; he was quite young when his parents died. Not long ago, I was hired as instructor at an Authority university on Kalla. It is a place for higher education, mostly for Authority scions, a school rooted in technical educa-tion, commerce, and administration, with minimal stress on the humanities. But there were still some vacancies for a few old crackpots like me, and the pay was more than adequate. As nephew of a university don, the boy was eligible for higher study, and thats where the trouble began. He saw just how oppressive the Authority is, stifling anything that even remotely endangers profit.

My nephew began to speak out and to encourage others to do the same. Rekkon stroked his dense beard as he thought back on it. I advised hun against doing so, although I knew he was right, but he had the convictions of youth, and I had acquired the timidity of age. Many of the students who listened to the boy had parents highly placed in the Authority; his words could not go unnoticed. It was a painful time, for al-though I couldnt ask the boy to ignore his conscience, I feared for him. As an ignoble compromise, I decided to resign my post. But before I could do so, my nephew simply disappeared.

I went to the Security Police, of course. They made an appearance of concern, but it was clear that they had no intention of exerting themselves. I began mak-ing inquiries of my own and heard accounts of other disappearances among those whod inconvenienced the Authority. Im accustomed to looking for patterns; one wasnt long in emerging.

Picking carefully-very carefully, I assure you, Captain!mI gathered a close group of those whod lost

someone, and we began a careful penetration of this Center. Word had come to me of the disappearance of Jessas father, Dec, as hes called. I approached her, and she agreed to help us. All of which leaves us sitting here, Hah interrupted, but why here?

Rekkon had noticed that the race of characters and ciphers across lighted screens had stopped. Rising to return to Max, he answered. The disappearances are related. The Authority is attempting to remove those individuals who are most conspicuously against it; it has decided to interpret any natural, sentient individualism as an organized threat. I think the Authority has collected its opponents at some central location that-

Let me get this straight, Han broke in. You think the Authoritys gone into the wholesale kidnapping business? Rekkon, youve been staring at the lights and dials too long.

The man didnt look offended. I doubt that the fact is generally known, even among Authority officials. Who can say how it happened? Some obscure official draws up a contingency proposal; an idle superior takes it seriously. A motivational study crosses the right desk perhaps, or a cost-benefit analysis becomes the pet project of a highly placed exec. But the germ of it was in the Authority all along - power and paranoia. Where no real opposition existed, suspicion supplied one.

As he spoke, he paced back to the worktable, unplugging Max. That stuff was really interesting, the little computer bubbled.

Please show a little less enthusiasm, Rekkon entreated, taking Max up from the table. You give me the feeling Im contributing to the delinquency of a minor. The computers photoreceptor zeroed in on him as he continued. Do you understand everything Ive shown you?

You bet! Just give me a chance, and Ill prove it. I shall. The main events coming up. Rekkon took Max over to one of the terminals and set him down by it. You have a standard access adapter? In reply, a small lid in the computers side flipped down, and Max extended a short metal appendage. Good, very good. Rekkon moved Max closer to the terminal. Max inserted his adapter into the disklike receptor there. The receptor and the calibrated dial around it circled around and back as Max accustomed himself to the fine points of the linkup.

Please begin as soon as youre ready, Rekkon bade Max, and took a seat again between Han and Chewbacca. Hell have to sift through an enormous amount of data, he told the two partners, even though he can use the system itself to help him at his work. There are numerous security blocks; it will take even Blue Max awhile to find the right windows.

The Wooldee growled. Both humans understood the expression of Chewbaccas doubt that the information Rekkon wanted would actually be found in the network.

The location as such wont be there, Chewbacca, Rekkon responded. What Max will have to do is find it indirectly, just as you must sometimes turn your eyes away to locate a dim star, finding it out of the corner of your eye. Max will analyze logistical records, supply and patrol ship routings, communications flow patterns and navigational logs, plus a number of other things. Well know where Authority ships have been stopping, and where coded traffic has been heaviest, and how many employees are on payrolls at various installations, and what their job categories are. In time, well find out where the Authority is keeping the members of what it has come to believe is a far-flung plot against it.

Rekkon got up again to pace the room briskly, clapping his hands with sounds like solid-projectile rifle shots. These fools, these execs and their underlings, with their enemies lists and Espo informers, theyre creating just the sort of climate to make their worst fears come real. The prophecy fulfills itself; if we werent talking about life and death here, it would make a grand joke!

Hah was reclining against the wall, watching Rekkon with a cynical smile. Had the scholar actually thought that people were any different from the Authority execs? Well, anybody who let his guard drop or wasted his time on ideals was in for just the same sort of rude shock Rekkon had gotten, Han thought. And that was why Han Solo had gone and would always go free among the stars.

He yawned elaborately. Sure, Rekkon, the Author-ity better watch out. After all, whats it got going for it except a whole Sectors worth of ships, money, man-power, weapons, and equipment? What chance does it have against righteous thoughts and clean hands?

Rekkon turned his hearty smile on Han. But look at yourself, Captain. Jessas communication mentioned a little about you. Just by living your life the way you chose, youve already committed deadly offenses against the Corporate Sector Authority. Oh, I dont look for you to wave a banner of freedom or to mouth platitudes. But if you think the Authoritys the winning side, why arent you playing its game? The Authority wont meet with disaster because it abuses naive schoolboys and idealistic old scholars. But as it in-creasingly hampers intractable, hardheaded individ-ualists such as yourself, it will find its real opposition.

Han sighed. Rekkon, youd better take it easy; youve got me and Chewie confused with somebody else. Were just driving the bus. Were not the Jedi Knights, or Freedoms Sons.

What Rekkons rejoinder would have been became academic. The door-lock buzzed just then, and a mans voice at the intercom demanded Rekkon! Open this door!

With a cold feeling in his stomach, Han caught the blaster Chewbacca tossed to him as the Wookiee lev-eled his bowcaster at the door.

REKKON interposed himself between Han and Chew-bacca and the door. Kindly put your weapons up, Captam. That is Torre, one of my group. Even if it werent, would it not have been wiser to find out what was happening before preparing to shoot?

Han made a sour face. I happen to like to shoot first, Rekkon. As opposed to shooting second. But he lowered his weapon, and Chewbacca did the same with the bowcaster. Rekkon worked the door controls. The panel snapped up, revealing a man of about Hans height, but bulklet through the torso, with brawny arms and wide, blunt hands. His face was fine-featured, with high cheekbones and alert, roving eyes of a liquid blue. His hair was a long shock of bright red. His darting eyes found Hah and Chewbacca first, as his right hand made a reflexive spasm toward the thigh pouch of his coveralls. But he arrested the mo-tion, turning it into the rubbing of palm against trouser leg on seeing Rekkon. Han didnt blame the man for being skittish at this point, with several of his team-mates already dead.

The mans mind worked quickly. Were leaving? he was asking, even as he stepped through the door. Presently, Rekkon replied, gesturing over to where Blue Max sat linked to the data system. Well soon have the data we require. Captain Solo there and his first mate, Chewbacca, will be transporting us off-world when were ready. Gentlemen, may I present Tonal, one of my companions.

Term, his poise recovered now, inclined his head to the two, then went over to inspect Blue Max. Han fol-lowed; someone in this band might be an informer, and he wanted to acquaint himself with each one of them, to do all he could to safeguard himself and his ship.

Not very impressive, is it? Term asked, staring down at Max.

Not too, Han answered fake-pleasantly.

A nod from Term. You think Rekkonll find what hes looking for? Han asked. I mean, this long shots your only hope of finding your folks, right? Or shouldnt I ask?

Term fastened a frank gaze on him. It is a personal matter, Captain. But since your own safety is at stake, I suppose youre withm your rights. Yes, if I cant lo-cate my father and brother in this way, Ill have no idea how to proceed. Weve fixed all our hopes on Rekkons theory. For a moment he glanced over to Rekkon, who was showing Chewbacea features of the rooms equipment. I didnt throw in with him lightly, but when I saw that the Authority was dragging its feet in its investigations, and my own inquiries led me to hun, I knew I must commit myself to follow Rekkons be-lief.

Torms voice had drifted as his thoughts had. Now he came back to himself. Its most unselfish, very ad-mirable of you, Captain Solo, to take on this mission.

Not many men would willingly risk-

Jet back; you got it all wrong, Han interrupted. Im here cause I struck a deal, Torm. Im strictly a businessman. I fly for money and I look out for num-ber one, clear?

Torm reappraised him. Quite. Thank you for clari-fying that, Captain. I stand corrected.

The door was sounding again. This time, Rekkon admitted two of his co-conspirators. They were Trianii, members of a humanoid species of feline. One was an adult female, trim and supple, who stood just about the height of Hans chin. Her eyes were very large, yellow, with vertical slits of green iris. Her pelt, a var-ied, striped pattern along her back and sides, lightened to a soft, creamy color on face, throat, and torso front. It tufted out to a thick mane around her head, neck, and shoulders. Behind her curled and swayed a meter of restive tail, mixing the colors of her pelt. She wore the only clothing her species required, a belt at her hips to support loops and pouches for her tools, instru-ments, and other items. Rekkon introduced this being as Atuarre.

With Atuarre was her cub, Pakka. He was a mini-ature copy of his mother, standing half her height, but his coloring was darker, and he wasnt as slender or as graceful. He still had some of the fuzzier fur and baby fat of cubhood, but his wide eyes seemed to hold an adults wisdom and sorrow. Though his mother spoke, Pakka said nothing. Then Han recalled Rekkons say-ing the cub had been a mute since enduring Authority custody. Like his parent, Pakka wore a belt and pouches.

Atuarre pointed a slim, clawed finger at Hah and Chewbacca. What are they doing here? Theyre here to aid our escape, Rekkon ex-plain-ed. They brought the computer element I needed to extract the final data. The only one yet to arrive is Engret; I couldnt contact him, but left a message on his recorder with the code word for him to contact me.

Atuarre seemed agitated. Engret didnt make his check-call and didnt answer his com, so I stopped by his billet on the way here. Im sure his quarters are under surveillance; we Trianii do not mistake such things. Rekkon, I believe Engrets been killed, or taken.

The leader of the small band sat down. For a mo-ment Han saw the strength and determination leave Rekkons features. Then it was back, that special vi-tality. I suspected that was the case, he admitted. Engret would not forgo contact for days, no matter what. I trust your instincts in this completely, Atuarre. We must presume him to have been eliminated.

He had said this with absolute finality. This wasnt the first time he had come up against an unexplained disappearance. Han shook his head; on one side was the near-absolute power of the Authority, and on the other, nothing more substantial than friendship, than family ties. Han Solo, loner and realist, considered it a gross mismatch.

How do we know hes what he says he is? Atuarre was demanding, pointing to Han.

Rekkon looked up. Captain Solo and his first mate, Chewbacca, come to us by way of Jessa. I presume we all trust her aid and counsel? Good. We leave as soon as possible; Im afraid therell be no time for lug-gage or arrangements. Or com-calls, for any of us.

Atuarre took her cubs paw-hand as Pakka studied Han and Chewbacca silently. When do we go?

Rekkon went back to Max, to find out just that. Just then the computer modules photoreceptor came back on. Got it! he chirped. A translucent data plaque emerged from the slot at the terminals side.

Rekkon seized it eagerly. Fine. Now we must match it against the Authoritys installations charts- But thats not all, Max blurted.

Rekkons dense brows knit. What more, Blue Max?

While I was in the system, I monitored it, you know, to get the feel. This intrusion is fun! Anyway, theres a Security alert on in the building. I think its directed at this level. The Espos are moving into po-sition.

Atuarre hissed and pulled her cub closer. Torms face seemed impassive at first, but Han noticed a tic of anxiety along his jaw. Rekkon tucked the data plaque into his robes, and from them drew a big dis-rupter pistol. Han was already buckling on his gunbelt, as Chewbacca settled his ammo bandolier over his shoulder and threw the empty tool bag aside.

Next time I fall for one of these tempting offers, Han instructed his partner, sit on me till the urge passes.

Chewbacca growled that he definitely would.

Torm had taken a handgun from his thigh pocket, and Atuarre had produced another from one of her belt pouches. Even the cub, Pakka, was armed; he pulled a toylike pistol from his belt.

Max, Rekkon said, are you still in the network? Max indicated he was. Good. Now, look at deploy-ment plans for alerts in this Center. At what corridors, junctions, and levels will the Espos be

stationed?

I cant tell you that, Max answered, but I could clear a way through them, if thats what you want.

That grabbed Hans attention. Whatd that little fusebox say?

The computer-probe elaborated. The Security Po-licemen are all supposed to respond to alarms, it says here, and redeploy to cover any new trouble spots. I could just make enough alarms in other places and draw them away in different directions.

That may not get them all out of the way, Hah pointed out, but it could sure thin out the opposition. Do it, Maxie. Another thought struck him. Wait a second. Can you fake alarms anywhere else?

Maxs voice burst with pride. Anywhere on Orron III, Captain. This networks got so much capacity that theyve hooked just about everything into it. Good cost reduction, but bad security, right, Captain?

No foolin. Yeah, give it everything youve got

fires in the power plants, riots in the barracks, inde-cent exposure in the cafeteria, whatever appeals to you, all over the planet. He was thinking that if there were a picket ship in orbit, she might also be kept busy by a rash of false alarms.

Bollux, who had remained silent during all this commotion, now came to the terminal and prepared to take Max back the moment the computers work was done. Rekkon stood with him.

Therere two ways out of here that might be open, Max announced, and flashed the positions on the screen. The two paths, picked out on the levels lay-out, both led back to the gallery where the lift and drop chute banks were located. One route was on their floor, the other on the floor above.

Security alarms began clanging and warbling in the corridors. The rooms equipment blazed with ripples of light as every circuit reacted to Maxs prompting. Then, suddenly, the room became dim, except for light from the window-wall. The Centers automatics had shut down main power sources in response to the supposed emergency. Alarms continued to sound, run-ning on reserves.

Illumination in the corridors will be very low, on standby power, Rekkon told the others as they gathered by the door. We may be able to slip by. He carefully set Blue Max back into his eraplacement. As his plastron swung shut, Bollux, followed by Rekkon, joined the rest of them at the door.

If I may suggest, said the droid, I would, per-haps, attract less suspicion than any other individual here. I could walk well in advance of you others, in case there are Security Policemen present.

That makes sense, Atuarre said. Espos wont waste time and power shooting a droid. Theyll halt him, though, and that will warn us off from any traps.

The door slid up, and Bollux started off down the corridor, preceded by the noise of his stiff suspension. The others followed afteraRekkon and Hah in the lead, with Term behind. Atuarre and Pakka came next, and Chewbacca brought up the rear, his bow-caster cocked and ready. The Wooldee was watching the conspirators as well as rear-gnarding. With the possibility of a traitor in the group, he and Hah trusted no one, not even Rekkon. The first wrong move on the part of any of them would be the Wooldees signal to shoot.

They came to a turn. Bollux went around first, but as the others approached it, they heard Halt!

You, droid, get over herel

Hah, peeking cautiously around the corner, spied a contingent of heavily armed Espos clustered around Bollux. He picked up bits of the conversation, mostly questions about whether the droid had seen anyone else. Bollux put up a front of supreme ignorance and lethargic circuitry. Beyond the gathered Espos, the corridor opened onto the chute gallery, but it might just as well have been on the other side of the Corpo-rate Sector.

Its no good this way, Hah said.

Then its the more desperate route for us, Rekkon replied. Follow me. They went back the way they had come, at a trot. As they rounded the next corridor, the footfalls of the Espo detachment drifted to them.

They hadnt gone far when they heard another squad approaching from the opposite direction.

Nearest stairwell, Hah instructed Rekkon, who led them a few meters more, then ducked through a

door. Keep it as quiet as you can, Han whispered in the semidarkness of the emergency-lighted stairwell.

Up one floor, and well make our way to the balcony overlooking the chutes. Of course, Chewbacca, for all his bulk, moved quietly, as did the sinuous Atuarre and her cub. Rekkon, too, seemed used to running

with stealthy efficiency. That left only Hah and Torm to guard their steps, both laboring to keep the noise of their movements to a minimum.

When they reached the second floor of that level, they found it empty. Blue Maxs flurry of crazy alerts had drawn the security forces away from their contingency posts. The fugitives raced along the corridors as through a hall of mirrors, keeping close to the walls.

They came to the balcony overlooking the gallery. Crouching low, they edged up to its railing. Han risked a quick peek over the top, then drew his head down again. Theyre setting up a crew-served blaster down by the chutes, he told them. Therere three Espos working it. Chewie and I will fix that up; the rest of you get set to jump. Chewie?

The Wooldee rumbled softly, his finger tightening on the bowcaster. He moved off, staying low, along the railing. Hah leaned close to Rekkons ear and whispered, Do us a favor and watch things here; we can only look one way at a time. He scuttled off in the opposite direction from his partner. With Rekkon armed and watchful, Hah doubted that any turncoat would show his hand now.

He paralleled the railing, rounding its corner, down to the far wall. Peering over the rail, he saw the Wooldees big blue eyes edging up over the opposite railing. Halfway between them and several meters below, the gun crew was making final adjustments on the heavy blaster and its tripod mount. In a moment they would be ready to activate the weapons deflector shield; going after them would then become an almost hopeless venture, and the drop chutes would be inaccessible. Apprehension would be a matter of time. One of the Espos was bending even now to throw on the shield.

Hah stood, drew, fired. The man who had been about to activate the shield slumped, clapping a burned leg. But one of the others, with no regard for niceties like fire-discipline, spun and sprayed a steady stream of destructive energy from a short riot gun. The riot guns fire blasted material from the walls and railing; the Espo slewed the weapon around carelessly, searching for his target.

Hah was forced to duck back out of the way as the rain of energy lashed through the air, striking walls, ceiling, and most things in between. That innocent bystanders mightve been hurt didnt seem to have entered into the Espos calculations.

But the Espo gave a cry and fell, his finger easing off the trigger, accompanied by the metallic twang of Chewbaccas bowcaster. Hah looked over the rail again and saw the second man slumped over the first, brought down by one of the short quarrels from the Wooldees weapon. Now Chewbacca stood, jacking the foregrip of his bowcaster down to recock it and strip another round off its magazine.

The third gun crewman kicked the bodies of his fellows out of the way while firing wildly with his pistol and yelling for help. Hah shot him just as the Espos hands were closing on the heavy blasters grips.

Chewbacca was already over the balcony railing. Han, straddling the railing on his side, called, Rekkon, get em moving! He pushed himself off.

He missed his footing and fell to all fours, then raced to help his partner throw assorted Espos off the blaster cannon. Term leaped down, landing lightly for all his weight, and Atuarre came after him, all grace and form. Her cub launched himself off the rail, gathered his limbs and tail in for a somersault, and landed next to her. Atuarre slapped him on his way, as if to say this was no place to show off, even for an acrobatic Trianii.

Last to come was Rekkon, moving skillfully, as if this were something he did all the time. Han wondered for a half-second about this versatile university don who never seemed to lose track of the problems at hand. In sending all the others ahead, Rekkon made sure no potential spy remained behind, to be tempted by an unguarded back.

Torre stopped short of the drop chutes, luckily for him. The fields have been shut off he shouted. Rekkon and Atuarre were with him in a moment, fumbling at the emergency panel beside the chute opening. Rekkons sturdy fingers closed around the panels grille, and he yanked it away without apparent effort.

Calls and a general hubbub could be heard in the upper corridors. Han squirmed himself down behind the blaster cannon, setting his feet on the pegs of its tripod, and switched on the deflector shield. Heads up! he warned his companions. The partys starting!

A squad of Espos, wearing combat armor and car-tying rifles and riot guns, burst out onto the balcony

above, fanning out along the rail, and started firing down. Their bolts splashed in polychrome waves from the cannons shield. Torm, Rekkon, and the others, directly behind Han as they worked on the drop-chute panel, were protected, too, for now. Chewbacca stood behind his partner, firing his bowcaster whenever he had an opening. Soon his weapon was empty, and he pulled another magazine from his bandolier. He chose explosive quarrels and started firing again. The deto-nations filled the gallery with smoke and thunder.

Hah had raised the cannons snout to extreme ele-vation, and now he swept it across the railing. Heavy blaster charges flashed and crackled; parts of the rail-ing and the balconys edge exploded, melted, or burst into flames. Several Espos were hit, falling to the floor below, and the rest backed hastily out of the line of fire, darting out to snap off a volley when they could, in a constant, determined exchange of shots. The fire-fight and its echoes, heat, and smoke enveloped the gallery.

Han kept the Espos heads down with long traverses of the cannon, letting go at the floor of the balcony, scoring the walls. The gallery heated up like a furnace from the energies unleashed. Red beams of annihila-tion bickered back and forth, and Hah knew that the cannons shield wouldnt hold out forever against con-stant fire from the riot guns and rifles.

A squad of armored figures appeared in the low corridor, the one leading directly onto the gallery. Hah depressed the cannons mouth and filled the lower hallway with raging destruction. These Espos drew back, too, but, like the others, stayed just out of range to risk firing whenever they could. Atuarre, Pakka, and Torre, drawing their guns, joined Han and Chew-bacca in returning fire, while Rekkon kept working at the chute.

Rekkon, if you cant get that drop field working, thatll be all for us, Han hollered over his shoulder. A Security man leaned out from the balcony above and snapped off a shot. It rebounded from the guns shield, but Han could tell from the residual heat the deflector let through that it was beginning to fail. Its no use, Rekkon decided as his strong, sensi-tive fingers probed the mechanisms. Well have to find another way out.

This is a one-way street! Han shouted without looking back. Chewbaccas angry, frustrated roars sounded above the din.

Then you dive headfirst down the shaft! Torre bellowed back. Hans rejoinder was lost in an elec-tronic whooping that filled all their ears, catching at their hearts. It was a warning signal, standard through-out much of the galaxy.

Hard radiation leak, Rekkon shouted. That wasnt one of the alarms Max put in.

Not only that, Han thought, but it had only just be-gun to sound, and it was sounding right in the corri-dors off the gallery. A hard radiation exposure would leave little chance for any of them to live; theyd be receiving lethal dosages even as they listened. Hah swore at himself for ever having gotten out of a nice, cushy racket like gunrunning sideways through moun-tains. He scrambled up. Get ready. Were going to have to shoot our way through them, or else we all get signed off.

Over the alert sirens, Atuarre shrilled, Wait- look!

Hans blaster was out again, ready to target on what he presumed to be another Espo. But the figure totter-ing down the lower hall toward them was moving stiff]y, its arms extended horizontally, holding some burden.

Bolluxl cried Torm, and it was. The droid stiff-legged out into the stronger light of the gallery, hold-ing a globular public-address speaker in either hand. Wires from them ran back to his open chest, patched in near Blue Maxs eraplacement. From the speakers beat the whooping radiation alarm.

They gathered around Bollux, yelling in Standard, Wookiee, Trianii, and one or two other tongues, but nobody could hear anybody else because of the alarms. Hah was getting a headache that he was will-ing to ignore only because he was too overjoyed at being alive.

Then the alarms stopped. Bollux carefully lowered the P.A. speakers and patiently unplugged their cables from himself while the others clamored for an expla-nation.

Im gratified that my plan worked, sirs and maam; but I confess it was merely an extension of Maxs false

alarms, Bollux told them. He learned about the radiation alarms while he was in the network. Under his guidance, I vandalized these two speakers from the corridor walls and adapted them. The corridors are empty now; the Espo armor is for combat, not radiation protection. They appear to have withdrawn hastily.

Han broke in, Get Max over there by the drop chutes. If he cant get one running again, were still gonna be old news. He tugged Bollux over that way.

All the chutes cut out, right? Blue Max piped up.

No sweat, Captain!

Just turn era on, huh? Hah pleaded, adding, Whats a runt like you know about sweat, anyway?

Bolluxs plastron swung wide as the droid approached the panel. But the adapter input was too high. So Chewbacca, who was closest, slung his bow-caster, took Max out of his eraplacement, and held the computer up to the chutes control panel. Maxs adapter extended itself and engaged the receptor. The metal tumblers twirled back, forth, back again. The panel lit up.

Its working! Rekkon exulted. Quickly, follow me, before someone notices and has the thing shut down again. He made a hand motion to Hall, so fast that no one else caught it, and the pilot knew he was to go last. Rekkon was still unsure of the loyalty of his people. He hopped into the drop chute and Atuarre followed after him. Then came Pakka, spinning, tum-bling, and chasing his own tail playfully in the chutes field. Torre leaped after, gun in hand.

They could hear the tread of cleated boots in the corridor. With Blue Max still tucked under his arm, Chewbacca jumped into the drop chute, too. Han held back long enough to fire at the blaster cannon from its unshielded side. There was a bright eruption as its power pack began to overload. Hah spun and dived headlong down the shaft, as Torm had invited him to do. Behind, he heard the explosion of the portable cannon.

They plunged down, in varying postures and atti-tudes, strung out behind Rekkon in a ragged line.

Craning their heads upward, they waited nervously for the first blaster bolt to come raving down the chute, but none did. Han decided that the Espos had been delayed by the exploding cannon. He hoped it would take them awhile to figure out that the drop chute was on, but feared that any moment would bring the stomach-wrenching fall, once the field was shut down again, that would plunge him, Chewie-aU of them-to their deaths.

They descended all the way to the garage levels. Rekkon left the chute at last, beckoning them to do the same. They found themselves standing in a large parking area as alarms sounded off in the distance. I thought there would be a flyer of some sort here, Rekkon said sourly; worse luck.

Were not going back into that chute, and thats that, Hah stated.

Theres a ground skimmer. Lets take it, Atuarre suggested. They piled in, with Han taking the controls and Rekkon next to him. Chewbacca sat back in the cargo bed with the others, keeping his back to his partner and his eyes on the others as he fit a new magazine into his bowcaster. Before the Wookiee could take time to return Max to Bolluxs chest, Hah had thrown the skimmer into motion and shot away, barely making the turn onto the up-ramp, scarcely avoiding the wall.

He kept the control stems steering grips pushed for-ward, giving the skimmer all the acceleration she could safely stand and a good deal more. The ramp went by in a wild corkscrewing of Formex, the walls whirling past the skimmers front cowling at hair-raising speed. Rekkon saw at once the wisdom of yielding the controls to the younger man.

Hah hoped that nobody had gotten around to seal-ing off the computer complex yet, and they hadnt. The security network was inundated with everything from reports of insurrection to drunk-and-disorderly calls from the executives club, spread across the Cen-ter and the face of Orron III. The skimmer left the garage like a missile out of a launch tube. In his haste, Hah had departed through a door clearly marked E-XgnNCV.. A traffic-monitoring scanner dutifully logged the skimmers license number for a citation and man-datory court appearance.

The skimmer tore through the city, guided partly by Rekkons instructions and partly by Hans instincts. Han left the citys edge behind in a blur, drilling a hole through the air down the fusion-formed road, as other traffic dodged and skidded hysterically away from him. He was glad hed taken the time to orient

himself on the spaceport while in Rekkons office. Since its cab was open, the wind plucked and tugged hard at everyone on the skimmer, ruffling hair, fur, and clothing alike, making conversation impossible as the passengers braced however and wherever they could.

But rounding a turn in the last stretch approaching the spaceport, Han discovered that somebody some-where in the bureaucracy had actually done a bit of thinking. The skimmer nearly crashed head-on into a roadblock, an Espo troop-hovervan parked across the roadway, its twin-mounted guns nosing for a target. Han jerked the controls hard, kicking the foot auxiliaries, and sent his small vehicle sailing off the road's surface. The engine sang with effort; the low-built skimmer slammed down among the rippling grain and raced off through it erratically. The tall grain, an Arcon Multinode hybrid, was so high that it instantly swallowed them up, hiding them from the startled Espos. But Han zigzagged anyway, for luck, and sure enough, the Espos fired even though they had no clear target, most probably from sheer frustration. The troop-hovervan was a ground-effect vehicle, unable to climb above the field, Han knew. That meant that if his pursuers wanted to give chase, they'd have to eat a little cereal themselves. He had to stand up, poking his head above the windscreen as he drove, in a mostly unsuccessful attempt to see where he was going. The skimmer sliced through thick rows of hybrid grain, sending a spray of mangled plants and chaff back over and around it. Han slitted his eyes and tried to peer through the hurricane of vegetable matter as best he could, which wasn't very well. In moments, all of the skimmer's grillwork and trim was decked with stalks of grain that had gotten lodged there, and the craft looked like a strange agricultural float.

Chewbacca, standing and exhorting, reached forward over his partner's shoulder and pointed. Han, asking no questions, changed course. He had to steer hard to slide past the hazard, a mountain of yellow metal, one of the enormous automated farm machines slowly and patiently working this part of Orton III's limitless fields.

Han broke out onto bare ground, reaped clean by the harvester. He coned the skimmer around in a wide arc, got his bearings on the spaceport and the ranked colossi of the berthed barges, and hotted off that way.

At that moment the Espo hovervan broke through, too, but farther down the field, away from the spaceport. Han couldn't take time to watch it; instead he tried to throw enough twists and dodges into his course to keep them out of the Espo gunners' sights. Heavy blaster salvos scored around the skimmer, starting small fires smoldering among the stubble of shorn stalks.

Han took the skimmer through a hairpin turn, trying to jump out of the line of fire, but the hovervan's twin-mounted guns scored closer and closer to starboard, making the shaven field erupt. He jammed the control stem back to port. But the Espo gunner, trying for a bracketing salvo, had outguessed him. The ground blew apart just beyond the skimmer's undercarriage.

The skimmer jarred violently, its nose plowing at the rich soil, crumpling, as the engine cowling was smashed and compressed. Smoke rolled from its engine compartment, and the little craft grounded, carving long scars in the crop-stubble.

Han, fighting to keep control, lost his grip on the control stem at the last moment, clipped his head on the windscreen, and was flung clear of the cab as it stopped short, ending up on his back. He watched the sky of Orton III, which appeared to be spinning, and wondered if his entire skeleton had actually been turned into confetti. That was just how he felt.

Everybody off, he announced woozily; baggage claim to your left.

The others tumbled off the wrecked skimmer. Han found himself being lifted as easily as a child; Rekkon's dark fists were hoisting him by his vest. He was pleased to find himself more or less whole. Run for the spaceport fence! Rekkon ordered the others. The whine of the Espo hovervan grew in the distance.

Han shook off the fall. The hovervan was closing quickly. Rekkon pulled him down into the shelter of the skimmer's nose and began working at the adjust-merits of his oversized disrupter pistol. Han drew his blaster. Chewie, get em moving, he called.

The vociferous Wookiee, still lugging Blue Max in one arm, shoved or shouted the others into motion. Atuarre and Pakka sped away, the Trianii female half dragging her cub, haft carrying him, with Torre not

far behind. Even Bollux moved at top speed in long, jarring bounds made possible by his heavy-duty sus-pension system, disregarding the damage he might do his gyros and shock absorbers. Chewbacca came last, casting frequent glances over his shoulder. Before them rose another stand of grain, being reaped by another of the giant machines, and past that was the spaceport security fence.

Han felt a warm liquidity on his forehead, swiped at it, and saw blood on his fingers, courtesy of the skimmers windscreen. Rekkon, having finished adjusting his disrupter, was waiting for the hovervan to come into range, which it was doing with frightening speed.

The hovervan driver, watching the figures running for the fence, failed to notice the two men hiding behind the disabled vehicle. When the Espo was close enough, Rekkon, forearms braced across the skimmers nose, fired. He set his disrupter on overload, and now the powerful handgun emptied itself in a brief flood of ruinous energy. Han had to shield his face from it, thinking what a chance Rekkon was taking; the disrupter could just as easily have blown up in his hands, killing both men.

But the jet of disrupter fire splashed across the hovervans cowl and windshield. The Espo craft slid side-on, spun once, and plowed into the ground, plowing up a mound of soil before it.

Han, lowering his hands, saw that the barrel of Rekkons pistol was white-hot, and the scholars face was sweating and seared. Rekkon tossed aside the useless pistol. You mustve taught in some tough damn schools, was Hans only comment as he struggled to his feet, preparing to run again.

Rekkon, watching the overturned hovervan, didnt hear. Body-armored Espos were already stumbling from it, to continue the pursuit on foot. The twin-gun mount, twisted underneath the vehicle, was useless. Rekkon, backing away a step or two, said, The moment has come for our departure, Captain Solo! Han pegged a couple of shots at the Espos. The range was long, but they still hit the dirt. Then he put his head down and pounded off behind Rekkon, wondering if the Espos could get into range before the fugitives made the fence and somehow got over, under, or through it. All things considered, the smart money appeared to be with the Espos, he conceded.

For long moments all he did was race after Rekkons flying sandals and wait for a blaster bolt to fry his shoulder blades. Then he raised his head, gulping breath. The monstrous harvester was working its way back down the rows of grain, its gaping maw cutting down a swath twenty meters wide, pouring the grain into a tandem load-carrier. Hah and Rekkon cut wide around it, and Hah scanned the terrain in front of him. He spotted figures thrashing through the stalks, but could make none of them out.

A shot kicked up dirt and flame off to the left, proof that the Espos were gaining. Hah and Rekkon dodged right, to put the enormous agrirobot between themselves and their pursuers. Then they were shoving, running, tearing through a world of golden-red stalks, occasionally spying one of their companions in the distance.

Han dug his heels in, sliding to a stop. Rekkon, who had come abreast of him, caught the movement and halted, too. Both of them panted hard, as Han demanded, Wheres Chewie?

Ahead of us, to the side; who can tell in this field? Hes not. Hes the only one whod be easy to spot, even here. Hah straightened, his side aching. That means hes back there? He shagged back the way hed come, ignoring Rekkons cries.

When he broke into the open again, he saw at once what had happened. Chewbacca had realized the Espos stood a good chance of overtaking his companions before they could make it to the spaceport and get past the fence. Some major distraction had been needed to save all their lives, and so the Wooldee had paused to set one up.

As Hah cried out for him to come back, Chewbacca, his bowcaster slung over his shoulder and Blue Max under his long arm, pulled himself up the side of the giant harvester as the machine went on its programmed way. The harvester had already borne the Wooldee most of the way back toward the Espos. He finished climbing the last few feet, reaching the top of the agrirobot, where its control center was situated.

Chewbacca began tugging and heaving at the protective cover over the controls. It was a durable industrial design and resisted him. Han and Rekkon watched as Chewbacca seated himself for better leverage, then applied all his strength in a tremendous effort. The cover popped loose, and the Wooldee threw it aside. He began working furiously, uncoupling hook-ups and moving components

around in order to make room for Blue Max. There was no way he could hear Hans hoarse shouts over the noise of the harvester, and the distance, and no way could the Wooldee see, from his position, the three Espos who had managed to catch hold of one of the maintenance ladders and clamber after him. Han was too far away to shoot. The Espos swarmed quickly upward. The huge harvester gave a lurch, then went through a series of disturbed tremors as Blue Max usurped control of it and tried his touch. Just as the Espos, having worked their way to the top of the ladder, leveled their weapons at Chewbaccas spine, the harvester gave the most violent shudder of all.

One Espo nearly fell, and must have yelled, because the Wooldees head snapped around just as the three crouched to keep from being dislodged. Chew-baccas bowcaster shot exploded against one mans chest, flinging him backward to roll off the harvesters side. But in turning and firing, Chewbacca had lost his own balance. The harvester went into a sharp turn, and the Wooldee had to make a desperate lunge to catch hold of a stanchion. He managed to do it but lost hold of his bowcaster.

Chewiel Hahn bawled, starting back, but Rekkons big hand closed around his shoulder, holding him res-olutely.

You cant get to him now, the scholar shouted, and that seemed certain. More Espos were closing in around the slow-moving harvester.

Chewbacca, unarmed, got his feet back under him and threw himself at the two remaining Espos before they could recover. He gathered one in a lethal hug, kicking the second, before either man could raise his weapon. But the second man somehow managed to cling to the Wookiees leg, and held on for his life. Blue Max now had the harvester under control, that much was clear. He pivoted the machine, attempting to swallow an entire squad of Espos. But, using the harvesters primitive guidance system, Max was un-aware of the Wookiees predicament. The pivot dis-lodged Chewbacca and the two Espos. They fell, limbs gyrating, and the Wookiee somehow managed to land on top. But it was still a long drop, and before the stunned humanoid could rise, he was buried under a pile of rifle-swinging Espos.

Han, struggling to get loose of Rekkons grip, felt himself shaken until his teeth rattled. Rekkon implored, There are dozens of them! You have no hope. Better to live, and stay free, to help the Wook-lee later! Hah spun, pulling his blaster. Hands off. I mean it.

Rekkon saw by his eyes that he did indeed; Han would kill anyone who stood between himself and Chewbacca. The broad black hands fell away. Gun in hand, Hah went off toward the mass of Espos. He couldnt tell just how Rekkon hit him then. Hans whole spinal column seemed to light up, and a blinding paralysis descended on him. Perhaps it was a nerve-punch, or a blow to a spot selected for its hydro-static shock value. In any case, Han dropped like an unstrung puppet.

The harvester, moving much more quickly now, circled back at the Espos. They fired on it, but the giant machine, an uncomplicated device, was difficult to stop with small-arms fire. Unimportant pieces of plating and cutter blade were shot away, but the har-vester ground on. Several Espos, failing to move quickly enough in the thick grain, vanished into its cavernous mouth.

Max had finally seen Chewbaccas predicament and moved in to give the Wookiee an opportunity to jump back aboard. But Chewbacca, his arms and legs dan-gling limply, was now being rushed away by a squad of Espos. Max couldnt go after them for fear of injur-ing Chewbacca with the clumsy harvester. Moreover, the Espos fire was becoming more concentrated. Blue Max wished desperately that Bollux were there to tell him what to do; the computer didnt feel that hed been operative long enough to make decisions like this one. But with no other apparent option, Max recog-nized that he must go join the others. He headed the ponderous harvester around, cut out its speed gover-nor, and gunned it for all it was worth.

Han only dimly felt Rekkon hoist him up on one shoulder; he could hardly focus his eyes. But as Max came past, Rekkon took a pair of wide steps, pro-pelled himself into the air, and caught a foothold at the harvesters side. He pulled himself up a short lad-der and deposited Hah on a narrow catwalk.

Some-how, Han managed to lift his head. He could make out, through the machines rough ride and the dis-tance, the knot of Espos bearing his friend away, a prisoner.

Han daved at the metal under him, to throw him-self off the machine, to go back. Rekkon was on him instantly, pinning his arms with a strength and an in-tensity that were frightening. Hes my friendl Hah

grimaced, writhing.

Rekkon shook him once more, with more emphasis than violence. Then help your friend. Urged the rich basso voice. Face hard fact you must save your-self to save him, and not throw both lives away!

The giant, imprisoning strength retreated and Han was left enervated, knowing Rekkon was right.

Hold-ing the catwalk railing, he stopped staring at the in-distinguishable specks of Chewbacca and the Espos.

Ahh. He lowered his eyes disconsolately.

Chewie...

AS he overtook each of the escapees in turn, Max slowed the harvester just enough for them to board. First was Bollux, who had fallen behind the others despite his best efforts; he made a last bound with a deep sproing from his suspension, found a servo-grip hold, and drew himself aboard. Then came Term, who, pacing the harvester, made an athletically skillful mount. Lastly, Atuarre and Pakka came aboard, the cub clinging to his mothers tail. Blue Max accelerated for the spaceport perimeter.

Rekkon still held Hah to the catwalk, but now it was to make sure he wouldnt fall. Captain, you must accept that theres no more you can do here. Your chances of getting to Chewbacca here on erron III are vanishing small. And, more to the point, its doubtful hell be here for long. Surely hell be taken for interrogation, just like the others. Our mission is yours now; its nearly certain the Weekice wdl be put in with the rest of the Authoritys special enemies.

Han wiped blood from his forehead, pulled himself upright, and began climbing a maintenance ladder.

Where are you going? Rekkon demanded.

Someone has to tell Max where hes going, Han answered.

The spaceport was guarded by a security fence of fine mesh, ten meters high, carrying a lethal charge maintained by transmitting posts along its length. An unprotected man, or even an armored one, would stand no chance of making it through, but the har-vester offered a special form of protection. Everybody get to a catwalk, Rekkon called. Stand on the insulated strips? His various compan-ions, Hah included, rushed for positions, bracing their feet on the thick runners of insulation on the mechan-ics catwalks.

The harvester hit the field area as Max threw his cutter blades into motion again. Defensive energy spat and splattered all around the agrirobot, discharging across its bow in skittering strands. Then the fence was torn apart by the harvesters blades, a twenty-meter length of it ripped loose and engulfed. The defensive field faded along that part of the fence, its continuity broken. Whereupon the giant machine churned out on-to the fiat, press-bonded landing area.

Han hauled himself up and looked down at Max, nestled in the control niche. Can you program this crate so itll run without you?

The computer probes photoreceptor swiveled around, coming up to bear on him. Thats what its built to do, but itll remember only simple things, Cap-tain. For a machine its pretty dumb.

Hah weighed his suspicions, presumptions, and a knowledge of security procedures. Theyll be rushing their men to the passenger-ship end of the port; they wont think the barges are any good to us. But theyll certainly be looking for this tub, Max. Set it up so itll give us a few seconds to get dear, then head itself down toward the main port area. To the others, he called, Checkout time! Everybody pound ground!

From Blue Max came low buzzes, beeps, and wonks of his labors. Then he announced, Done, Captain, but we better get off right now.

Han reached down as Max disengaged himself from the harvesters controls, pulled free the connector jacks Chewbacca had inserted, and lifted the computer out of the niche. There was a carrying strap in a recessed groove on Maxs top. Han pulled it out and slung Max over his shoulder.

When he reached the ground, Rekkon and the oth-ers were already there. They all stepped back as the harvester ground into motion again, wheeled promptly, and tore off between rows of barges. From the bar-vester, Han had already spotted, not far away, the barge shell concealing the Millennium Falcon. He handed Blue Max back to Bollux and started for his ship at a dead run, with the rest keeping up as best they could.

The outer hatch, the makeshift one, wasnt dogged, of course. He pushed it aside, palmed the ramp and

inner hatch open. Then he dashed to the cockpit and began swiping at controls, bringing his ship back to life, yelling Rekkon, say the word the second every-bodys onboard, and hang onto your heirlooms! He pulled on his headset and deserted all caution, think-ing, Hell with preflight. He brought the barges engines up to full power all at once, and simply hoped they wouldnt blow or dummy out on liftoff. His best hope lay in the nature of bureaucracy. Some-where back in the fields, the Espo detachment commander was trying to explain to his superior what had happened. That man, in turn, would have to contact port security and give them the rundown. Given a creaky enough chain of command, the Falcon still stood a chance.

Han pulled on his flight gloves and ran through his preparations with a sharp feeling of incompleteness; he was used to dividing the tasks with Chewbacca, and each detail of the liftoff drove home the fact that his friend Wasnt there.

He checked the barges readouts-and swore several of his choicer curses. Bollux, stumping into the cockpit to relay Rekkons word that all was secure, added, Whats wrong, Captain?

The motherless barge is whats wrong! Some over-eager Authority expediter filled it up already! The instruments proved it; several hundred thousand metric tons of grain were stowed in the barges vast shell. There went Hans plan for rapid ascent.

But, sir, Bollux asked in his unhurried speech pattern, cant you release the barge shell?

If the explosive-releases worked, and if I didnt damage the Falcon, Id still have to get above the ports close-proximity defenses, and maybe a picket ship. He turned and yelled back down the passage-way, Rekkon! Get somebody in those gun turrets; we may have to stand tall! Hah could operate the ships top and belly turrets by means of serves from the cockpit, but remote control was a poor substitute for sentient gunners. And screw your navels in; we go in twenty seconds! He fumed over the fact that the barges engines took so much longer to heat up than the Falcons.

Port control, having noticed that the barge was preparing to lift, began transmitting to what it still presumed to be a robotized ship orders to abort liftoff. Hah hit the overrides and had the barges computer answer by acknowledging clearance as if it had received permission to go. Port control repeated the command to hold, convinced it was dealing with a computer malfunction along with all its other problems.

Hah brought the engines up. The barge wallowed up from its pit, bending aside the boarding gantry, ignoring all directions to do otherwise. As his radius of vision increased with altitude, Han spied the abandoned harvester. It was halfway to the other end of the giant port, surrounded by Espo hover-vans, skimmers, and self-propelled artillery. The harvester had been partially disabled, but still obeyed its preset programming mindlessly, trying to grind forward.

As Han watched, a cannonade from all sides stopped the huge machine for good, gouging large chunks from it, turning most of the harvesters lower chassis into wreckage. Someone no longer cared whether prisoners were taken or not. The harvesters power plant went up in a fireball, and the harvester split in half with a force that rocked the Espo field pieces back.

As the barge rose higher, responding sluggishly under its burden of cargo, ignoring chatter from the port control, Han saw the place where Chewbacca had been captured. Other Espo vehicles were gathered near the wreck of the hovervan. Hah couldnt tell whether his partner was there or had already been taken away, but the fields were crawling with Security Police, like a pestilence among the golden-red grain, searching for possible stragglers. Rekkon had been right; going back wouldve spelled certain disaster. The barge gave a sudden, convulsive shudder, and the Falcons passengers felt as if someone had caught them by the collar and given a yank. With an ominous feeling, Hah punched up the rear screens. Bollux, having nearly fallen, lowered himself into the navigators chair, inquiring what was wrong. Hah ignored him.

It had been a picket ship, in transpolar orbit, that he and Chewbacca had picked up just prior to landing. Even Rekkon hadnt realized how security-minded the Authority was about Orron III. Moving up hard astern the barge was a dreadnaught, one of the militarys old Invincible Class capital ships---over two kilometers long, bristling with gun turrets, missile tubes, tractor-beam projectors, and deflector shields, armored like a protosteel mountain. The dreadnaught hailed them with the demand that

the barge halt, and at the same time identified herself the Shannadors Revenge. She locked her tractors onto the barge, and compared with her raw power, the lighters beam back on Duroon had been a mere beckoning finger.

Church is out, Han observed, bringing his ordinance up to charge and preparing to angle deflector shields, for all the good it would do. The dreadnaught had enough weaponry to hold and vaporize a score of ships like the Falcon. Han opened the intercom. That shake-up was a tractor. Everybody stay cool-things could get rough. As if we have a prayer, he finished to himself. But he had no intention of being caught alive. Better to shorten a few Espo careers, and go out in style.

There were sounds of banging, tearing metal from the barge shell, of parting supports and struts. Some of the superstructural features, weakened or loosened by alterations to the hull, had been pulled free by the tractor beam and gone flying back toward the Shannadors Revenge.

Han took inspiration from it. He had at his side breadboarded computer overrides for the barges every function. His fingers stabbed at them as he shouted, Everybody brace! Were gonna- and was slammed back in his seat. He hit the cargo release, opening the barges rear dump-doors. Hundreds of thousands of tons of grain were poured into the dreadnaughts tractors, pulled toward the Shannadors Revenge by her own brute power, fanning out in a blinding con-trail, as the barge surged ahead with a lightening load. The dreadnaught was engulfed, her sensors muffled by the tidal wave of grain. Han, with one eye on his own sensors, saw that the warship was driving straight on through the hail of grain, closing quickly on the barge even though she was blinded. Her tractor beams were still clamped onto the barges stern, and Han wondered how long it would be before her skipper gave the command to open fire.

There was only one other possibility. He hit the controls, cutting in the barges retrothrusters, and with virtually the same motion, slapped the emergency releases. His other hand hovered over the main drive control of the Millennium Falcon.

The barge shell shook, losing much of its velocity, while the reports of exploding bolts sounded through both the freighter and the larger ship around it. Super-structural elements, added to secure the Falcon and disguise her lines, were blown clear. A split second later, the Falcons engines howled to life, their blue fire tearing the smaller ship free of the breakaway supports holding her and severing her external control hookups.

Han took the Falcon on the same course he had been holding, keeping the barge shell between himself and the Authority warship. The Shannadors Revenge, her sensors impaired, had failed to note the barge shells drastic drop in speed. The dreadnaughts captain was calling for a vector change just as the warship rammed the decelerating barge. The Shannadors Revenues forward screens flared with impact, and her anticoncussion fields cut in instantly on collision, as she cut the floating hulk of the barge shell in half in a terrific impact and suffered structural damage of her own. The warships forward sensor suite was disabled; she ro-sounded with alarms and damage reports. Airtight doors began booming shut automatically, triggered by decompressure hull ruptures.

The Millennium Falcon was clawing for the upper atmosphere. The thought that he had bloodied the nose of a battlewagon, escaping against all odds, didnt lighten Hans mood, nor did the thought that hyper-space and safety were only moments away. Occupying his mind was one simple, intolerable fact his friend and partner was now in the merciless hands of the Corporate Sector Authority.

When the stars had parted before him and the ship was safely in hyperspace, Han sat for long minutes thinking that he couldnt remember the last time he had spaced without the Wookiee beside him. Rekkon had been right in arguing for escape, but that didnt change Hans feeling that he had let Chewbacca down. But regrets were a waste of time. Han stripped off his headset and shoved himself out of his seat. Rekkon was his only hope now. He headed for the forward compartment, the ships combination lounge-mess-me area, and realized something was wrong while he was still in the passageway. There was the pungent smell of ozone, the smell of blaster fire. Rekkon!

Han ran to where the scholar slumped over the gameboard. He had been shot from behind, by a blaster set on needle-beam at low power. The sound of it probably hadnt even carried across the compartment. On the gameboard, under Rekkons body, was a portable readout. Next to it a clear puddle of molten liquid bubbled, the remains of the data plaque. Rekkon was dead, of course; he had been shot at close range.

Hah leaned on a bulkhead pad, rubbing his eyes and wondering what to do next. Rekkon had been his sole hope for rescuing Chewbacca and for getting him-self out of this insane jam. With Rekkon dead, the hard-won information gone, and at least one traitor-murderer onboard, Han felt alone for one of the few times in his life. His blaster was in his hand, but there was no one else in the compartment or in the passage-way.

A tattering on the rungs of the main ladderwell. Han ran to it just as Torm came climbing up from the Falcons belly turret. As he came up, Torre found him-self staring into the muzzle of Hans gun.

Just give over your pistol, Torm. Keep your right hand on the rung, and do it with your left, easy. Dont make a mistake; itd be your one and only.

When he had the other mans weapon, Han let him ascend, then made him shuck his tool belt. Patting him down and finding no other weapons, Han motioned for him to move into the lounge, then called up the ladderwell for Atuarre to come down from the ships top quad-mount.

He kept one eye on Torm, who was staring in shock at Rekkons body. Wheres her cub? he asked the man quietly.

The redhead shrugged. Rekkon told Pakka to look around for a medi-pack. You werent the only one who was injured along the way. The cub went off to rum-mage around. I guess when you yelled for everyone to stay put and hang on, he did. He looked back to Rekkon, as if he couldnt fathom the fact of the mans death. Who did it, Solo? You?

No. And the list of possibilities is awfully short. He heard Atuarres light tread on the rungs and covered her as she came down the ladderwell.

The Trianiis features became a mask of feline hatred. You dare point a weapon at me?

Gag it. Toss your gun out here, careful, then step out and drop the tool belt. Somebodys killed Rekkon, and it could be you as easy as anyone. So dont push me. Im not telling you twice.

Her eyes were wide now, the news of Rekkons death appearing to shock her out of her fury. But how can I tell if its real or an act? Han asked himself.

When he had them both in the forward compartment, he still found he couldnt pick up anything but shock and dismay. Theirs, at least, served to prod him out of his own.

A clanking on the deckplates marked Bolluxs arrival from the cockpit. Han didnt look around until he heard the urgency in the droids voice. Captain!

Han whirled, dropping to one knee, blaster up. Beyond the cockpit offshoot from the passageway crouched the cub, Pakka, his small pistol held in one paw-hand, a medi-pack swinging from the other. He seemed to be wavering indecisively.

He thinks youre threatening me! Atuarre rasped, moving toward her cub. Hah swung his blaster to cover her and looked back to the cub. Tell the kid to drop it and come to you, Atuarre. Do it!

She did, and the cub, shifting his wide eyes between Han and his mother, obeyed.

Torre took the medi-pack from the cub and handed it to Han. Still covering his passengers, Han moved to an acceleration chair and opened the pack with his free hand. He held the nozzle of an irrigation bulb against his forehead injury, then wiped at it with a disinfectant pad.

Putting the medi-pack down, he took up the three confiscated weapons, put them aside, and confronted Torm, Atuarre, and Pakka. His mind ran in circles. How to tell who had done it? Theyd each had a weapon, and time. Either Pakka had doubled back from his search, or one of the others had left his turret long enough to murder. Han almost regretted not having exchanged fire with the Shannadors Revenge; at least hed have known if either of the quad-mounts was untended.

Atuarre and Torm were trading suspicious looks now. Rekkon told me, Tonn was saying, that he took you and the cub on against his better judgment.

Me? she shrieked. What about you? She turned to Hall. Or, for that matter, you?

That shook him. Sister, Im the one who got you out of there, remember? Besides, how could I lift off and shoot Rekkon at the same time? And anyway, Bollux was with me. Han rummaged again in the medi-pack, dug out a patch of synth-flesh, and pressed it over his injury, his mind in a turmoil.

That all couldve been done by computer, Solo, or you could have killed him just before I came down, Torm said. And what goods a droid for a witness? Youre the one pointing the blaster around, hotshot.

Hah, pushing the medi-pack aside, replied, I'll tell you what you're all, all three of you, going to keep an eye on one another, and I'm going to be the only one with a gun. If anybody has the wrong look on his face, it's going to be all over for him. You're all fair game, understand?

Atuarre moved to the gameboard. I'll help you with Rekkon.

Keep your hands off him, Tonn shouted. It was either you or that cub who killed him, maybe both. The big redheads fists were bailed. Both Atuarre and Pakka were showing their fangs.

Hart cut them off with a wave of the blaster. Ev-erybody relax. I'll take care of Rekkon; Bollux can help. The three of you move down to that cargo hold off the main passageway. He stifled their objections with a motion of the guns muzzle. First Torm, then the two Trianii, began to move.

Han stood to one side as they filed into the empty hold. If anybody sticks his face out of here without my say-so, I'll figure he's out to get me, and I'll fry him. And if anybody's hurt in here, I'll space whoever is left, no questions asked. He closed the hatch and left them.

In the forward compartment, Bollux waited si-lently, with Blue Max on a console nearby. Han re-garded the corpse. Well, Rekkon, you did your best, but it didn't get you far, did it? And you dumped it into my lap. Now my partners captured and your murderers onboard with me. You weren't a bad old man, but I somehow wish I'd never heard of you.

Han picked up one heavy arm, dragging at the corpse. Bollux, you get ready to take the other side; he was no lightweight.

Then he noticed the scrawl. Han pushed Rekkon's body back clumsily and bent to examine a stylus scribble on the gameboard that the dead man's arm had hidden. The writing was difficult to read, dashed off in a pained, distorted hand, hastily and weakly. Han turned his head this way and that, puzzling the message out aloud Stars End, Mytus VII. He knelt and quickly found Rekkon's bloodstained stylus on the floor by the gameboard base. With his last strength, after he'd been left for dead, Rekkon had managed to leave word of what the computer plaque had told him. Dying, he hadn't abandoned his cam-paign.

Foolish, Han told himseN. Who was he trying to tell?

You, Captain Solo, Bollux answered automati-cally. Han turned on him in surprise. What?

Rekkon left the message for you, sir. The wound indicates that he was shot from behind, and therefore quite probably never saw his assailant. The only living entity he could trust would be you, Captain, and it would be logical to assume you would be present when his body was moved. He made sure in this man-ner that the information would reach you.

Hah stared down at the body for a long moment. All fight, you stubborn old man; you win. He reached over, smearing and eradicating the words with his hand. Bollux, you never saw this, under-stand? Play dumb.

Shall I erase that portion of my memory, sir? Hans answer was slow, as if he was catching the habit from the droid. No. You may be the one wholl have to pass it along if I don't hack it. Make sure Blue Max keeps zipped, too.

Yes, Captain. Bollux moved to take Rekkon's other arm as Han prepared to hoist again. His joints creaked, and his servos whined. This was a great man, was he not, Captain?

Han strained under the corpse's weight. What do you mean?

Just, sir, that he had a function, a purpose he cared about above and beyond his life. Doesn't that indicate a greatness to the purpose?

You'll have to read the obituaries, Bollux; all I can tell you is, he's dead. And we're going to have to eject him through the emergency lock; we might get boarded yet, and we can't have him around.

Without further conversation, the two dragged at Rekkon, who had reached out from beyond death and given Hah the answers he needed.

Hah opened the hatch. Atuarre, Pakka, and Torm looked up in unison. They'd taken seats on the bare deck, the man at the opposite side of the empty hold from the two Trianii.

We had to ditch Rekkon, Han told them. Atuarre, I want you and Pakka to go square away the forward compartment. You can throw some eats into the warming unit, too. Torm, come with me; I need a hand repairing the damage we did on liftoff.

Atuarre objected. I am a Trianii Ranger, and a rated pilot, not a drudge. Besides, Solo-Captain, that man is a traitor.

Save it, Hah cut her off. Ive locked up all the other weapons in the ship, including Chewies other bowcaster. Im the only one armed, and things stay that way until I figure out what to do with you all. She gave him a sullen look, telling him, Solo-Captain, youre a fool. She left, with Pakka trailing behind. Torre rose, but Han stopped him with an arm across the hatchway. The redhead retreated back into the hold and waited. Youre the only one I can trust, Han told him. Bollux isnt really much good, and I just figured out who killed Rekkon. Which of them did it?

The cub, Pakka. He was in Authority custody, and they messed with him. Thats why he doesnt talk. I think they brain-set him, then let Atuarre recover him. Rekkon wouldnt have let any of you others near. Torm nodded grimly. Han produced the mans pis-tol from the back of his gunbelt and handed it to him. Its charge indicator read full. Keep this on you. Im not sure Atuarres figured it out yet, but Im willing to play them along and find out if either of them know anything thatll help.

Torre stashed the gun in his coverall pocket. What will we do next?

Rekkon left a message as he was dying, scrawled it on the gameboard. The Authoritys keeping its special prisoners at something called Stars End, on Mytus VI. After weve checked the ship over, well gather in the forward compartment and run down everything weve got in files and computers on it. Maybe Pakka or Atuarre will let something slip then.

When the light damage suffered by the Millennium Falcon in her breakout from Orton III had been re-paired insofar as was possible, the ships complement gathered in the forward compartment. Hah had brought four portable readouts. He gave one to each of the others and took one himself. Bollux watched, seated to one side, with Max back in his usual place, gazing out from the droids chest.

I patched these readouts into the ships computers, Han explained. Each of theres keyed to one kind of information. Ill pull navigational, Atuarres got plan-etological; Pakka can retrieve the Authoritys unclas-sifted stuff, and Torms got operational files from the outlaw-techs. Okay, punch up Stars End and lets get at it.

Each of the other three complied. Torms screen, except for the retrieval request, remained blank.

Atuarres too. She looked up, as they all did, to see Han scan his own readout.

Your portables arent hooked up to anything, he told them, only mine. Atuarre, show Torre your screen. Dubious, she still did as he asked, turning her read-out so that the redhead could see it. On her screen was the shnple retrieval request, MYTUS VIII. Yours too, Pakka, Hah bade the cub. That readout showed MYTUS V.

Catch his face, Han told the others, meaning Torre, who had become pallid. You know what youve done, dont you, Torre? Show everybody your readout. It says MYTUS VII, but I told you that Stars End was on MYTUS VI, just as I told the others the wrong planet. But you already knew the right one, because you read it over Rekkons shoulder before you killed him, right? His voice lost its false light-ness. I said right, traitor?

Torre jumped to his feet with impressive speed, gun drawn. Atuarre pulled her out too, and pointed it at him. But neither Torms shot at Hah nor Atuarres at him worked.

Two malfunctions? Hah inquired innocently, un-limbering the blaster at his side. I betcha mine works, Term.

Term heaved his pistol wildly. Hah reacted with a star pilots reflexes, slapping the gun out of midair with his left hand. But Term had already whirled and seized the surprised Atuarre in a savage infighting hold, prepared to break her neck with a slight twist. When she started to resist, he forced her neck to the brink of fracture, making her subside.

Put down the blaster, Solo, he grated, and get your hands on the gameboard, or Ill-

He was interrupted as Pakka, in a spectacular leap, landed on Torms shoulders, sinking fangs into his neck, clawing at his eyes, wrapping a supple taft around the traitors throat. Term was forced to release his hold to keep from being blinded. Atuarre sought to turn and fight, and even Bollux had risen in the moment of crisis, unsure of just what to do.

Term gave Atuarre a vicious kick. His superior weight and strength sent her sprawling, blocking Han, who had been moving for a clear shot. As Han skirted Atuarre, Term tore Pakka from his shoulders and threw the cub aside just as Bollux blundered into the pilots path. Pakka bounced off one of the pads of safety cushioning lining the compartment hatch, as Term dashed into the passageway.

Dodging, moving as quickly as he could, Torre raced past the cockpit, main ladderwell, and ramp hatch; none of them held any promise of even tempo-rary safety. He heard Hans footsteps close behind and ducked into the first compartment he came to, damning himself for not having taken time to learn the ships layout. He hit the hatch-close button as he came through. The compartment was empty, offering no tools, nothing he might use as a weapon. Hed been hoping this was the escape-pod chamber, but fortune had passed him by. At least, he thought, he had a moments respite. He might be able to buy time, perhaps even wrest Solos blaster from him. His thoughts were moving so quickly that he didnt realize, for a moment, where he was. But when he did, he threw himself back at the hatch through which hed come, tearing at the controls, screaming obscenities.

Dont waste your time, came Hans voice over the intercom. Nice of you to choose the emergency lock, Torre. Its where you wouldve ended up any-way.

Han stood looking through the viewport set in the locks inner hatch. Hed overridden the locks controls to make sure Term couldnt get back in. All the Fal-cons access systems had inboard overrides, to make life complicated for anyone interested in forced entry, a wise smugglers option.

Term tried to wet his lips with a very dry tongue.

Solo, stop and think a minute.

Save your breath, Torre. Youre gonna need it all; youre going swimming. There were, of course, no spacesuits stored in the lock. Torms eyes opened wide with fear.

Solo, no! I never had anything against you; I never would have come, except that bastard Rekkon and the Trianii never took their eyes off me. If Id cut, they would have shot me. You can understand that, cant you? I had to look out for number one, Solo? So you shot Rekkon, Han told him in a soft voice, no questioning to it.

I had to! If hed passed on word about Stars End, it wouldve been my neck! You dont know these Au-thority people, Solo; they dont accept failure. It was Rekkon or me.

Atuarre came up behind Han, and Pakka and Bol-lux after her. The cub climbed up the droids shoul-ders for a better view. But, Tom, Atuarre said, Rekkon found you, recruited you. Your father and brother really have disappeared.

Without facing away from the viewport, Han added, Im sure they did. Your father and older brother, right, Torre? Lets see, now, that wouldnt by any chance make you heir to the Kail Ranges, would it? The traitors face was waxen. Yes, if I did as the Authority asked. Solo, dont play righteous with reel You said youre a businessman, didnt you? I can get all the money you want! You want your friend back?

The Wooldee is on his way to Stars End by now; the only way youll ever see him again is by bargaining with me. The Authoritys got no grudge against you; you can name your price!

Torre reasserted control over himself, going on more calmly. These people keep their word, Solo. They dont even know your names yet, any of you; I was operating under deep cover, saving the informa-tion I developed so I could up the price. Strike a deal. The Authoritys just good business people, like you and me. You can have the Wooldee back and go free with enough money to buy a new ship.

He got no answer. Hans gaze had gone to his own reflection in the metal of the emergency locks control panel. Torm pounded his fists on the inner hatch, a dull thudding.

Solo, tell me what you want; Ill get it for you, I swear! Youre a guy who looks out for number one, arent you? Isnt that what you are, Solo?

Hah stared at his own lean reflection. In another man, hed have said those eyes were too used to con-cealing everything but cynicism. His thoughts echoed Torm Is that what I am? He looked back to Torms face, straining against the viewport.

Ask Rekkon, Hah answered, and hit the lock release.

The outer hatch snapped open. With an explosion of air into vacuum, Torm was hurled out into the chaotic pseudoreality of hyperspace. Once outside the Millennium Falcons mantle of energy, the units of matter and patterns of force that had been Torm ceased to have any coherent meaning.

SOLO-CAPTAIN, Atuarre interrupted his thoughts, leaning into the cockpit, isnt it time we spoke? Weve been here for nearly ten Standard Time-Parts, and our course of action is no clearer than when we arrived. We must reach some decision, dont you agree?

Han broke off gazing out the canopy at the distant speck, barely visible, of Mytus VII. All around the Millennium Falcon rose the peaks and hills of the tiny asteroid on which she was concealed. Atuarre, I dont know how Trianii feel about waiting, but me, I hate it worse than anything. But theres nothing else we can do; we have to sit tight and play out our hand.

She wouldnt accept that. There are other courses of action, Captain. We could attempt to contact Jessa again. Her slit-irises dwelled on him.

Han shifted around in the pilot seat to face her directly, so quickly that she drew back reflexively.

Seeing this, he reined in his temper. We could waste all kinds of time looking for Jessa. When her operation ran, after we got hit by the IRDs, she probably dug a hole and pulled it in after her. The Falcon can cook along at point-five factors over Big L, but we still might waste a month looking for the outlaw-techs and not find them. Maybe word will find its way to Jessa, or one of the prearranged blind transmissions, but we cant bank on her. I dont count on anybody but me; if I have to bust Chewie out of there alone, Ill do it.

Some of the tension left her. You arent alone, Solo-Captain. My mate is there at Stars End, too. Your fight is Atuarres. She extended a slim, sharp-clawed hand. But come, now, take some food. Star-ing at Mytus VII cannot help and may be distracting us from solutions.

He pushed himself up out of the seat, taking one more look at the distant planet. Mytus VII was a worthless rock, as worlds went, revolving around a small, unexceptional sun at the end of the wisp of stars that was the Corporate Sector. Stars End, indeed. There'd be scant danger of anyones happening on the Authoritys secret prison facility here, unless he came looking for it specifically.

Since Mytus VII had been listed in the charts as being at the outermost edge of its solar system, Hah had broken into normal space nearly ten Standard Time-Parts before, deep in interstellar space, far out of sensor range. Hed come in from the opposite side of the system, entering a thick asteroid belt halfway between Mytus VII and its sun, and hunted up what hed wanted, this jagged hunk of stone. Using his starships engines and tractors, hed brought the asteroid onto a new course, one that would allow him to take a long-range peek at Stars End, sure that no one there would notice the slightly unusual behavior of one tiny mote in the uncharted asteroid belt.

Hed spent most of his time monitoring the planets communications, studying it by sensors, and watching the occasional ship come and go. Monitored comms traffic had told him nothing; most of it had been encrypted in codes that had resisted his computers analyses. Plaintext messages had been either mundane or meaningless, and Hah suspected that at least some of them had been sent strictly for appearances sake, to make Stars End look like an ordinary, if remote, Authority installation.

Now he trailed Atuarre into the forward compartment. Bollux was seated near the gameboard, his plastron open. Pakka was stalking a jetting remote back and forth. The remote, a small globe powered by magnetic fields and repulsor power, turned, dove, climbed, and dodged unpredictably. The cub hunted it with tail twitching and quivering, obviously enjoying the game. The remote eluded him time and again, demonstrating more than its usual maneuverability.

As Hah watched, Pakka nearly caught the globe, but it evaded his pounce at the last second. Hah looked to the droid. Bollux, are you directing that remote?

The red photoreceptors trained on him. No, Captain. Max is sending information pulses to it. Hes much better at anticipation and dictating random factors than I, sir. Random factors are extremely difficult concepts.

Hah watched the cub make a final, long spring and catch the remote in midair, pulling it to the deck and

rolling over and over with it in sheer delight. Then the pilot sat at the gameboard, which often doubled as a table, and accepted a mug of concentrate broth from Atuarre. They had used up fresh supplies several Time-Parts before and were now sustaining them-selves on the Falcons ample, if bland, emergency rations.

There have been no new developments, Captain? Bollux asked. Han presumed the droid already knew the answer and had asked only out of a sort of pro-programmed conversational courtesy. Bollux had turned out to be an entertaining shipmate who could spin hours of tales and accounts of his long years work and the many worlds hed seen. He also had a reper-toire of jokes programmed into him by a former owner, and an absolutely deadpan delivery. Zero, BoUux. Absolutely zilch.

May I suggest, sir, that you assemble all available information in sum, recapping it? Among sentient life forms, new ideas sometimes emerge that way, I have noticed.

I bet. After all, arent most decrepit labor droids armchair philosophers? Hah put his mug down, rubbing his jaw thoughtfully. Anyway, there isnt much to tote up. Were on our own---

Are you sure theres no other resource? Max chirped.

Dont start that again, lowpockets, Han warned.

Where was I? Weve found the place we want, Mytus VII, and-

How high is the order of probability? Max wanted to know.

Up an afterburner with the order of probability, Hah snapped. If Rekkon said its here, its here. The installation has a pretty big power plant, almost for-tress class. And quit interrupting, or Ill take a drill to you.

Lets see. We cant hang around forever, either; supplies are running low. What else? He scratched his forehead where the synth-flesh patch had flaked away, leaving new, unscarred skin.

This is a strictly off-limits solar system, Atuarre contributed.

Oh, yeah, and if we get nailed here without a mighty good alibi, theyll stick us in jail, or what-ever. He smiled at BoUux and Blue Max. Except you boys. You, theyd probably recycle into lint filters and spittoons.

He dragged the toe of his boot back and forth on the deck. Not much more to it; only that Im not leaving this stretch of space without Chewie. Of all the things hed mentioned, he was surest of that. Hed spent many long watches in the Falcons cockpit, haunted by what his Wookiee partner might be under-going. A hundred times since taking up this vigil, hed almost cut in the ships engines to shoot his way into Stars End and get his friend out or get flamed in the attempt. Each time, his hand had been stayed by the memory of Rekkons words, but it was a constant struggle for Han to restrain his impulses.

Atuarre had plainly been thinking along the same lines. When the Espos came to evict us from our colony world, she said slowly, some Trianii tried armed resistance. The Espos were brutal in their inter-rogation of prisoners, seeking the ringleaders. It was the first time I had seen anyone use The Burning. You know what I refer to, Solo-Captain?

Han did. The Burning was a torture involving the use of a blaster set at low power, to scorch and sear the flesh off a prisoner, leaving only blood-smeared bone. Usually, a leg would be first, immobilizing the victim; then the rest of the skeleton was exposed, inch by inch. Any other prisoners could be made to watch, to break their will. The Burning seldom failed to obtain answers, if answers were to be had; but in Hans opinion, no being who employed such methods de-served to live.

I will not leave my mate in the hands of the kind of people who would do that, Atuarre was saying. We are Trianii; death, ff it comes to that, is not something we fear.

Not a very linear analysis, Blue Max piped up.

Well, who said youd understand it, birdhouse?

Han scoffed.

Oh, I comprehend it, Captain, Max said with what Han couldve sworn was a note of pride. I just

said it wasn't very-

He was interrupted by a beep from the comtoo monitoring suite. Han was out of his chair and halfway to the cockpit by the second beep. Just as he slid into the pilot's seat, a last, sustained beep signaled the end of the transmission.

The recorder bagged it, Hah said, hitting the playback. I don't think it was encrypted.

It was a clear text message, sent economically, in burst. He had to slow down the playback by a five-to-one factor before it ungarbled.

To Corporate Vice-President Hirken, Authority facility at Stars End, the audio-reconstruction began. From the Imperial Entertainers Guild. We beg the Viceprex's indulgence and forgiveness, but the troupe scheduled to stop at your location has been forced to cancel its itinerary because of transportational mishap. This office will schedule a replacement immediately, when a troupe with a droid of the requisite type becomes available. I am, distinguished Viceprex, your abject servant, Hokkor Long, Secretary in charge of scheduling, Imperial Entertainers Guild.

Hans' fist hit the console on the last syllable. That's it!

Atuarre's expression mixed befuddlement with doubt of Hah's soundness of mind. Solo-Captain, that's what?

No, no, I mean that's us. We're in! We just got dealt a wild card!

He whooped, slammed his fist in his palm, and nearly ruffled Atuarre's thick mane from glee. She retreated a step. Solo-Captain, has the oxygen pressure dropped too low for you? That message was about entertainers.

He snorted. Where've you been all your life? He said replacement entertainers. Don't you know what that means? Haven't you ever seen the broken-down acts the Guild'll throw in to fill a playdate, just so they can hang on to their agent's fee? Haven't you ever gone to some bash where they promised a class act, then at the last second they pull a switch and stick in some...

It dawned on him that they were all staring at him now, photoreceptors and Trianii eyes. He half sobered. What else can we do? The only other thing I've thought of is to fly into Mytus VII backward so they'd think we were leaving. But this is even wilder. We can do it. Oh, they'll think we stink like banta droppings maybe, but they'll buy the lie.

He saw Atuarre was far from convinced, and turned to Pakka. They want entertainers. How'd you like to be an acrobat?

The cub made a little bounce, a kind of strain to speak, then, frustrated, sprang into a backflip to swing upside down from an overhead control conduit by his knees and tail.

Hah nodded approval. What about it, Atuarre, for your mate's sake? Can you sing? Do magic tricks? She was nonplused, resenting his appeal to Pakka and his invocation of her mate. But she saw, too, that he was right. How many chances like this would come their way?

The cub began clapping his paws for Itan's attention. When he got it, Pakka shook his head energetically in answer to Hans' last question; then, still hanging upside down, he put paws on hips and made wriggling motions.

Hah's eyebrows knit. A... dancer? Atuarre, you're a dancer!

She cuffed her cub's rump sharply. I am not, er, unskilled in the rites of my people. Itan saw she was embarrassed; she riveted him with a defiant stare. And what of you, Solo-Captain? With what will you astonish your audience?

He was too exhilarated with the prospect of action to be dampened. Me? I'll think of something.

Inspirations my specialty!

A dangerous specialty, the most dangerous of all, perhaps. What of the droid? What droid? We don't even know what kind of droid they meant.

Ah, a replacement droid, remember? Hah talked fast, to sell his point, gesturing at Bollux. The droid made strangely human prevocal sounds, a creak of astonishment, and Blue Max got out a Wow! as Hah rattled on.

We can say the Guild got it wrong. So Stars End wanted a juggler or whatever and they get a story-

teller. So what? Well tell them to go sue the Entertainers Guild!

Captain Solo, sir, if you please, Bollux finally interjected. With your kind permission, sir, I must point out-

But Han already had his hands on the droids weatherbeaten shoulders, eyeing him artistically.

Hmm, new paint, of course, and there's plenty aboard; it often pays to slap a coat on something before resale, especially if you didn't own it to begin with. Scarlet liqui-gloss, I think; a five-coat job all we have time for. And maybe some trim. Nothing flashy, no scrollwork or filigree; just some restrained silver pinstriping. Bollux, boy, you can stop worrying about obsolescence after this, cause you're gonna lay out in the aisles!

Their approach and planetfall were uneventful. Han had altered the drift of their captive asteroid to take him back out of range of the Authority's sensors and then abandoned it. Once back in deep space, he'd made a nanno-jump, barely brushing hyperspace, to emerge near Mytus VII and its two small moonlets. The Falcon identified herself, using the Waivered registration obtained by Rekkon. To that was added the proud announcement that she was the grand touring vehicle of Madam Atuarres Roving Performers. Mytus VII was a place of rocky desolation, airless, its distance from its sun rendering it dim and cheerless. If anybody escaped Stars End, he'd have no place to go; the rest of the solar system was untenanted, none of its planets being hospitable to humanoid life.

The Authority's installation was marked by groupings of temporary dormitories, hangars and guard barracks, hydroponics layouts, dome-sheds and weapon sites. The ground was gouged and pocked where construction of permanent subsurface facilities was in progress, but there was at least one finished structure already. In the middle of the base reared a tower like a stark, gleaming dagger.

Evidently no tunnel system had been completed yet. The whole complex was interconnected by a maze of tunnel-tubes, like giant, pleated hoses radiating from their boxy junction stations, a common arrangement for construction sites on airless worlds.

There was only one sizable vessel on the ground, an armed Espo assault craft. There were also smaller craft and unarmed cargo lighters, but Han had checked carefully for picket ships this time and was satisfied that there were none.

Hah, checking visually for that heavyweight power plant his sensors had spotted, he'd faded to locate it and wondered if it might be in that tower. He shot a second look at the tower, thinking something about it looked strange. It was equipped with two heavy docking locks, one at ground level and the other near its summit, the former hooked up to a tunnel-tube. He would very much have liked to run a close sweep of the place to see if he could pick up a high concentration of life forms that might indicate prisoners, but dared not for fear of counterdetection. Being caught probing the base would spell the end of the masquerade.

He made an undistinguished approach, nothing fancy, revealing none of the Falcon's hidden capabilities.

The attentive snouts of turbo-lasers tracked the ship exactly. Ground control guided the starship down, and one of the tunnel-tubes snaked out, its folded skin extended by its servoframe, its hatch-mounted mouth sealing to the Millennium Falcon's hull, swallowing the ship's lowering ramp.

Han shut down the engines. Atuarre, in the over-sized copilots seat, said, I tell you one last time, Solo-Captain I don't wish to be the one to do the speaking.

He brought his chair around. I'm no actor, Atuarre. It'd be different if we were just going to jump in, spring the prisoners, and kiss off, but I can't cut all that chitchat and play the role.

They left the cockpit. Han was wearing a tight-cut black body suit, converted into a costume by the addition of epaulets, piping, shining braid, and a broad yellow sash, over which he'd buckled his blaster. His boots were newly polished.

Atuarre was bedecked at wrists, forearms, throat, forehead, and knees with bunches of multicolored streamers, Trianii attire for festivals and joyful occasions. She applied the exotic perfumes and formal scents of her species, using up the tiny supply she had in her belt pouch.

I am no actress, either, she reminded him as they met the others at the ramp hatch.

Did you ever see a celebrity?

Authority execs and their wives, when they came to our world as tourists.

Han snapped his fingers. That's it. Smug, dumb, and happy.

Pakka was costumed as his mother was, wearing the scents appropriate to a pre-adolescent male. He handed his mother and Han long, billowing metallic capes, hers coppery and his an electric blue. Han's small wardrobe had been ransacked for material for the costumes, and the capes had come from the thin insulating layers of a tent from the ship's survival gear.

The fitting, seaming, and alternations had been a problem. Han was all thumbs when it came to tailoring, and the Trianfi, of course, were a species who had never developed the art because they never wore anything but protective clothing. The solution had come in the form of BoUux, who had been programmed for the necessary skills, among others, while serving a regimental commander during the Clone Wars.

The ramp was already down; all that remained was to open the hatch. Luck to us all, Atuarre bade them softly. They piled hands, including Bollux's cold metal ones, then Han reached for the switch.

As the hatch rolled up, Atuarre was still objecting.

Solo-Captain, I still think you ought to be the one to--- At the foot of the ramp, the tunnel-tube was crammed with body-armored Espos brandishing heavy blasters, riot guns, gas projectors, fusion-cutters, and sapper charges. Whirling, Atuarre gushed, Oh, my! How thoughtful! My dears, they've sent us a guard of honor!

She touched up her glossy, fine-brushed mane with one hand, smiling down at the Security Policemen charmingly. Han wondered why she'd ever worried.

The Espos, keyed up for a shootout, stared popeyed as she swept down the ramp, the profusion of streamers rippling and snapping behind her, her cape shimmering. Her steps sounded with the ankle-chimes that Han had run off for her from shipboard materials, using his small but complete tool locker.

At the front of the Espos ranks was a battalion commander, a major, his black swagger stick held behind his back, spine stiff, face rigid with officiousness. Atuarre descended the ramp as if she were receiving the keys to the planet, waving as if to acknowledge a standing ovation.

My dear, dear General, she half-sang, intentionally giving the man a promotion, I'm simply beyond words! Viceprex Hirken is too kind, I'm sure. And to you and your gallant men, thanks from Madam Atuarre and her Roving Performers! She swooped right up to him, ignoring the guns and bombs and other items of destruction, one hand playing with the major's ribbons and medals, the other waving her gratitude to the massed, dumbfounded Espos. A dark, high-blood-pressure blush rose out of the major's collar and climbed swiftly for his hairline.

What is the meaning of this? he sputtered. Are you saying you're the entertainers Viceprex Hirken is expecting?

Her face showed cute confusion. To be sure. You mean word of our arrival wasn't forwarded here to Stars End? The Imperial Entertainers Guild assured me it would communicate with you; I always demand adequate advanced billing.

She swept a grand gesture back up the ramp.

Gentlemen! Madam Atuarre presents her Roving Performers! First, Master Marksman, wizard of weaponry, whose target-shooting tricks and glittering gunplay have astounded audiences everywhere!

Han walked down the ramp, trying to look the part, sweating under the tunnel-tubes worklights. Atuarre and the others could use their real names with impunity here, since those names had never appeared in Authority files. But Hans might have, and so he'd been forced into this new persona. He wasn't altogether sure he liked it now. When the Espo saw his blaster, weapons came up to cover him, and he was cautious to keep his hand away from it.

But Atuarre was already chattering. And, to amaze and amuse you with feats of gymnastics and spell-binding acrobatics, Atuarre presents her pet prodigy

Han held up a hoop he had brought down with him. It was a ring-stabilizer off an old repulsor rig, but he'd plated it and fitted it with an insulated hand-grip and a breadboarded distortion unit. Now he thumbed a switch, and the hoop became a circle of dancing light and waves of color as the distortion unit scrambled the visible spectrum, throwing off sparks and flares.

-Pakka! Atuarre introduced. The cub dived through the harmless light-effects, bounced off the ramp, and executed a triple forward somersault, into a double twist, and ended bowing deeply to the surprised major. Han scaled the hoop back into the ship and stepped to one side.

And lastly, Atuarre went on, that astonishing automaton, robotic raconteur, and machine of mirth and merriment, Bollux!

And the droid clanked stiffly down the ramp, long arms swinging, somehow making it all look like a military march. Han had knocked out most of his dents and dings and applied a radiant paint job, five layers of scarlet liqui-gloss, as promised, with glinting silver pinstriping, painstakingly limned. The droid had been converted from an obsolescent into a classic. The mask-and-sunburst emblem of the Imperial Entertainers Guild embellished one side of his chest, a touch that Han had thought would raise their credibility.

The Espo major was stumped. He knew Viceprex Hirken was expecting a special entertainment group, but was not aware of any clearance for one's arrival. Nevertheless, the Viceprex attached particular importance to his diversions and wouldn't take kindly to any meddling or delay. No, not kindly at all. The major put on as cordial an expression as his gruff face could achieve. I'll notify the Viceprex of your arrival at once, Madam, ah, Atuarre?

Yes, splendid! She gathered her cape for a curtsy and turned to Pakka. Fetch your props, my sweet. The cub skipped back up the ramp and returned a moment later with several hoops, a balance-ball, and an assortment of lesser props scrounged up aboard ship.

I'll escort you to Stars End, said the major. And I'm afraid my men will have to hold on to your Master Marksman's weapon. You understand, Madam Standard Operating Procedure.

Han steeled himself and handed his blaster over butt-first to an Espo sergeant as Atuarre nodded to the major. Of course, of course. We must never ignore the proprieties, must we? Now, my dear, dear General, if you'd be so gracious...

He realized with a start that she was waiting for his arm, and extended it stiffly, his face livid. The Espo, knowing their commanding officers' temper, hid their grins carefully. They formed up a hasty honor guard as Han hit the ramp control. The ramp pulled itself up quickly and the hatch rolled closed. They would reopen for no one but himself, Chewbacca, or one of the Trianii.

The major, after sending a runner ahead, led the group off through the tunnel-tube maze. They were a long walk from the tower, and passed through several of the tread-mounted junction stations, to the surprised gazes of black-covered tech controlmen. Their footsteps and Bollux's clanking joints echoed through the tunnel-tubes, and the new arrivals noticed a gravity markedly lighter than the Standard gee maintained onboard the Millennium Falcon. Air in the tubes had the tang of hydroponics recycling, a welcome change from shipboard.

They came at last to a large, permanent air lock. Its outer hatch swung open at a verbal order from the major. Han caught a quick glimpse of what he knew must be the tower's side, surrounded by the

tunnel-tubes seal, that confirmed something he'd thought he'd see when landing.

Stars End, or at least the towers' outer sheath, was molecularly bonded armor, of a single piece. That made it one of the most expensive buildings—no, he corrected himself, the most expensive building—Hah had ever seen. Enhancing the molecular bonding of dense metals was a costly process, and doing it on this scale was something he'd simply never heard of.

Inside the tower, they passed down a long, broad corridor to the central axis, which was a service core that also housed elevator banks. They were hurried along, with little chance to gawk, but they did see techs, Authority execs, and Espos coming and going. Stars End itself didn't appear to be particularly well manned, which didn't jell with the theory that it was a prison.

They entered an elevator with the major and a few of his men and were whisked upward in a high-speed ride. When the elevator opened and they trailed the major out, they found themselves standing beneath the stars, which shone so brightly and were packed so tightly overhead that they seemed more like a mist of light.

Then Han realized they were on top of Stars End, which was covered with a dome of transparent steel. There was an apron of bright flooring by the elevators. Beyond that began a small glen, complete with miniature streamlet, and flowers and vegetation from many worlds, landscaped down to the last bud and leaf. He could hear the sounds of birds and small animals, the hum of pollinating insects, all of which were confined to the roof garden, he assumed, by partition fields. The glen was cleverly lit by miniature sun-globes of various colors.

Footsteps to their right made them turn. A man came around the curve of the tower's service core, a tall, handsome patriarch of a man. He wore superbly cut uppermost-exec attire—a cutaway coat, formal vest, pleated shirt and meticulously creased trousers, set off by a jaunty red cravat. His smile was hearty and convincing, his hair white and full, his hands clean and soft, his nails manicured and lacquered. Han instantly wanted to bop him in the skull and dump him down the elevator shaft.

The man's voice was sure and melodious. Welcome to Stars End, Madam Atuarre. I am Hitken, Vice-President Hitken, of the Corporate Sector Authority. Alas, you come unheralded, or I'd have greeted you with greater pomp.

Atuarre feigned distress. Oh, honorable sir, what shall I say? We were contacted by the Guild and asked to serve as a replacement act, at the last moment, as it were. But I was told the Secretary in charge of scheduling, Hokkor Long, would make all arrangements.

Viceprex Hitken smiled, a charming drawing back of red lips from chalk-white teeth. Han thought how useful that smile and smooth voice must be in Authority board sessions. Totally unimportant, the Viceprex announced. Your appearance is thus an unexpected pleasure.

Why, how gracious of you! Never fear, my kind Viceprex; we'll distract you from the problems and pressures of your high office! To herself, though, Atuarre swore Trianii vengeance. If you've hurt my mate, I vow I'll see your living heart in my hand!

Hah observed that Hirken wore, at his belt, a small, flat instrument, a master-control unit. He assumed that the man liked to keep close watch on everything in Stars End; the unit gave him total control of his domain.

I have gathered some of the most prestigious entertainers in this part of our galaxy, Atuarre continued. Pakka here is a premier acrobat, and I myself, in addition to being mistress of ceremonies, perform the traditional music and ritual dance of my people. And here stands our handsome Master Marksman, peerless expert with firearms, to amaze you, worshipful Viceprex, with his trick shooting.

There was a whistling laugh and a jeering Trick shooting of what? Of his mouth, as appears likely? The speaker appeared behind Viceprex Hitken. He was a reptilian creature, slender and quick of movement. Viceprex Hirken chided the humanoid gently. There, there, Uul; these good folks have come a long way to relieve our tedium. He turned to Atuarre. Uul-Rha-Shan is my personal bodyguard, and something of an adept with weapons himself. Perhaps a contest of some sort could be arranged later. Uul has such a droll sense of humor, don't you agree?

Han was eyeing the reptile, whose bright green scales were marked with diamond patterns of red and white, and whose big black, emotionless eyes were studying Han. Uul-Rha-Shan's jaw hung open a bit,

exposing fangs and a restless pink tongue. Strapped to his right forearm was a pistol, a disrupter, Hah thought, in a spring-loaded or power-driven holster of some kind.

Uul-Rha-Shan had taken up a position to Hirkens fight. Han recalled having heard the bodyguards name before. The galaxy was filled with species, all boasting their exceptional killers. Nonetheless, some individuals rose to a kind of prominence. One of those, an assassin and gunman who, it was said, would go anywhere and slay anyone for the right price, was Uul-Rha-Shan.

Hirkeffs manner had shifted to businesslike demeanor. Now, that is the droid I requested, I take it? He inspected Bollux unsmilingly, with a look that put cold danger in the air. I was most specific with the Guild; I told Hokkor Long precisely what sort of droid I desired and stressed that they were to send nothing else. Has Long acquainted you with my desires?

Atuarre swallowed, trying not to let her effusive manner slip. Of a certainty, Viceprex, he did.

Hirken threw one more skeptical look at Bollux. Very well. Follow me. He set off, back the way he had come, Uul-Rha-Shan at his heels. The travelers and their escort came behind. They left the garden area, coming to an amphitheater, an open expanse surrounded by banks of comfortable seats, separated by partitions of transparisteel.

Automated fighting is combat at its purest, dont you agree? Hirken said chattily. No living creature, no matter how savage, is free of the taint of self-preservation. But automata, ah! They are without regard for themselves, existing only to follow orders and destroy. My own combat-automaton is a Mark-X Executioner; there arent many of them around. Has your gladiator droid ever fought one?

Hans nerves were screaming; he was trying to figure out whom to jump for a weapon if, as he feared, Atuarre bobbed her reply. Any show of hesitation or ignorance now would surely tip their hand to Hirken and his men.

But she improvised smoothly. No, Viceprex, not the Mark X.

Han was struggling with the jarring revelation. Gladiator droid? So that was what Hirken assumed Bollux was. Han had known, naturally, that matching droids and other automata in combat was a fad among the wealthy and jaded, but it hadnt occurred to him that Hirken would be among those. He put his brain into overdrive, looking for a way out.

As they walked, a woman joined them, coming from what was evidently a private lift tube. She was short, extremely fat, and trying to hide it with expensive, well-tailored robes. Han thought she looked as if somebody had draped a drogue parachute over an escape pod.

She took Hirkens hand. The Viceprex endured the gesture with ill humor. She fluttered a fat, beautifully maintained hand and chortled, Oh, darling, do we have company.⁹

Hirken turned upon the woman a stare that, Han calculated, was enough to dissolve covalent bonding. The chubby birdbrain ignored it. The Viceprex gritted his teeth. No, dearest. These people have brought a new competitor for my Mark X. Madame Atuarre and Company, I present my lovely bride, Neera. By the way, Madam Atuarre, what did you say your droids designation is.⁹ Han jumped in. Hes one of a kind, um, Viceprex. We designed him ourselves and call him Annihilator.

He turned to Bollux.

Bollux looked from Hah to Hirken, then bowed. Annihilator, at your service. To destroy is to serve, exalted sir.

But our troupe has other acts to offer, Atuarre was quick to tell Hirkens wife. Tumbling, dancing, trick shooting, and more.

Ooh, dearest! the obese woman exclaimed, clap-ping her hands, sliding up against her husband. Lets see that first! I grow so tired of watching that old Mark X demolish other machinery. How boring and uncouth and crude, really! And live performers would be such a relief from those dreadful holotapes and recorded music. And we have company here so seldom. She made puckering noises which, Han took it, were intended to be kisses to her husband. Hah thought they sounded more like the attack of some invertebrate.

He saw a chance to solve two problems at once

how to get Bollux out of the match and how to get a look around Stars End on his own. Uh, honored Viceprex, Im also gaffer for the troupe. I have to tell you, our gladiator droid, Annihilator there, was damaged in his last match. His auxiliary management circuitry needs to be checked. If I could use your shop, itd only take a few minutes. You and your wife could enjoy the other performances in the meantime, Hirken looked up at the stars through the dofile and sighed, while his wife giggled and seconded the proposal. Very well. But make these repairs quickly, Marksman. Im not much taken with acrobats or dane-ing.

Sure, right.

The Viceprex summoned a tech supervisor who had been checking the amphitheaters systems and explained to the man what was needed. Then he offered his arm, unwillingly, to his wife. They went to find seats in the amphitheater, with the Espo major and his men ranging themselves around in a loose guard for-marion. Uul-Rha-Shan, with a last, menacing look at Hun, followed along, again positioning himself near Hirkens right.

Since Pakkas acrobatics and Atuarres dancing would pose no danger to the audience, Hirken hit a control on his belt unit, and the transparisteel slabs forming the arenas walls slid away into floor slots. The Viceprex and his wife settled into luxurious conform-loungers. Pakka readied his props.

Han turned to the supervisor tech whod been placed at his disposal. Wait for me by the elevator; Ill get the circuit box out, be with you in a second.

The man left. Hun, loosening his cape and sliding it from his shoulders, turned to Bollux. Okay, open up just enough for me to get Max.

The plastron opened partway. Hun leaned close, shielded by the plastron halves. As he freed the computer-probe, he warned, Not a sound, Max. Youre supposed to be a combat-control component, so no funny stuff. Youre deaf and dumb as of now. As a signal that he understood, Blue Maxs photo-receptor went dim. Good boy, Maxde.

Han straightened, slinging the computers shoulder strap over his arm. As Bollux closed his chest up, Hun handed his cape and gunbelt over and patted the droids freshly painted head. Hold these for me and stay loose, Bollux. This shouldnt take long.

As Hun joined the tech supervisor at the elevator, Pakka was just beginning a marvelous exhibition of tumbling and gymnastics. The cub was a competition-class acrobat and covered the amphitheater floor in a series of flips, twists, and cartwheels, somersaulting through a hoop he held and, perching on the balance-ball, moving himself around the arena with both hands and feet. Then Atuarre came in to act as thrower as Pakka became a flyer.

Hirkens wife thought it all charming, oohing at the cubs prowess. Subordinate Authority execs began to show up and take seats, a handful of the privileged who had been invited to see the performance. They muttered approval of Pakkas agility, but stifled it when they saw their bosss deadly look of discontent. Hitken thumbed his belt unit. A voice answered instantly. Have the Mark X readied at once. He ignored the crisp acknowledgment from the duty tech, eyed the waiting Bollux, and turned his attention back to the acrobatics. Authority Vieeprex Hitken could be very, very patient when he wished, but wasnt in the mood now.

RIDING down in the elevator, Hun concentrated furiously on his predicament.

Hed led the others into this jam thinking that, if nothing else, hed at least get an idea of what he was up against. At worst, hed thought, theyd be told they werent welcome. But this was an unanticipated twist. That Bollux was committed to a match against a killer robot of some sort shouldnt bother him, Hun reminded himself. Bollux was, after all, only a droid. It wasnt as if a living entity would die. Hall had to keep repeating that because he was having a hard time selling it to himself. Anyway, he had no intention

of giving Viceprex Hirken the enjoyment of seeing the superannuated droid taken apart.

Times like this, he wished he were the slow, careful type. But his style was the product of Hun himself, defying consequences, jumping in with both feet, heed-less of what he might land in. His plan, as revised in the elevator, was to do all the scouting he could. If nothing more could be accomplished, he and the others would have to wing it, withdraw from the performance and, it was to be hoped, Stars End, on the plea that Bollux was irreparable.

He watched floor numbers flash and kept himself from asking questions of the tech supervisor beside him. Any outsider, particularly an entertainer, would be scrupulously uncurious about an Authority installation. For Hah to be otherwise would be a matter causing instant suspicion.

A few other passengers entered and left the car. Only one was an exec; all the rest were Espos and techs. Han looked them over for keys, restraint-binders, or anything else that might indicate detention-block guard duties, but saw nothing. Again he noticed that the tower seemed very lightly manned, contrary to what he'd expect if there really was a prison here.

He followed the tech supervisor out of the elevator, alighting at the general maintenance section, nearly back at ground level. Only a few techs were there, moving among gleaming machinery and dangling hoisting gear. Disassembled droids, robo-haulers, and other light equipment, as well as comms and computer apparatus, were to be seen everywhere.

He resettled Max's carrying strap at his shoulder.

Do you guys have a circuit scanner?

The tech led him to a side room with rows of booths, all of them vacant. Han set Max on a podium in one of them and lowered a scanner hood, hoping the tech would go off and take care of his normal duties. But the man remained there, and so Hah found himself staring into the computer-probes labyrinthine interior.

The tech, watching over his shoulder, commented, Hey, that looks like a lot more than just an auxiliary component.

It's something I worked up, pretty sophisticated, Han said. By the way, the Viceprex said when I'm done here I could take it up to your central computer section to recalibrate it. That's one level down, right?

The supervisor was frowning now, trying for a better look at Blue Max's guts. No, computers are two levels up. But they won't let you in unless Hitken verifies it. You're not cleared, and you can't go into a restricted area if you're unbadged. He leaned closer to the scanner. Listen, that really looks like some kind of computer module to me.

Han chuckled casually. Here, look for yourself. He stepped aside. The tech supervisor moved closer to the scanner, reaching down to work its focus controls. Then his own focus went completely dark.

Han, rubbing the edge of his hand, stood over the unconscious tech and looked around for a place to stow him. He had noticed a supply closet at the end of the scanner room. Han fastened the man's hands behind him with his own belt, gagged him with a dust cover off a scanner, and lugged the limp form into the closet. He paused to take the man's security badge, then dosed the door.

He went back to the little computer-probe. All right, Max; perk up.

Blue Max's photoreceptor lit up. Hah removed his own sash and stripped the gaudy homemade medals and braid off his outfit. He yanked the epaulets and piping away, too, and what remained was a black body suit, a fair approximation of a tech's uniform. He placed the supervisor's security badge prominently on his chest, took Max up again, and set out. Of course, if anyone were to stop him or compare the miniature holoshot on his badge to his real face, he'd be tubed. But he was counting on his own luck, a convincing briskness of stride, and an air of purpose.

He went up two levels without mishap. Three Espos lounging in the guard booth near the elevator bank waved him on, seeing he was badged. He fought the impulse to smile. Stars End was probably an uneventful tour of duty; no wonder the guards had gotten lax. After all, what could possibly happen here?

At the amphitheater, Pakka's amazing deftness hadn't even drawn an approving look from Viceprex Hirken. The cub had been using a hoop while rolling a balance-ball with his feet, doing flips.

Enough of this, Hirken proclaimed, his well-tended hand flying up. Pakka stopped, glaring at the

Viceprex. Isn't that incompetent Marksman back yet? The other execs, conferring among themselves, managed to reach a group decision that Han was still gone. Hirkens breath rasped.

He pointed to Atuarre. Very well, Madam, you may dance. But be brief, and if your sharpshooting gaffer isn't back soon, I may dispense with him alto-gether.

Pakka had removed his props from the arena floor. Now Atuarre handed him the small whistle-flute Hah had machined up for him. While the cub blew a few practice runs on it, Atuarre slipped on the finger-cymbals Hah had fashioned for her and clinked them experimentally. The improvised instruments, even her anklet-chimes, all lacked the musical quality of Trianii authentics, she decided. But they would suffice, and might even convince the onlookers that they were see-ing the real thing.

Pakka began playing a traditional air. Atuarre moved out onto the arena floor, following the music with a sinuous ease no human performer could quite match. Her streamers blew behind her, many-colored fans flickering from arms and legs, forehead and throat, as her finger-cymbals sounded and her anklets rang, precisely as they should.

Some of the preoccupation left Hirkens face and the faces of the other onlookers. Trianni ritual dancing had often been touted as a primitive, uninhibited art, but the truth was that it was high artistry. Its forms were ancient, exacting, demanding all a dancers con-centration. It required perfectionism, and a deep love of the dance itself. In spite of themselves, Hirken, his subordinates, and his wife were drawn into Atuarres spinning, stalking, pouncing dance. And as she per-formed, she wondered how long she could hold her audience, and what would happen if she couldnt hold them long enough.

Han, having found a computer terminal in an unoc-cupied room, set Max down next to it. While Max ex-tended his adapter and entered the system, Hah took a cautious look in the hall and closed the door. He drew up a workstool by a readout screen. You in, kid?

Just about, Captain. The techniques Rekkon taught me work here, too. There? The screen lit up, flooded with symbols, diagrams, computer models, and col-umns of data.

Way to go, Max. Now spot up the holding pens, or cells, or detention levels or whatever.

Blue Max flashed layout after layout on the screen, while his search moved many times faster, skimming huge amounts of data; this was the sort of thing hed been built for. But at last he admitted, I cant, Cap-tain.

What dyou mean, cant? Theyre here, theyve gotta be. Look again, you little moron!

There are no cells, Max answered indignantly. If there were, Id have seen them. The only living ar-rangements in the whole base are the employees hous-ing, the Espo barracks, and the exec suites, all on the other side of the complex-and Hirkens apartments here in the tower.

All right, Han ordered, put a floor plan of this joint up, level by level, on the screen, starting with Hirkens amusement park.

A floor plan of the dome, complete with the garden and amphitheater, lit the readout. The next two levels below it proved to be filled with the Viceprexs osten-tatious personal quarters. The one after that confused Hah. Max, whatre those subdivisions? Offices?

It doesnt say here, the computer answered. The property books list medical equipment, holo-recording gear, surgical servos, operating tables, things like that.

A thought struck Hah. Max, whats Hirkens title?

His official corporate job-slot, I mean.

Vice-President in charge of Corporate Security, it says.

Han nodded grimly. Keep digging; were in the right place. Thats no clinic up there, its an interro-gation center, probably Hirkens idea of a rec room. Whats on the next floor down?

Nothing for humans. The next level is three floors high, Captain. Just heavy machinery; theres an indnstrial-capaeity power hookup there, and an air lock. See, heres the floor plan and a power-routing schematic.

Max showed it. Han leaned closer to the screen, studying the myriad lines. One, marked in a different color and located near the elevators, attracted his at-tention. He asked the computer what it was.

Its a security viewer, Captain. Theres a surveil-lance system in parts of the tower. Ill p atch in.

The screen flickered, then resolved into the bright-ness of a visual image. Hah stared. Hed found the lost ones.

The room was filled, stack upon stack, with stasis booths. Inside each, a prisoner was frozen in time, stopped between one instant and the next by the booths level-entropy field. That explained why there were no prisoner facilities, no arrangements for hand-ling crowds of captive entities, and only a minimal guard complement on duty. Hitken had all his victims suspended in time; theyd require little in the way of formal accommodations. The Security Viceprex need take prisoners out only when he chose to question them, then pop them back into stasis when he was done. So he robbed his prisoners of their very lives, taking away every part of their existence except inter-rogation.

There must be thousands of them, Han breathed. Hitken can move them in and out of that air lock like freight. Power consumption up there must be terrific. Max, wheres their plant?

Were sitting on it, Max answered, though that anthropomorphism couldnt really apply to him. He filled the screen with a basic diagram of the tower. Hah whistled softly. Beneath Stars End was a power-generating plant large enough to service a battle for-tress, or a capital-class warship.

And here are the primary defense designs, Max added. There were force fields on all sides of the tower, and one overhead, ready to spring into exist-ence instantly. Stars End itself was, as Han had al-ready noticed, made of enhanced-bonding armor plate. According to specs, it was equipped with an anticon-cussion field as well, so that no amount of high explo-sives could damage its occupants. The Authority had spared no expense to make its security arrangements complete.

But that helped only if the enemy were outside, and Han was as inside as he could get. Is there a prisoner roster?

Got it! They had it filed Transient Persons.

Han swore under his breath at bureaucratic euphe-misms. Okay, is Chewies name on it?

There was the briefest of pauses. No, Captain. But I found Atuarres mate! And Jessas fatheft He flashed two more images on the screen, arrest mug-shots. Atuarres mates coloring was redder than hers, it turned out, and Docs grizzled features hadnt changed. And heres Rekkons nephew, Max added. The mug was of a young black face with broad, strong lines that promised a resemblance to the boys uncle. Jackpot! Max squealed a moment later, a very uncomputerish exclamation. Chewbaecas big hairy face flashed on the readout. He hadnt been in a very good mood for the mugshot; he was disheveled, but his snarl promised death to the photographer. The Wook-iees eyes looked glassy, and Han assumed that the Espos had tranquilized him as soon as theyd taken him.

Is he okay? Han demanded. Max put up the ar-rest record. No, Chewbacca hadnt been badly injured, but three officers had been killed in apprehending him, the forms said. He hadnt given a name, which explained why it had been diScult for Max to locate him. The list of charges nearly ran off the screen, with a final, ominous, handwritten notation at the bottom listing time of scheduled interrogation. Hah glanced at a wall clock; it was no more than hours before Chewbacca was due to enter Viceprex Hirkens torture mill.

Max, were up against it. We have to do something right now; rm not going to let them take Chewies mind apart. Can we deactivate defensive systems?

The computer replied Sorry, Captain. All the pri-maries are controlled through that belt unit Hirken carries.

What about secondaries?

Max sounded dubious. I can get to the standby, but how will you deactivate the Viceprexs belt unit? I dnnno; hows he wired up? There must be ancil-lary equipment; the damn box is too small to be self-contained and still control this whole tower.

Max gave the answer. Receptor circuitry ran through Stars End, built into the walls on each level

Show me the top-level circuitry diagrams. Hah studied them carefully, memorizing points of reference --doors, elevators, and support girders.

Okay, Max, now I want you to cut into the second-ary control systems and rearrange power-flow priori-ties. When the secondaries cut in, I want that umbrella shield, the deflector direcfiy overhead, to

start load-shedding its power back to the plant, but I want you to prejudice the systems safeguards, so that they notice the deflector droppage but not the feed-back.

Captain Solo, thatll start an overload spiral. You could blow the whole tower up.

Only if I get to Hirkens primaries, Han said, half to himself, half to Max. Get crackin.

High above, Viceprex Hirken had realized that he was being played for a fool.

As fascinated as hed been by Atuarres dance, hed recoLmized in a fundamental, ever-suspicious part of his mind that he was being diverted. What he desired was to see mechanized combat. This dance artistry, though pretty enough, was no substitute.

He stood, fingering a button on his belt unit. Lights came up, and Pakka stopped playing. Atuarre looked around her, as if awakening from a dream. What-

Enough of this, Hirken decreed. Uul-Rha-Shan, his reptilian gunman, stood at his side, hoping for the order to slay. But instead, Hirken said, Ive seen enough, Trianii. Youre clearly stalling. You think me an imbecile? Then he motioned to Bollux. You ri-diculous excuses for entertainers brought this obsolete droid to me purely as a fraud, never planning to give me value for my money. Youd hoped to plead me-chanical failure and get me to reimburse you for your trip, or even reward you for your efforts. Isnt that so?

Her quiet No, Viceprex was ignored.

Hirken was not convinced. Prepare that droid for combat, and bring out my Mark X, he ordered the techs and Espos around him.

Atuarre drew herself up, enraged, and siraid for Bollux. But she could see Hitken was adamant, and she had her cub to think of. Furthermore she could do Han and her mate little good here. With your per-mission, Excellency, I will return to my ship. On-board the Falcon, at least, more options would be available.

Hirken waved her away, preoccupied with his Exe-cutioner, laughing his humorless laugh. Go, go. And if you see that worthless liar of a Marksman of yours, youd be wise to take him with you. And dont think I wont lodge a complaint. Ill have your Guild member-ship revoked.

She glanced to where Bollux was being ushered down to the arena, helpless to aid him. Lord Hirken, surely this is illegal. That is our droid-

Brought here to defraud me, he finished for her, but Ill have my value from it. Now leave, if youre going to, or watch if you wish. He wagged a finger, and an Espos sergeant barked an order. Tall, stern guards fell in, one to either side of the two Trianii.

Atuarre couldnt restrain her hiss. She grabbed Pak-kas paw and stormed toward the elevator, the cub bouncing along behind. Uul-Rha-Shans dry laugh was like a stab of hatred.

Down in the computer center, the readout screen, which had been showing a small part of the modifica-tion Blue Max was making, went blank for a moment. Max? You all right? Han asked worriedly. Captain Solo, theyre activating that combat ma-chine, the Mark X. Theyre putting it in with Bollux! Even as the computer-probe spoke, the rapid-fire images of the Mark-X Executioners engineering de-tails replaced one another on the screen. Maxs voice was filled with alarm. The Mark Xs controls and power are independent of this system; I cant touch it! Captain, we have to get back upstairs right now. Bollux needs me!

What about Atuarre?

Theyre summoning an elevator and notifying se-curity that shes leaving. Weve got to get up there!

Han was shaking his head, unmindful that Maxs photoreceptor was off. Sorry, Max, therere too many other things I need to do here. Besides, we couldnt help Bollux now.

The readout went blank and the photoreceptor came on. Blue Maxs voice trembled. Captain Solo, Im not doing anything else for you until you take me to Bollux. I can help him.

Han struck the probe, not gently, with the heel of his hand. Get back to work, Max. Im serious. For an-swer, Max withdrew his adapter from the network. Han, infuriated, snatched the little computer up and held it high overhead.

Do what I told you, or Ill leave you here in pieces!

Maxs reply was somber. Go ahead, then, Captain. Bollux would do whatever he had to if I were in trouble.

Hah paused in the midst of dashing the computer to the floor. It occurred to him that Maxs concern for his friend was no different from Halls own for Chew-bacca. He lowered the probe, looking at it as if for the first time. Ill be damned. You sure you can help Bollux?

Just get me there, Captain; youll see I hope. Which car was going to the dome? Max told him and he set out for the elevators at once, slinging the probe over his shoulder. When he got there, he removed the security badge and punched for a downward ride. The wrong car stopped; he let it wait and go on, and punched the descent button again.

He lucked out. The car containing Atuarre, Pakka, and their two guards had stopped a number of times on its way down. She saw Han and pulled her cub off the car with her. The Espos had to hurry to avoid being left behind.

Han took the two Trianii aside a pace or two, but the Espos made it plain that they were keeping an eye on all three.

We were going to the ship, Atuarre told him in low tones. I didnt know what else to do. Solo-Captain, Hirken is putting BoUux in with that Executioner machine of his!

I know. Max has some kind of angle on that. He saw one of the Espos speaking on a tom-link. Listen, the lost ones are here, thousands of cm. Max rigged the tower; Hirkenll have to let everybody go if he wants to keep breathing. Go get the ship ready. If I can just get my hands on a blaster, the fix is in, sister.

Captain, I meant to tell you, Max interrupted. I was rechecking the figures. I think you should know-

Not now, Max? Han pulled Atuarre and Pakka back toward the elevator, hitting both the up and the down buttons. One of the Espos fell in with the Tri-anti again, but the other stationed himself with Han, explaining, The Viceprex says its all right for you to come up. You can take home whats left of your droid after the fight.

The techs and Espos hurried Bollux down into the arena as the transparisteel slabs raised from their hidden slots in the floor. Hirken knew now that this was no gladiator droid, and so gave the command that Bollux be equipped with a blast shield, to make things more interesting. The shield, an oblong of dura-armor plate fitted with grips, weighed down the old droids long arm as he tried to adjust to what was happening.

Bollux knew he would never escape so many armed men. He had known many humans in his long years of function and could recognize hatred by now. That was what he saw on the Viceprexs face. But Bollux had come through a number of seemingly terminal situations and had no intention of being demolished now ff he could avoid it.

A door panel slid up in the far wall forming one are of the arena. There was a squeal of drive wheels, the rattling of treads. The Mark-X Executioner rolled out into the light.

It was half again as tall as Bollux and far broader, though it moved on two thick caterpillar tracks instead of legs. From the treads and support housing rose a thick trunk, armored in gray alloy plate. The Executioners many arms were folded close to it now, inactive, each one furnished with a different weapon.

Bollux employed a trick he had learned from one of his first human owners, and simply omitted from computations the logical conclusion that his destruction was now a high order of probability. Among humans, he knew, this tactic was called ignoring certain death. Bollux thought of it as excluding counterproductive data. Hed been doing it for a long time now, which was why he was still functional. The Executioners cranial turret swung, its sensors locking in on the droid. The Mark X was the latest word in combat automata, an extremely successful, highly specialized killing machine. It could have zeroed in on the unarmed, general-purpose labor droid and vaporized him fight then and there, but was,

naturally, programmed to give its owner a more enjoyable show than that. The Executioner was also a machine with a purpose.

The Mark X began rolling, moving with quick precision, maneuvering toward Bollux. The droid backed away clumsily, contending with the unfamiliar task of holding and manipulating his blast shield. The Executioner circled, studying Bollux from all sides, gauging his reactions, while the droid watched from behind his shield.

Commencet called Viceprex Hirken through the arenas amplifiers. The Mark X, voice-keyed to him, changed to attack mode. It came directly to bear on BoUux, rushing at him at top speed. The droid dodged one way, then another, but his efforts were all anticipated by the Executioner. It compensated for his every move, rumbling to crush him under its treads.

Cancell rasped Hirken over the amplifiers. The Mark X stopped just short of Bollux, allowing the old droid to totter awkwardly back from it.

Resume! ordered the Viceprex. The Executioner cranked into motion again; selecting another destructive option from its arsenal. Servos hummed and a weapon arm came up, its end supporting a flame projector. Bollux saw it and brought his shield up just in time.

A gush of fire arced from the nozzle of the flame gun, splashing against the walls of the arena, throwing a burning stream across BoUuxs shield. The Mark X brought the nozzle of its weapon back for another pass at low angle, to cut the droids legs out from under him. BoUux barely managed to crash clumsily to his knees and ground his shield before flame washed across it, making puddles of fire on the floor around him. The Mark X was rolling again, preparing for a clearer shot, when Hirken canceled that mode, too. Bollux struggled to his feet, using the shield for leverage. He could feel his internal mechanisms overheating, his bearings especially. His gyro-balance circuitry hadnt been built with this sort of constant punishment in mind.

Then the Mark X was coming in again. Bollux ignored the inevitable, making his sluggish parts respond, moving with some mechanical equivalent of pain, but still functional.

Han came out of the elevator at a run. The Espos there, aware that the Viceprex wished him to see the spectacle, let him pass.

He skidded to a stop at the top row of the little amphitheater. Hirken was seated below with his wife and subordinates, cheering theft champion and laughing at the ludicrous Bollux as the Executioner raised another weapon arm. This one was provided with a bracket of fievchette-missile pods.

Bollux saw it, too, and used a trick, or, as he thought of it, a last variable. Crouching, still holding his shield, he loosed the heavy-duty suspension in his legs and jumped out of the Mark Xs cross hairs like some giant red insect. Miniature missiles exploded against the clear arena walls in a cloud, filling the amphitheater with crashing eruptions in spite of the sound-suppression system out in the seating area. Hirken and his people roared their frustration. Hah flung himself down the steps to the arena, three at a time. Bollux had landed badly; the strain on his mechanisms was becoming insuperable. The Viceprex changed his combat-automatons programming once more.

The Executioner retracted its missile-arm. Articulated catch-cables extended from ports in its sides, like metallic tentacles, and two circular saws swung out, their arms locking into position. The sawblades spun, creating a peculiar sound, the molecules of their cutting edges vibrating in a way that would shear through metal as easily as through air. The Mark X moved toward Bollux, its cables weaving, for a terminal embrace.

Hirken spied Han reaching the arenas edge. Fraudl Now, watch a true combat-automaton at work! He shook with gruesome laughter, all the affected charms of corporate board rooms stripped from him now. His wife and subordinates followed suit dutifully.

Hah ignored them and held up the computer. Max, tell him! Blue Max sent burst-signals at top volume, concentrated pulses of information. Bollux turned his red photoreceptors to home in on the probe. He listened for a moment, then returned his attention to the onrushing Mark X. Hah, knowing it was crazy, still found himself holding his breath.

As the Executioner bore down on him, BoHux made no move to avoid it or raise his shield. The Executioner recognized that as only logical. The droid had no hope. Questing catch-cables spread wide

to seize Bollux; circular saws swung close.

Bollux hefted his shield and threw it at the Mark X. Cables and cutters changed course; the shield was easily intercepted, caught, and sliced to pieces. But in the moments reprieve, Bollux had thrown himself, stiffly with a huge metallic bong---down between the crushing treads of the Executioner.

The combat-automaton ground to a halt, but not in time. Bollux, lying beneath it, fastened one hand to its undercarriage and locked his servo-grip there. The other hand reached in among the components of the Mark X, ripping at its cooling circuitry.

The Executioner emitted an electronic scream. If it had sat there and pondered for an age, the killing machine would still never have considered the possibility that a general-labor droid could have learned how to do the irrational.

The Mark X broke into motion, rolling this way and that, randomly. It had no way to get at Bollux, who clung beneath it. No one had ever programmed the Executioner to shoot at itself, or cut at itself, or to crush something it couldn't reach. Bollux was in the single safe place in the entire arena.

The Mark X's internal temperature began rising at once; the killing machine produced enormous amounts of heat.

Hirken was on his feet now, screaming Cancell Cancell Executioner, I order you to cancel? Techs began running around, bumping into one another, but the Mark X was no longer receiving orders. Its complicated voice-keyed command circuitry had been among the first things to go out of whack. Now it charged aimlessly around the arena, discharging blast-ers, flame guns, and missile pods at random, threatening to overload the noise-suppression system.

The arena's transparisteel walls became a window into an inferno as the Executioner roamed, its trunk rotating, its weapons blazing, its malfunctioning guidance system seeking an enemy that it could confront. It was hit by shrapnel from its own missiles. Smoke and fire could be seen pouring from its ventilators.

Bollux hung on to the Mark X's undercarriage with both hands now, being dragged back and forth, wondering calmly if his grip would fail.

The Executioner rebounded from one of the arena's walls. Surviving targeting circuits thought the killing machine had found its enemy at last. It backed up, preparing for another charge, its engine revving.

Bollux decided correctly that it was time to part company. He simply let go. The Executioner howled off again, all its remaining attention focused on the un-offending wall. The droid began to drag himself, squeaking laboriously, toward the exit.

The Executioner crashed head-on into the arena wall, bouncing back with a mighty concussion.

Frustrated, it fired all weapons at close range and was engulfed in the backwash of blaster beams, flic-flac fragments, and acid spray. Then, as Hirken cried a last Wo.-oooh, the Mark X's internal heat reached critical, compounded by external damage.

The Mark-X Executioner, latest word in combat automata, was ruptured open by a spectacular explosion just as Bollux, semi-obsolete general-labor droid, got his tired chassis out of the arena.

Han knelt by him, pounding the old droid on the back while Blue Max somehow produced a cheer from his vocoder. The pilot threw his head back and laughed, forgetting everything else in the absurdity of the moment.

Give me a minute, please, Bollux begged, his drawl even slower now. I must try to bring my mechanisms into some sort of order.

I can help? Max squeaked. Link me through to your brain circuits, Bollux, and I'll handle all the by-passes. That'll leave you free to deal with the cybero-stasis problems.

Bollux opened his plastron. Captain, if you'd be so kind? Han put the little computer back into place.

Touching, whoever you are, said a smooth, dry voice behind Han, but pointless. We'll pick them both apart for the information we want. What happened to all your pretty braid and medals, by the way?

Han turned and stood fast. Uul-Rha-Shan was waiting there, gun in hand. Han's holstered blaster hung over the reptilian gunman's shoulder.

Hirken came up behind Uul-Rha-Shan, followed by the major and the other Espos, his execs, and his wife, all the trappings of his corporate importance. The air was filled with the smell of charred circuitry and molten metal, all that remained of the precious Mark X. Hirken's face held inexpressible rage.

He pointed a quivering finger at Hah. I shouldve known youre part of the conspiracy! Trianii, droids, the Entertainers Guild! Theyre all in on it. No one on the Board will be able to deny it now; this conspiracy against the Authority and against me personally involves everyone!

Han shook his head, amazed. Hirken was sweating, bellowing, with a maniacal look on his face. I dont know your real name, Marksman, but youve come to the end of this plot. What I need to know, Ill dig out of your droid, and the Trianii. But since youve spoiled my entertainment, youll make up for it. He went with the rest of his entourage and stood just inside the arena, safe behind the transparisteel slabs. Uul-Rha-Shan took Hans gunbelt from his shoulder and held it out to him. Come, trick shooter. Lets see if you have any tricks left.

Han moved warily and collected the belt. He checked his holstered blaster by eye, and saw that it had been drained of all but a microcharge, not enough to damage the primary-control circuitry. His gaze went to Hirken, who stood gloating behind invulnerable transparisteel. The belt control unit was out of the question. Hah climbed the amphitheater stairs slowly, buckling the gunbelt around his hips, tying down the holster.

Uul-Rha-Shan came after, returning his disrupter to its forearm holster. The two stepped out onto the open area overlooking the arena; the gathered Authority officials looked up at them.

It had been a good try, Han told himself, just a touch shy of success. But now Hirken meant to see him dead, and Chewbacca and Atuarre and Pakka in his interrogation chambers. The Viceprex held all the cards but one. Han made up his mind on the spot that if he was going to die anyway, hed take all these warped minds of Corporate Security with him.

He went, carefully, and stood by the wall, unsnapping the retaining strap of his holster. His opponent, squared off a few paces away, wasnt through taunting.

Uul-Rha-Shan likes to know whom he kills. Who are you, imposter?

Drawing himself up, Han let his hands dangle loosely at his sides, fingers working. Solo. Han Solo. The reptile registered surprise. I have heard your name, Solo. You are, at least, worthy of the killing. Hans mouth tugged, amused. Think you can bring it off, lizard?

Uul-Rha-Shan hissed anger. Han cleared his mind of everything but what lay before him. Farewell, Solo, Uul-Rha-Shan bade him, tensing. Han moved with a dipping motion of the right shoulder, a half turn, all done with the blinding abruptness of the gunfighter. But his hand never closed on the grip of his blaster. Instead, feigning his draw, he hurled himself out on the floor. As he fell, he felt Uul-Rha-Shans disrupter beam lash over him, striking the wall. It set off a belching explosion that caught the reptile full in the face, flinging him backward. His shot had blown apart the ancillary circuitry for Hirkens belt unit, freeing swirls of energy. Secondary explosions told of the destruction of power-management routers.

Han had hit the floor rolling, surviving the blast with little more than singed hair. His blaster was in his hand now, the cautionary pulser in its grip tingling his palm in silent, invisible warning that the gun was nearly empty. As if he needed to be reminded. Uul-Rha-Shan, somewhere in the din and smoke, was shrilling, Solo-ooo.t in furious challenge. Hah couldnt pick him out.

A far-off vibration reached him, the overload spiral hed had Blue Max build into the secondary defense program. Now that the primaries had been damaged and Hirkens belt unit circumvented, the power-rerouting had taken over. Wont be long now, he told himself.

Everyone in Stars End suddenly felt as if he were being immersed in thick mud, as the weight of a planet seemed to be pressing down. The anticoncussion field ---Han had forgotten about it, but it didnt matter. Then, with an explosion beyond words, the power plant blew.

ATUARRE restrained herself from running back through the maze of tunnel-tubes, conscious of the Espo

guard at her heels. Hans desperate plan left her so much room for doubt. What would happen if the bluff failed? But on that thought she corrected herself at once-Solo-Captain was not bluffing, and was more than capable of taking all his enemies with him in an act of awesome revenge.

But she approved of the gamble. This might be Stars Ends only vulnerable moment. Even so, she took her longest strides now, dragging a stumbling Pakka along breakneck-quick.

They passed into the final junction station, the one nearest the Falcon. A tech lounged on duty behind his console. The Espo com-link signaled for attention, and Atuarre heard the crackled order, relayed from Hirken through the Espo major, as clearly as did her escort himself. The two Trianii were to be brought back to the tower. She wondered if that meant Han had successfully intervened in Bolluxs combat.

But Atuarre had no intention of going back now;

Solo-Captain specifically wanted her onboard the Millennium Falcon. She tried her most reasonable tone. Officer, I have to pick up a very important item on my ship, then we can return. Please? Its very vital; thats why I was given clearance to go in the first place.

The Espo wasnt paying heed. He drew his side arm.

Orders say at once. Move it!

The attention of the duty tech was aroused now, but the guard was the immediate danger. Atuarre held Pakkas paw high, so that his toes barely touched the floor, showing him to the guard. You see, I was also told to leave my cub onboard ship. His presence dis-pleased the Viceprex. She felt Pakkas short, elastic muscles tighten.

The Espo opened his mouth to reply, and she whipped the cub up. Pakka took snapping momentum from the launch, and both of the Trianii split the air with predatory howls, astounding the Authority men. Pakkas dropkick caught the astonished Espo in the face and throat. Atuarre, coming in behind her cub, threw herself on the mans arm, prying his hand loose from his blaster. The Trianii bore their antagonist over backward, the cub with arms and legs and tail wrapped around the Espos head and neck, Atuarre wrenching the blaster free.

She heard a scuffle of sound behind her. Whirling, she saw the duty tech half standing from his chair behind the console. His left forefinger was stabbing some button on his board, hard. She assumed it to be an alarm, but the techs right hand was bringing up a blaster, and that was first on the agenda. She fired with the dispatch of a Trianii Ranger. The brief red flash of the blaster knocked the tech off his feet, back-ward, overturning his chair.

The Espo, bleeding from his wounds, threw Pakka off and charged at Atuarre, hands clutching for her. She fired again, the red bolt lighting the junction sta-tion. The Espo buckled and lay still. She couldnt hear alarms jangling through the tunnel-tube layout.

Atuarre was about to go to the junction station con-sole, to disconnect the tunnel-tubes and cut off pursuit, when the station jolted on its treads, as if the surface of Mytus VII had surged up under it. She and Pakka were bounced in the air like toys by the tremors of an explosion of incredible force.

Atuarre picked herself up dazedly and staggered to one of the thick exterior observation ports. She couldnt see the tower. Instead, a column of incandes-cent fire had sprung up where Stars End had stood. It seemed impossibly thin and high, reaching far up into the vacuous sky of Mytus VII.

Then she realized that the force of the explosion had been contained by deflector-shield generators around the tower. The pillar of destruction began to dissipate, but she could see nothing of Stars End, not a fragment. She couldnt believe that even an explod-ing power plant could utterly vaporize the nearly im-pregnable tower.

Then, on some impulse, she looked up, beyond the tip of the explosions flare. High above Mytus VII she saw the wink of the small distant sun off enhanced-bonding armor plate.

Oh, Solo-Captain, she breathed, understanding what had happened, you madman.t

She pushed herself away from the port unsteadily and assessed her situation. She must move without hesitation. She raced to the console, found separator switches, and matching them with indicators over the junction stations tunnel-tubes, worked the three not connected to the Falcon. The tubes disengaged, their lengths contracting back toward the junction, pleating in on themselves.

Then she brought the junction stations self-propulsion unit to life, setting its treads in motion, steering it toward the Millennium Falcon, gathering in the intervening tube length as she went.

She chilled the discord in her mind with the discipline expected of a Trianii Ranger, and a plan began to form. One minute later, the Millennium Falcon raised from Mytus VII.

Atuarre, at the controls with Pakka perched in the copilots chair, scanned the base. She knew the personnel must be coping desperately with pressure drop-pages and air leaks through their ruptured systems. But the armed Espo assault ship had already boosted clear of the base; she could see its engine glowing as it climbed rapidly in the distance. That someone had comprehended what had happened and responded so quickly gave her one more worry. No more Authority ships must be allowed to lift off. She guided the starship in a low pass at the line of smaller Authority vessels. The Falcons guns spoke again and again in a close strafing run. The parked, pilotless ships burst and flared one after another, yielding secondary explosions. Of the half-dozen craft there, none escaped damage. She swooped past the deep crater where Stars End had once stood.

She opened the main drive, screaming off after the departed Espo assault craft. She kept all shields angled aft, but there was only sporadic, inaccurate turbo-laser cannon fire. The personnel at the base were too busy trying to keep the breath of life from bleeding off into the vacuum. That was one advantage, a small help to her in what seemed like a hopeless task.

Stars Ends anticoncussion field must very nearly have overloaded, Hah thought; for the first seconds after the power plant blew, stupendous forces had been exerted on the tower and everything in it. But the immobilizing effect began to recede as the systems adjusted.

Smoke and heat from both the ruined Executioner and the now-defunct primary-control ancillaries rolled and drifted through the dome, choking and blinding. There was a universal rush of indistinct bodies for the elevators. Han could hear Hitken yelling for order as the Espo major bellowed commands and the Viceprexs wife and others shrilled in panic.

Hah skirted the mob headed for the elevators, wading through the anticoncussion field and the drifting smoke. Like all standbys, the anticoncussion field fed off emergency power inside Stars End. The towefsts reserves would be limited. Hah grinned in the murk and confusion; the Espos were in for a surprise.

He made his way down the steps of the amphitheater, groping along, coughing and hoping he wasn't being poisoned by burned insulation and molten circuitry. His toe hit something. He recognized Viceprex Hirkens discarded belt unit, kicked it aside, and went on. He located Bollux when he stumbled over the droids foot.

Captain, sir? Bollux hailed. We thought you'd quite left, sir.

Were bowing out now; can you make it?

Tin stabilized. Max improvised a direct linkup between himself and me.

Blue Maxs voice drifted up from Bolluxs chest. Captain, I tried to tell you when I rechecked the figures that this might happen.

Hah had gotten a hand under the droids arm, helping him to rise to his wobbly legs. What did happen, Max? Not enough power in the plant? He started moving Bollux off unsteadily through the drift-lag reek.

No, there was plenty of power in the plant, but the enhanced-bonding armor plate is a lot stronger than I thought at first. The exterior deflector shields contained the force of the explosion, all except the overhead one, the one that dissolved in the overload. All the force went that way. Us too.

Hah stopped. He wished he could see the little computer, not that it would have helped. Max, are you telling me we blew Stars End into orbit?

No, Captain, Max answered darkly. A high-arc trajectory, maybe, but never an orbit.

Han found himself leaning on Bollux as much as the droid was leaning on him. Oh, my! Why didn't you warn me?

I tried, Max reminded him sulkily.

Hah was in mental overdrive. It made sense Mytus VIIs relatively light specific gravity and lack of atmospheric friction must give it an escape velocity that was only middlin. Still, if the towers anticoncussion fields hadn't been on when the large charge had gone off, everybody in Stars End would've been colloidal slime by now.

Besides, Max added testily, isn't this better than being dead? So far?

Han brightened; there was no arguing with that logic. He shouldered part of Bollux's weight again. Okay, men; I have a new plan. Forward! They reeled off again, away from the elevators. All the elevators will be out; life-support and whatnot will have preempted all the reserve power. I saw a utility stairwell in the floor plans, but Hirken and Company will be remembering it pretty soon, too. Shag it.

They rounded the curve of the utility core as Han took his bearings. They were almost to a yellow-painted emergency door when the door snapped open and an Espo jumped out, riot gun in hand. Cupping his hand to his mouth, the man called, Viceprex Hirken! This way, sir!

Then he noticed Hah and Bollux and swung his weapon to bear. With only a microcharge in the blaster, Han had to make a quick head shot. The Espo dropped.

Brown nose, Hah grunted, still hanging on to the droid, stooping to grab the riot gun. He manhandled himself and his burden through the emergency door. A furor of shouting reached him; the others had found the elevators useless, and someone had remembered the stairwell. Han secured the door behind him and fired several sustained bursts at its latching mechanism. The metal began to glow and fuse. It was a durable alloy that would shed its heat again in moments, leaving the latch welded shut. Those remaining on the other side would be able to blast their way through with hand weapons, but it would take precious time.

As he and Hah half fell, half ran, down the stairs, Bollux asked, Where to now, sir?

The stasis-booth tiers. They careened around a landing, nearly falling. Feel that? The artificial gravities fluctuating. In time the power-management routers will cut off everything but life-support.

Oh, I see, sir. Bollux said. The stasis booths you and Max mentioned?

Give the droid a prize. When those booths start conking out, there're gonna be some pretty cranky prisoners on the loose. The guy who might be able to pull our choobies out of the conflagration is one of them Doe, Jessa's father.

They made their way down, past Hirkens' living quarters and the interrogation levels, encountering no one else in the stairwell. The gravity fluctuations lessened, but footing remained unpredictable. They arrived at another emergency door, and Han opened it manually.

Across a corridor was another door, which had been left open. Through it Hah saw a long, wide aisle between high tiers of stasis booths like stacked, upright coffins. The lowest rows of booths were already darkened, empty, the highest still in operation. Booths in the middle two rows flickered.

But down in the aisles a line of six guards wavered before a mass of humans and nonhumans. The released prisoners, members of dozens of species, growled and roared their hostility. Fists, tentacles, claws, and paws shook angrily in the air. The Espos, waving their riot guns and advancing, tried to contain the break without firing, afraid they might be overwhelmed if they opened up.

A tall, demonish-looking being broke from the mob and launched himself at the Espos, his face splitting with mad laughter, hands grasping. A burst from a riot gun brought him down in a groaning heap. The prisoners' hesitation disappeared; they advanced on the Espos in unison. What did they have to fear from death, compared with life in the interrogation chambers?

Han pushed Bollux aside, knelt behind the emergency-door frame, and cut loose at the guards. Two of them fell before they realized they were taking fire from their rear. One turned, then another, to exchange shots, while their fellows tried to hold back the seething prisoners.

Red darts of light crisscrossed. Smoke from charred metal rose from the doorframe with the ozone of blaster fire. The smell of burned flesh was in the air. The unnerved guards bolts zipped through the open emergency door or hit the wall, but failed to find their target. Han, kneeling to make himself as small a mark as possible, winced and flinched from the intense counterfire and cursed his own riot guns' poor sighting characteristics.

He finally nailed one of the two Espos shooting at him. The other dropped to the floor to avoid being hit. Hah, seeing that, used an old trick. Reaching through the doorframe, he placed his weapon flat on its side on the floor, triggering frantically. The shots, aligned directly along the plane of the floor, found the prone Espo and silenced him in seconds.

The remaining guards broke. One let his piece fall and raised his hands, but it did him no good; the mob poured over and around him like an avalanche, burying him in murderous human and alien forms. The other Espo, trapped between Hans sniping and the prisoners, started scaling one of the ladders connecting the catwalks along the tiers of stasis booths.

Partway up, the guard paused and shot those who had tried to follow him. Hans shots, at the wrong angle, missed. Han gathered up Bollux, headed for the tier room.

The last Espo's gunfire had made the prisoners draw back as he climbed for the third catwalk. From out of the pack of prisoners, three shaggy, simian creatures swarmed up after him, disdainful of ladders, swinging up arm over long arm along the tiers' outerworks. They overtook the Espo in moments. He hung from the rungs long enough to shoot one of the simians. It fell with an eerie caw. The other ape-things drew even with the Espo, one on either side. As he tried to fire again, his weapon was snatched from his hand and dropped to those below. The yowling guard was then caught up by both his arms, swung, and hurled with incredible strength straight upward. He slammed against the ceiling above the highest row of booths and fell to the floor in a windmilling of arms and legs, with an ugly sound of impact.

Han, setting Bollux aside, ran to join the milling prisoners. Overhead, more and more of the stasis booths were being shut down to power the overtaxed life-support systems, yielding inhabitants of many planets. Now that the immediate challenge of the guards had been eliminated, the recent escapees were at a loss. Many of them had been killed or wounded by the guards' fire, and many others were dead or dying, unwounded, because their physiologies weren't compatible with Star's End's atmosphere and they hadn't entered stasis with their life-support equipment. Voices overbore one another. Hey, where are- The gravity's funny! What's happen---What place is this?

Han, yelling and waving, got their attention. Grab those guns and take up positions in the stairwell! Espo's will be finding their way here in a minute! He spotted a man in the uniform of a planetary constabulary, probably a bothersome official the Authority had decided to put on ice. Han pointed to him. Get them organized and set up defenses, or you'll all find yourself back in stasis!

Han turned, heading for the corridor. As he passed the droid, he told him, Wait here, Bollux; I've got to find Doc and Chewie.

As the prisoners scrambled for the fallen Espo's weapons, Han dashed into the connecting corridor, swung right, and headed for the next tier block. But as he closed on the next door, it snapped open, unlocked from the inside. Three Espo's crowded, elbows and hips, each trying to be the first to get out of the tier block, as a pandemonium of fighting and shooting echoed from the room behind them.

The guards made it only halfway through the door. There was a deafening roar, and a familiar pair of long hairy arms reached out to gather all three of them back into the fray.

Yo, there you are now, Hah called happily.

Chewie!

The Wooldee had finished draping the guards' limp forms over a nearby handrail. He saw his friend and hooted ecstatically. Han, his protestations ignored, was caught up in a comradely embrace that made his ribs creak. Then the artificial gravity waffled for a second and Chewbacca nearly fell. He let Han down. If we ever get out of this, partner, Han panted, let's go settle down on a nice, quiet, stellar delivery route, what do you say?

This tier block had been taken with less trouble than the other; apparently fewer guards had been here when its stasis fields began to go. There was the same confusion, though, in a multitude of tongues and sound levels. The Wooldee, jostled into Hah, turned with a truly stentorian roar, holding his fists aloft. A space cleared around him instantly. Into the interval of silence Hah inserted the order that the prisoners take up what guns they had and join the other defenders.

Then he grabbed Chewbacca's shoulder. Cmon, Docs here somewhere, Chewie, and we haven't got long

to find him. Hes our only chance of coming out of this alive.

The two went on to the next tier block, of which there were five altogether, as Hah recalled from the floor plan. They encountered a door already open. Hah brought the riot gun up and peered cautiously into the chamber. Its stasis booths were empty, and a disturbing silence hung over all. Han wondered if, per-haps, the Authority hadnt gotten to use this portion of its prison yet. He stepped into the tier block; Chew-bacca followed after.

Stand where you are! ordered a voice behind them. Men and other creatures jumped up from con-cealment on the catwalks and outerworks, and along the walls. More appeared from around the bend in the corridor.

But both Hah and his first mate had identified the voice that had commanded them. DOCI Hah cried, though he and the Wooldee prudently held their places. No use being fried.

The old man, his head wreathed by a white, frizzy cloud of hair, blinked at them in utter surprise. Han Solo! What in the name of the Original Light brings you here, son? But I suppose thats obvious two more inmates, eh? He faced the others. This palrs okay.

He trotted over to them. Han was shaking his head, No, Doc. Chewie was here. A few of us came to see what we,---

Doe hushed him. More important things to get to, youngster. All these tiers in the first three rooms went at once; thats how we took the blocks so quickly. The demands on the systems mustve been extraordinary; and now I notice the gravitys unstable.

Three tier blocks going all at once figured, Hah thought, what with that first giant demand placed on the anticoncussion fields when the power plant went.

Uh, yeah, Doc. I meant to mention that. You know youre in a tower, right? Well, I, I sort of blew it into space; overloaded the power plant and cut the over-head deflector shield so that-

Doe clapped a hand over his eyes. Hah, you irr- becilet

Hah became defensive. You dont like it? Climb back into your shipping cratel He saw hed made his point. No time to argue; theres no way Stars End can make it all the way out of Mytus VIIs gravity. Were due for a crash, and Im not sure how soon. The only thing thatll save us is that anticoncussion field, and its faded. Its up to you to make sure its juiced up when we hit.

Doe was staring at Han with his mouth open.

Sonny, energizing an anticoncussion field is not like hot-wiring somebodys skyhopper and going for a joy-ridel

Han threw his hands up. Fine; lets just sit and wait to smash ourselves flat. Jessa can always adopt a new father.

That struck home. Doe sighed. Youre right; if its our one shot, we shall take it. But I dont think much of your taste in jailbreaks. He turned to the others, who had been kept from intruding in the conversation only because of Chewbaccas looming presence. Pay attention! No time for chatting! Come with me, and do as I say, and we may make it yet; at least I can promise you an end to interrogation.

He elbowed Hah. Blaze of glory, and all that, eh? Then he started off at the head of a shuffling, loping, hoof-clacking horde, each individual moving on what-ever extremities or in whatever fashion was his.

As they went, Han rapidly told Doe the bare bones of the story. The old man interrupted This Trianii is onboard the Millennium Falcon?

Should be, but it wont do us much good; the Fal-cons tractors could never hold back this tower from re-entry.

Doc stopped. I say, did you hear something, boy?

They all had, the mew and crackle of blaster fire. They broke into a run. For all his apparent age, Doe

kept up with the pilot and the Wookiee. They reached the emergency door just as the limp body of a prisoner was passed into the corridor from the stairwell. It was a gangling, saurian creature with a blaster burn in its midsection. From the stairwell came the irregular sounds of a firefight.

Whats going on? Hah shouted, trying to elbow his way through. Chewbacca got in front, shoving and yelping, and opened a way. The prisoner who Hah had arbitrarily put in charge appeared on the stairs. Were holding an upper landing. There are a number of Authority people up there, trying to fight their way down. I put some lookouts on the lower stairs, but nothings happened down there yet.

Hitken and his bunch are trying to make their way down because the air locks are located here and on the lowest level. Hes hoping for a rescue, Han told them.

Doe and the others looked at him in surprise. He remembered that Stars End must be largely unknown territory to them. The constabulary officer asked, Just whats happened?

Our times running out, is what, Han answered. We have to hold up here and give Doe there a chance to get down to the engineering levels. Take whoevers armed on point; therell be some resistance down there, but it ought to be light. The rest can follow at a distance.

The expedition down the stairwell began, with Doe hurrying because none of them knew when the tower would hit its apogee and begin its plummeting descent.

Meanwhile, Han and Chewbacca dashed upstairs. Han felt himself breathing hard and understood that life-support systems were beginning to fail. H the oxy-gen pressure in the tower fell too low, all their efforts would mean nothing.

They joined the defenders holding the second land-ing above the tier blocks. Blaster beams from above sizzled and crashed against the opposite wall as the re-maining armed prisoners here fired quick, unaimed shots around the corner when they could, with little chance of hitting anyone up on the next landing.

Sev-eral defenders lay dead or injured. As Han topped the stairs, one man edged his weapon around the corner, quickly squeezed off a few shots, and drew back hast-fly. He spied Hah. Whats going on down there?

Han crouched beside him and was about to ease around the corner for a squint upstairs when a volley of red bolts burned and bit at the floor and walls out in the field of fire. He shrank back.

Get your damn bulb down, man, the defender cautioned. We ran into the point men right here at the turn. We drove them back, but the rest came down. Its a standoff, but they have more weapons. Then he repeated, Whats going on below?

The others are headed for the lower levels, to rig a, a way out of this. Were here to keep the riffraff out. He began to sweat, thinking that the tower must surely be succumbing to the pull of Mytus VII by now. The steady salvos from the next landing lit the stair-well. Chewbacca, checking it out with narrowed eyes, gobbled something to Han.

My pals right, Han told the other defenders. See all the incoming bolts? Theyre hitting the far wall and the other side of the floor, and thats all, nothing on this side.

He slid around on the seat of his pants, cradling the riot gun high across his chest. Chewbacca braced Hans knees solidly to the floor. Han squirmed back on his buttocks, centimeter by centimeter, until his back was almost into the line of fire.

He and Chewbacca traded looks. The mans was rueful, the Wooldees concerned. Hang it out.

Han let himself fall backward. The riot gun, clamped across his chest, pointed straight upstairs. Still dropping, he saw what hed expected. A man in g. spo brown was stealing down the stairs, hugging the near wall to avoid his covering fire. The scene burned into Hans mind with an abrupt, almost painful clarity as he cut loose with a flurry of shots. Without waiting to see their effect, he leaned up again, long before his back could touch the floor. Chewbacca felt the move, pulled hard. Han came sliding to safety; his pop-up appearance had begun and ended so suddenly that nobody upstairs had managed to redirect his aim.

There was a rapid clattering on the stairs, and an Espo-issue side arm spun to a stop on the landing. A moment later, with a weighty bouncing, the pistols owner rolled to a halt next to it, more than adequately dead. It was the Espo major.

Han nodded in tribute to the majors devotion to duty.

The barrage from the next landing became more intense. The defenders answered with what weapons they had. Chewbacca picked up a pistol dropped by one of the fallen defenders, a feathered creature lying in a pool of translucent blood. The corpses beaked face had been partly obliterated by a blaster shot. The Wooldee found that the barrel of the pistol had been hit, and was twisted and useless.

Chewbacca, pointing at Hans empty, holstered blaster, threw him the unusable gun. Hah threw back the riot gun in exchange and drew his own side arm, to charge it from the ruined pistol. Chewbacca, whose thick fingers didnt fit the human-sized weapon well, tore off the trigger guard, then began firing around the corner without looking high, low, and in between, at every angle.

Han mated the adapters in the pistols grip to those in his own blasters power pack, just forward of the trigger guard. He wound up with only half-charge capacity, but it would have to do. Finished, he tossed the useless Espo pistol aside and joined the Wooldee. To frustrate counterfire, the two fired unpredictably, and they could be very unpredictable indeed. None of the Authority people seemed to want to emulate the majors heroism.

Suddenly the firing from above stopped. The defenders also stopped, watching for a trick. It occurred to Han that if Hitken had even one shock-grenade--- but no; hed have used it already.

A flat, hissing voice called down, Solel Viceprex Hirken would speak with you?

Hah leaned back against the wall nonchalantly. Without showing himself, he answered, Send him down, Uul-Rha-Shan. What the hell, come on down yourself, old snake Happy to oblige.

Then came Hirkens strong-sales-experience voice. Well talk from here, thanks. I know now just what it was you did.

Hah wished to himself hed known, too, beforehand. I want to strike a bargain, Hirken went on.

How-ever youre planning on getting away, I want you to take me with you. And the others with me, of course. Of course. Hah didnt even hesitate. You got it.

Throw your guns down here and come down one at a time, hands on your-

Be serious, Solo! Hirken interrupted, depriving Hah of the chance to tell him where to put his hands. We can keep you occupied here so that you wont be able to get out yourself! And Stars End is at the top of its arc; weve seen that much through the dome. Itll be too late soon for any of us. What do you say to that?

No way, Hirken! Han wasnt sure whether Hirken was bluffing about the towers having reached apogee. but there was no way to check it short of leaning out one of the locks-a poor idea in view of the scarcity of spacesuits. Hirkens dead center about one thing, he whispered. They could pin us here if we let them make the rules.

The others followed him quickly down to the next landing, the last one before the tier-block level. They slipped around the corner and took up positions, waiting. Now itd be the Viceprexs turn to sweat. From what Hah could hear, it sounded like the majority of the prisoners were still in the tier blocks, unsure of what they should do. Han just hoped they wouldnt panic and come his way.

He had his blaster raised, knowing a questing head must come around the corner theyd abandoned, but it was impossible to anticipate exactly when it would come.

A head did flick around the corner, Uul-Rha-Shans, high up; hed stood on someone elses back or shoulders. He flashed out, saw the disposition of the defenders, and pulled back with astounding speed. Hans tardy shot merely chipped a little more wall away; the pilot marveled at how quickly the reptilian gunman had moved.

Is that how it is to be, Solo, came Uul-Rha-Shans hypnotic voice. Must I hunt you from level to level? Strike a bargain with us; we only desire to live.

Han laughed. Sure, its just everybody else that you dont want to live.

There was a noise from below, boots on the stairs. Doe reappeared, puffing. He threw himself down next to Ham his face composed in alarm. Han hand-signaled him to speak quietly so that those above wouldnt hear.

Han, the Espos have come! Their assault craft is at the lower lock, unloading a strike force. Theyve linked up with the Authority people who were hiding from us down there They drove us off the

engineering levels; many were shot, and we were forced back. More died on the stairs before a rear guard was organized, but the Espoos are pushing a heavy blaster up, step by step. Were in it where its deep, this time!

A stream of prisoners was already pouring frantically up the stairwell. bound for the only shelter left, the tier blocks. The Espoos down there have spacesuits on, Dec said. What if they bleed off our air?

Hen abruptly saw that the men around him were looking to him for an answer, and thought, Who, me? Im just the getaway driver, remember?

He shook his head. tm tapped out, Dec. Get your-self some machinery. well play them one last chorus. Hirkens voice boomed down triumphantly. Solo! My men just contacted me by com-link! Surrender now, or Ill leave you here! As if to emphasize that, they heard the oscillation of a heavy blaster some-where in Stars End.

Well, theyll still have to come through to us, Han muttered. He grabbed Docs shirt, but recalling Hirken, spoke in a low, hard tone. Dont sweat the air; the Espoos cant bleed it off or theyll kill their Viceprex. Thats why they hit the lower lock instead of the one at prisoner level; they knew theyd have a much better chance of getting in without having to burn and rupture the tower. Send up everyone you can, anyone wholl come. Well rush Hirken, whatever it costs, and use him as a hostage.

Remembering the barrage the Authority people could lay down in the narrow stairwell, he knew that the price would be tenible. Doe did, too, and pushed himself off looking, for the first time, like the very tired old man he finally felt himself to be.

Dont stop for anything, Han was telling the others. If somebody falls, somebody else grabs his machinery, but nobody stops.

He caught Chewbaccas eye. The Weekfee peeled back his lips from his curved fangs, scrunching his black nose, and sounded a savage, appalling howl, shaking his shaggy head---a Wookiees way of defying death. Then he grinned and rumbled at Hah, who smiled lopsidedly. They were close enough friends not to have to make any more of it than that.

MORE inmates had come up to the landing, but they were unarmed. Hah repeated instructions about weap-ons and not stopping. His heart pounded when he thought how concentrated the energy beams would be in that stairwell. Goodbye, Old Spacemens Home.

He rose to a half crouch, and the others emulated him. Chewie and me first, to lay down a cover. On three; one, two-he edged to the coruer-th

A small, furry form, vaulting over those behind Hah, landed on his shoulders, tugging at his neck. Its limber tail looped out to encircle the surprised Chew-baccas wrist.

Han staggered, valor forgotten. What the flying- He identified his assailant. Pakka!

The cub swung down from Hans neck, bouncing up and down urgently, tugging at his leg. For a moment no fact seemed reliable. Pakka, didnt you, I mean, wheres Atuarre? Dammit, kid, howd you get here?

He remembered then that the cub couldnt answer.

Doe was shouting from below. Solo, get down here!

Sit on things here; dont charge and dont fall back unless you have to, Han told Chewbacca. He pressed through his troops and raced down the stairs, trailing the fleet Pakka. Inside the emergency door leading to the tier blocks, he slid to a halt. ,4 tuarre!

She was surrounded by Doe and the other prisoners. Solo-Captain! She seized his hands, her words tum-bling out on top of one another. Shed brought in the Millennium Falcon and clamped onto the cargo lock here at the tier-block level, on the opposite side of the tower from the Espo assault ship.

I dont think they noticed me; energy fluxes in Stars End are distorting sensors completely. I had to link up purely by visual tracking.

Han drew Doe and Atuarre aside. We could never, never fit all these people into the Falcon, not if we use

every cubic centimeter of space. How do we tell them?

The Triarii broke in. Solo-Captain, shut up! Please. And listen I have a tunnel-tube junction station secured to the Falcon. I drove it right up against the ship and made it fast with a tractor beam.

We can certainly fit inmates in the tunnel-tubes if we extend them, Doe began.

Halls excited voice overbore him. Well do better than that. Atuarre, you're a genius! But will the tunnel-tube reach? It should.

Doe was looking from one to the other. What are you two--- Oh! I see! He rubbed his hands together, eyes bright. This will be novel, for a fact.

One of the defenders from the upper landing poked his head through the emergency door. Solo, the Viceprex is calling for you again.

If I don't answer, he'll know something's doing. I'll send Chewie down to help you. Work fast! Solo-Captain, we have only minutes remaining! He bounded up the stairs, though it left him huffing and heaving, and threatened to black him out. Airs going, he thought. In hushed tones he explained everything quickly and dispatched the Wooldee and most of the others down to join Atuarre and Dec. Then he answered Hirken. The Viceprex shouted, Time short, Solo. Will you yield?

Yield? Hah sputtered, unbelieving. What do you have in mind, deformation? He pegged a shot around the corner, beginning a steady harassing fire, and hoped that those below could hold the Espo assault team for the required time.

Ninety seconds later a cycling light came on over one of the unused stern air locks of the Authority as-satfit craft. No one was there to notice, because, except for a skeleton watch, the entire ship's complement had been turned out to rescue the Viceprex, at his order.

The lock opened. Through it stepped a very incensed Wooldee, hefting a captured wide-bore blaster. He was pleased, however, that he hadn't been compelled to waste time and power burning through the lock doors. He'd secured the outer hatch open. Behind him, floating in the weightlessness of the extended tunnel-tube, were more prisoners, waiting with weapons and with claws and stingers and pincers and bare, eager hands. Even farther back, at the junction station, other prisoners were being crowded aboard the Falcon, while more waited to leave the tower. Since the freighter could never hold them all, this ship had to be captured.

Chewbacca gave a hand motion and set off. The others drew themselves in after, touching down as they entered the assault craft's artificial gravity.

The locks opening had been noted on the bridge. An Espo crewman, coming to check out what he thought would be a malfunction in the air-lock apparatus, rounded a corner and almost fetched up against the Wooldee's enormous, furry-haired torso. A stroke of the blaster's butt sent the Espo flying back through the air. He landed in a brown-clad heap, his helmet skittering along the deck.

Another Espo, down a side passageway, heard the noise and came running, tugging at his holstered pistol. Chewbacca stepped out of concealment and swung the blaster's stovepipe barrel, downing him. As prisoners rushed to pick up the felled men's weapons, Chewbacca led the rest on, past engineering and crew quarters, as small parties split off from the main group to take and hold those areas. More and more prisoners poured from the aft lock, making way quickly for the many who were to follow.

The Wooldee came to the hatch of the ship's bridge.

He hit its release and, as the hatch slid up, stepped through. A junior officer did a foolish double take and fumbled for his pistol, saying, How in-

Chewbacca struck the officer down with a giant fore-arm, then threw his head back and roared. Those behind him surged into the bridge. Little of the fighting done in the next twelve seconds was with artificial weapons. None of the bridge watch ever reached an alarm hutton.

Setting the wide-bore aside, Chewbacca prepared to cast off from Stars End.

Atuarre watched anxiously as she and a few chosen helpers in the big tier-level cargo lock almost threw milling prisoners into the tunnel-tube, where they thrashed like swimmers, moving and helping one another toward the junction station. Doe had already gone ahead to take the Falcon's controls. As soon

as Chewbacca had control of the assault craft, he was to free it gently from the tower so that it couldn't be re-taken, and the Espo withdrawal route would be cut off.

So many! Atuarre thought, hoping there'd be room enough for all of them. Then she saw a familiar face in the crowd and abandoned her place, keening with joy.

Pakka came, too, and clung to his father's back, holding on to both his parents for the first time in months, his wide eyes tearing.

Just then, Stars Ends' general power conduits, weakened by erratic flow management, began to explode. Up on the landing, Hah heard it, the beginning of Stars Ends' death throes. He was holding with three others, all of them armed. Hirkens' people had been quiet for the last few minutes; the Viceprex was probably hoping that relief wasn't far off. And he could be right, since Espo assault troops were working their way up through the tower quickly, mowing down the prisoners' opposition.

But the exploding conduits constituted a new factor. Hah ordered everybody back. Well hold at the tier-block level; pass the word below to come running. They could pull back to the air lock, which lay beyond the fifth tier block, if they had to.

He fired a few more shots up the stairwell as his runner took off. He tried to figure out how long it had been since the tower had been blown free. Twenty minutes? More? They were asking a great deal of their luck.

As Han and his men fell back, the clatter of the lower-level defenders was heard. Both groups met at the emergency door leading to the tier blocks and crowded through. Han, among the last, turned to give the man behind him a hand, only to see him die with an odd, disappointed look on his face.

Han pulled the falling body out of the way as the final prisoner leaped through. Several others helped him shoulder the ponderous door shut as blaster and disrupter fire lashed against it, and made it fast with scraps of metal jammed in the latch. But it wouldn't hold long, especially if the heavy crew-served blaster were brought up. Han surveyed the prisoners with him. How many left to load?

Almost done, fella, someone called. Just a few left, not more than a hundred or so.

Then anybody who's not armed, hat up! The rest spread out and take up a firing position. We're almost home.

They were still moving down the corridor when the emergency door crumpled inward, burned from its frame in a rain of glowing slag. The snout of the crew-served blaster stood in the gap, pointing straight into the abandoned first-tier block. Han didn't bother firing at its shielded barrel.

The heavy blaster erupted into the empty tier block, and an armored Espo came worming around it to enter the corridor. One of the prisoners stopped long enough to shoot him. At the curve in the corridor, the defenders paused to take up firing again. The gunners were having trouble getting their piece through the emergency door without exposing themselves to counterfire.

Han and three others were the only ones left; a few prisoners had gone on to set up a new line of defense. Smoke from ruptured power conduits was getting thicker, the air thinner. Han's senses strayed for a moment. He was opposite the door to the second tier block and crossed to it, bent over double, for a better field of fire.

But he spied something propped up against one of the stasis booths, halfway down the tier's aisle. Bollux, what the hell are you doing there? Evidently the droid either had been dragged or had managed to drag himself this far toward the air lock, then had been shunted aside, and pausing in the shelter of the tier block for a moment, was unable to rise again. Hah realized that no prisoner in fear of his life would have taken time to worry about an antiquated labor droid.

He ran to his side and dropped to one knee. Up and at em, Annihilator. We're beaten feet.

It took all his strength to get the droid up. Thank you, Captain Solo, Bollux drawled. Even with Max's direct linkage, I couldn't—Captain.

Simultaneously with the droid's warning, Han felt Bollux throw all his mechanical weight against him, sending the two of them spinning around. In the same stopped frame, as it seemed, a disrupter beam meant for Han sliced into the droid's head.

As they spun, Han's draw was automatic. In that frozen instant, he saw Uul-Rha-Shan standing in the

doorframe at the head of the aisle, the bodies of the other defenders on the corridor floor behind him. The reptilian gunman had his weapon held at arms length, knowing that his first shot had missed. The disrupter pistol was realigning. Hah, with no time to aim, fired from the hip. Everything seemed to him to take forever, and yet to happen instantly.

The blaster bolt flowered high against Uul-Rha-Shafts green-scaled chest, lifting him and hurling him backward, while his own disrupter shot lanced upward and splashed off the ceiling.

Han and Bollux were sprawled together on the floor. There was no light in the droids photoreceptors, no evidence of function. Han rose shakily, locked the fingers of his left hand around Bolluxs shoulder pauldron, holding on to his blaster with his right, and began hatfling, heaving for breath.

He never saw the Espos who, following in Uul-Rha-Shans wake, were ready to cut him down. Nor did he see them fall, downed by the fire from the prisoners counterattack. Hans lightheadedness had narrowed his vision down to a dark tunnel; through that tunnel he would drag Bollux back to the Falcon, nothing less.

Suddenly another figure was at his side, a furred and sinuous Trianii Ranger, bearing a smoking blaster. Solo-Captain? It was a males voice. Come, I will aid you. We have but seconds.

Han let the other do so, both of them tugging the droids hulk along much more quickly. Dull curiosity made Han ask, Why?

Because my mate, Atuarre, said not to bother com-ing back without you, and because my cub, Pakka, would have come if I had not. The Trianii called out, Here, Ive found him!

Others arrived, to give supporting fire, throwing the Espos into a brief confusion. The assaulting troops, not having gotten their heavy blaster into the corridor yet, fell back. More willing hands dragged at Bollux.

Then, somehow, they were all standing at the air lock, and the Espos seemed to have broken off their attack. The droid was floated into the tunnel-tube, along with the other defenders and Atuarres mate. Only then did Han enter the air lock, leaving behind a strangely silent chamber. The iresher, thicker air of the tube hit him like a drug. He waved the rest on. The Millennium Falcon was still his ship, and he would be the one to east off.

Solo, wait! A man stumbled out of the smoke. Viceprex Hitken, looking a century older. He spoke with hysterical speed.

Solo, I know theyve moved the assault ship away from the lower lock. I told no one, not even my wi/e. I ordered the Espos back and came in by myself.

He shuffled closer, hands imploring. Han stared at the Vice-President for Corporate Security as if he were a specimen under a scope.

Please take me, Solel Do anything-anything-anything to me, but dont leave me here to---

Hirkens handsome face jumped, as if hed forgotten what he was about to say, then he fell, squirming and reaching uselessly for the wound in his back. His obese wife came waddling up behind him with F..spos at her back and a smoking pistol in her hands.

Han had already hit the inner air-lock hatch closure. He dived through the outer, into the tunnel-tube, hit-ting that switch, too. As the outer air-lock hatch closed, he irised the tunnel-tube shut, released its seal with an outgushing of air, and unclamped the tube. He floated there, watching through a viewport as Hirkens wife and the Espos beat at the air locks outer-hatch view-port, unavailingly. Stars Ends descent speed had al-ready drawn it away, and it plunged deeper into the planets gravity well.

Around him he could see and hear the wobble of the tunnel-tube as packed prisoners were gradually absorbed into the assault craft and the Millennium Falcon.

Everyone in the two ships and the tunnel-tubes was so busy crowding elbow to pseudopod, or helping the injured or the dying, that only one survivor thought to watch the towers fall.

As his mother and Dec labored over the Falcons controls, conning the freighter under its extreme bur-den and maintaining tractor-grip on the junction sta-tion, Pakka hung from an overhead conduit in the cockpit, the only one with both an unoccupied mind and a vantage point.

The cub stared down at Stars Ends descent, the flawless trajectory of an airless world. And even the

sudden, brilliant flash of its impact didnt distract the others, who had lives to worry about. But Pakka, un-bJinking, unspeaking, saw the symbol of Authority flare and die with the brevity of a meteor. The wind pulled hard across the landing field on Urdur, a no-nonsense wind, chilling, biting, but fresh and free. The former inmates of Stars End, those who had lived to reach this latest outlaw-tech base, breathed it without complaint as they were herded off to temporary quarters.

But Hah still pulled his borrowed greatcoat tighter around him. Im not arguing, he argued. ! just dont understand, is all. He was addressing Doe, but Jessa was listening, as were Pakka, Atuarre, and her mate, Keeheen.

Nearby rested the Falcon, the tunnel-tube junction still clamped to her side, and the Espo assault craft. Dec had guided both stuffy, overcrowded ships into quick contact with essa, and theyd been directed to this latest hide-out world.

Chewbacca was still onboard the Falcon, surveying the damage done to her since the last time hed seen her. A new yaup of inconsolable sadness echoed from the ship each time he found another item of damage.

Dec, rather than reiterate his explanation, said, Youngster, check the droid out for yourself. There. Outlaw-techs were just offloading Bolluxs mutilated, beam-scorched form from the ship. An entire segment of his cranium had been shot away by Uul-Rha-Shan. At Docs order, his men brought over the repulser-lift handtruck with the droid strapped to it. With force bars and pinch-jacks, they prized open the plastron.

And there sat Blue Max, unscathed, running Off his Own power pack. Han leaned over him. Uh, Maxie? The computers voice still sounded like a childs. Captain Solel Long time no see. In fact, long time no see anything.

Gotcha. Sorry; things were really jumping this trip.

Is Bollux in there with you for a fact?

In response, he heard the muffled drawl of the labor droid coming from Maxs grille, sounding strangely high-pitched through the vocoder. Right enough, Skipper. Blue Max was in direct link with me when the disrupter hit me. He pulled all my essential information and basic matrices down here, safe and sound with him, in microseconds. Imagine that? Nat-urally, Ive lost a lot of specifics, but I guess I can always relearn camp sanitation procedures if I have to. The voice became dejected. I suppose my bodys un-salvageable, though.

Well get you a new one, Bollux, Doe promised. One for both of you, a custom puff; you have my word. But now you have to go; my boys will make sure all that circuitry in there remains stable.

Bollux, Han said, and found himself with nothing to say. He hit that problem from time to time. Take it slow.

I always do, the vocoder drawled.

Gbye, Captain SOlo! Blue Max added.

Jessa, shading her eyes, pointed to the assault craft.

Theres a problem we wont solve in the shop.

A dark-skinned figure sat by the ships ramp, head bent to his chest. He took his uncles death pretty hard, Jessa continued. Rekkon was quite a man; losing him would be hard on anybody. She looked to Han. Hah was studiously looking elsewhere. He saw the boys head come up from his private grief; he bore a startling resemblance to Rekkon.

What do we do with him? Jessa went on. Most of the prisoners will find a new life somehow, even Torms father and brother. The majority of them will leave the Corporate Sector; a few hotheads plan to take it to the courts, as if they had a prayer. But the boys by far the youngest you rescued, and hes got no one now.

She was watching her father expectantly. Docs eye-brows shot up. Dont goggle at me, girlie. Im a certified businessman and criminal. I dont collect strays.

She giggled. But you never turn them away, either.

And you always say theres always room for one more at the table, well just-

m-scramble the eggs, he anticipated her, and wa-ter the soup. I know. Well, I suppose I could at least talk to the lad. He might have some usable aptitude, hmm, yes. Atuarre, you worked with his uncle quite closely; would you mind coming with me?

Dec went off with all three Trianii at his side. Pakka turned and pped Han a parting wave, his other paw-hand caught up in his fathers.

Jessa looked at Han. Well, Solo, thanks. See you around. She turned to go.

He couldnt stifle an involuntary Hey/ She turned back with a cant to her head that let him know hed have to talk fast. Which he did. I put my life-my one and precious life, mind you-on the line for your father-

-and all those other fine people, she cut in, including your good friend Chewie---

---and went through a couple of types of hair-raising situations, and all you have to say is thanks?

She evinced shock. Why, you only carried out your part of our deal. And I carried out mine. What else did you expect, a parade?

He glared at her, hoping shed wither from his gaze. She didnt. He spun on his toe and headed for the Fal-coifs ramp with long strides. You win! Women, hah! Ive got the whole galaxy, sweetheart, the whole galaxy. Who needs this?

She caught up, whirled him around. Jessa looked good even in cold-weather gear. Numbskull! Whats wrong with striking another deal?

His brow furrowed. I am somehow slipping into something tricky here, he thought, but I cant quite see what. What kind of deal?

She considered it, looking him over. What are your plans? Are you going to join this campaign against the Authority? Or clear out of this part of space? He looked up, sighing. You should know better than that. Rob em blind, thats my kind of revenge. Jessa leaned around him and called up into the ship Hey, Chewie, howd you like an all-new guid-ance system? And a complete overhaul?

The Wooldees delighted honks, preceding his ap-pearance at the ramp, sounded like a happy foghorn. Jessa finished cheerily, And to show you what a sport I am, boys, Ill throw in some body work, repair all minor hull damage. Ill reroute the ducting in the cock-pit, too; get all those conduits and other head-knockers out of your way.

Chewbacca was close to tears of joy. He threw his hairy arm around the Falcons landing gear and gave it a wet Wooldee kiss.

Jessa said, See, Solo? Its easy when youre the besss daughter.

He was fummoxed. Jess, what am I supposed to offer?

She slipped her arm through his, grinning slyly. Whatre you got, Han? She led him away, ignoring his objections. His outbursts became fewer as the pair walked across the landing field toward the distant buildings. Halfway there, Chewbacca saw, Han held his greatcoat open so that she could slip into it, safe from the bitter winds of Urdur, though her own suit was quite well insulated.

Leanlng casually on the Falcon, the Wooldee watched them go, and thought about what he and Hah Solo could do with a ship milled and tuned fine by the full resources of the outlaw-techs. His m, zzle wrinkled back from his fangs. He was glad for the breather theyd have here on Urdur.

But after that, everybody had best hang on to his cash with both hands.