

The background of the cover is a dynamic battle scene from Star Wars. In the upper half, a large, dark, mechanical structure, possibly a Star Destroyer's hull, looms over the battlefield. A red laser beam cuts through the air from the top left. In the lower half, several Rebel soldiers are engaged in combat. On the left, a Wookiee soldier in a grey and black tactical suit is crouched, aiming a blaster. In the center, a human soldier with a beard and a helmet with goggles is also aiming a blaster. To the right, another soldier is visible, and in the background, more soldiers and debris are scattered across a rocky, desolate landscape. The overall color palette is dominated by greys, blues, and reds from the laser fire.

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. . . .

STAR WARS®
BATTLEFRONT™
TWILIGHT COMPANY

ALEXANDER FREED

Contents

About the Book

About the Author

Title Page

Dedication

Acknowledgments

Part I: Withdrawal

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Part II: Regroupment

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Part III: Assault

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Part IV: Siege

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

Chapter 38

Chapter 39

Chapter 40

Chapter 41

Chapter 42

Chapter 43

Copyright

ABOUT THE BOOK

Among the stars and across the vast expanses of space, the Galactic Civil War rages. On the battlefields of multiple worlds in the Mid Rim, legions of ruthless Stormtroopers – bent on crushing resistance to the Empire wherever it arises – are waging close and brutal combat against an armada of freedom fighters. In the streets and alleys of ravaged cities, the front-line forces of the Rebel Army are taking the fight to the enemy, pushing deeper into Imperial territory and grappling with the savage flesh-and-blood realities of war on the ground.

Leading the charge are the soldiers – men and women, human and non-human – of the Sixty-First Mobile Infantry, better known as Twilight Company. Hard-bitten, war-weary, and ferociously loyal to one another, the members of this renegade outfit doggedly survive where others perish, and defiance is their most powerful weapon against the deadliest odds. When orders come down for the rebels to fall back in the face of superior opposition numbers and firepower, Twilight reluctantly complies. Then an unlikely ally radically changes the strategic equation – and gives the Alliance’s hardest-fighting warriors a crucial chance to turn retreat into resurgence.

Orders or not, alone and outgunned but unbowed, Twilight Company locks, loads, and prepares to make its boldest manoeuvre – trading down-and-dirty battle in the trenches for a game-changing strike at the ultimate target: the very heart of the Empire’s military machine.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexander Freed is the author of *Star Wars: the Old Republic: The Lost Suns*, as well as many short stories, comic books, and videogames. Born near Philadelphia, he endeavours to bring the city's dour charm with him to his current home of Austin, Texas.

STAR WARS™ **BATTLEFRONT**



ALEXANDER FREED



To Susan, who earned it

STAR WARS™

TIMELINE

I

THE PHANTOM MENACE

II

ATTACK OF THE CLONES

THE CLONE WARS (TV SERIES)

DARK DISCIPLE

III

REVENGE OF THE SITH

LORDS OF THE SITH

TARKIN

A NEW DAWN

REBELS (TV SERIES)

IV

A NEW HOPE

HEIR TO THE JEDI

BATTLEFRONT: TWILIGHT COMPANY

V

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

VI

RETURN OF THE JEDI

AFTERMATH

VII

THE FORCE AWAKENS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Books are written alone, but they rarely make it to publication that way.

Thanks first of all to Shelly Shapiro and Frank Parisi, who took a chance on me with this project (though Frank was wise enough to run for cover after tossing the grenade)—working with such thoughtful and adept editors is both humbling and a privilege.

Thanks also to Charles Boyd, Dana Kurtin, and Jeffrey Visgaitis, who provided valuable feedback during the writing process and helped forestall the worst of my nonsense. Due credit as well to all the writers from BioWare Austin who dragged me into the *Star Wars* galaxy in the first place; in particular, Daniel Erickson has been a tremendous backer and mentor over the years, and Drew Karpysyn's support has been much appreciated.

Finally, while I could list a dozen and more authors whose work influenced *Twilight Company*, a special tip of the hat must go to the grandfather of space opera E. E. "Doc" Smith, without whom none of this would be possible. Clear ether, spacehound!

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away....

STAR WARS™
BATTLEFRONT



The Galactic Empire endures. Despite the destruction of its terrifying Death Star by the Rebel Alliance, its oppression spreads undiminished across the stars.

Under the direction of the Emperor and Darth Vader, an army of highly trained, single-minded stormtroopers quashes dissent and destroys resistance.

But on worlds like Sullust, Coyerti, Haidoral Prime, and untold others, rebel forces fight in the trenches, determined to maintain hope against the unrelenting Imperial war machine ...

PART I

WITHDRAWAL





CHAPTER 1

PLANET CRUCIVAL

Day Forty-Seven of the Malkhani Insurrections
Thirteen Years After the Clone Wars

His name was Donin, and though that wasn't the name he'd been born with, he had the ink-rubbed brands to prove it. The black whorls and waves, freshly applied by the clan masters in honor of his induction, ran across his dusky shoulder blades under his coarse cloth jacket. They were one of four gifts he'd received upon joining the army of the Warlord Malkhan: a new name, the brands, a serrated knife, and an offworlder's particle blaster.

The masters had assured him that of the four gifts, the blaster was the most precious. Its grip was wrapped in fraying leather and its barrel was scored and crusted with ash. It had enough power left to fire a dozen searing bolts, and Donin had been warned not to waste a single shot or drop it if it began to burn his palms. Those were the acts of a child—not a full member of the clan.

He knelt among his new brothers and sisters—he'd yet to learn their names—behind a low stone wall that stretched across the hilltop. His slight frame, thin from youth and hunger, allowed him to conceal himself fully behind the barricade; for this reason he had been assigned to the front. Like his brands and weapons, that assignment was a privilege. He reminded himself as much when he began to sweat and tremble.

He glanced sidelong at his companions and looked for signs that they, too, were afraid of the coming battle. They

were nearly all larger and older, carrying offworld weapons that appeared as scored and rusted as his own. They cleaned their knives and murmured to one another. Donin told himself he would die for them as they would die for him, in the name of the clan and its warlord. And if they won the day—

If I survive the battle, Donin corrected himself. Victory was inevitable for the Warlord Malkhan. Only Donin's own fate was in question.

—then they would celebrate. He'd heard stories of feasts, of troughs of clear water and skewers of bantha meat, of salts and sauces from other continents, other *planets*. He would gorge himself, he thought, and sleep in safety in the warlord's camp. He'd heard the clan's celebrations before, while hiding shivering in his father's home, and those joyful cries were what had finally lured him to the masters.

His father had said the Malkhanis were no different than any other faction on Crucival, but his father was wrong. No one else had such food or took so much joy in victory. No one else was as strong as Malkhan, or had the wisdom to procure such a trove of offworld technology. Donin's new clan would build a better planet.

Something far away howled in the dusty air, starting soft and rising rapidly. Donin squared his shoulders, half stood from his crouch, and thrust his blaster over the wall in one movement, as he'd been taught. He saw no target. A man's voice laughed behind him, and a broad palm cupped his dark hair and tilted his head back.

"Battle ain't started yet, boy. Just a ship headed to the tower. Get us all killed if you shoot."

His gaze redirected, Donin saw the sphere and crossbars of an off-world flier silhouetted against the clouds. It roared in the direction of the steel spire and faded from view.

Donin lowered himself to his knees again, and the hand on his head disappeared. He'd made a fool of himself. He

silently pledged not to do it again. "We didn't see them much in the Gulches," he murmured—an explanation, not an excuse.

The man behind him grunted. "You'll see them a lot here. I'm serious about not shooting. Don't go within a stone's throw of the tower, either, no matter what happens. The offworlders in white may not come out much, but you bother them even a little ..."

"I know," Donin snapped. He swiveled and looked up at the man, who could have been four times Donin's age, with milky eyes and pitted skin. Older than the warlord himself. But that didn't mean he'd been part of the clan any longer than Donin. "I know all about them. Their soldiers are clones. They make them in *batches*."

The man grunted again, showing cracked yellow teeth in something that might have been a smile. "You don't say? Who told you that?"

"My father," Donin said. "He used to fight them." He gestured with his head toward the sky, toward the stars hidden behind yellow-gray clouds. "There was a war."

"Well, *you're* not fighting clones," the man said. "You're fighting the lowlifes who took the quarry last week and want our territory. That exciting enough for you?"

Donin scowled and stared. "I'm here to serve the clan," he said, and pivoted back to face the wall. One hand still clasping his blaster, he reached with the other to jerk down the collar of his jacket, displaying his brands to the man behind him.

Donin heard the man laugh, felt a slap on his spine that rocked him forward.

"I guess you are," the man said. "Just don't get your hopes up. Take it one fight at a time."

Donin nodded, shrugged his jacket higher on his back, and gripped his blaster tighter. He wasn't sure what the man meant. The clan was hope for them all.

It wasn't long before someone yelled that the enemy was approaching. The front line pressed against the wall and peered over. Donin saw specks against the brittle yellow grass in the valley below the hill, and soon those specks resolved into the shapes of dozens of men and women. Most held spears above their heads like pennants. Only a few carried offworld weapons—but those weapons were the size of tree branches, cradled by their owners in both arms.

The first of those weapons ignited with reverberating screams. Streaks of green fire spewed over the wall. The warlord's army became a mass of shouts Donin didn't understand. He steadied his blaster, reminded himself not to waste shots.

"All praise to the warlord!" someone called, and the shouting became a cheer. A rush of warmth filled the boy as he grinned and added his voice to the hurrah.

His name was Donin now. He was defending his new home. These were his brothers and sisters, their path was righteous, and he'd be part of their clan forever.



CHAPTER 2

PLANET HAIDORAL PRIME

Day Eighty-Four of the Mid Rim Retreat
Nine Years Later

The rain on Haidoral Prime dropped in warm sheets from a shining sky. It smelled like vinegar, clung to the molded curves of modular industrial buildings and to litter-strewn streets, and coated skin like a sheen of acrid sweat.

After thirty standard hours, it was losing its novelty for the soldiers of Twilight Company.

Three figures crept along a deserted avenue under a torn and dripping canopy. The lean, compact man in the lead was dressed in faded gray fatigues and a hodgepodge of armor pads crudely stenciled with the starbird symbol of the Rebel Alliance. Matted dark hair dripped beneath his visored helmet, sending crawling trails of rainwater down his bronze face.

His name was Hazram Namir, though he'd gone by others. He silently cursed urban warfare and Haidoral Prime and whichever laws of atmospheric science made it rain. The thought of sleep flashed into his mind and broke against a wall of stubbornness. He gestured with a rifle thicker than his arm toward the nearest intersection, then quickened his pace.

Somewhere in the distance a swift series of blaster shots resounded, followed by shouts and silence.

The figure closest behind Namir—a tall man with graying hair and a face puckered with scar tissue—bounded across the street to take up a position opposite. The third figure, a massive form huddled in a tarp like a hooded cloak, remained behind.

The scarred man flashed a hand signal. Namir turned the corner onto the intersecting street. A dozen meters away, the sodden lumps of human bodies lay in the road. They wore tattered rain gear—sleek, lightweight wraps and sandals—and carried no weapons. Noncombatants.

It's a shame, Namir thought, *but not a bad sign*. The Empire didn't shoot civilians when everything was under control.

"Charmer—take a look?" Namir indicated the bodies. The scarred man strode over as Namir tapped his comlink.

"Sector secure," he said. "What's on tap next?"

The response came in a hiss of static through Namir's earpiece—something about mop-up operations. Namir missed having a communications specialist on staff. Twilight Company's last comm tech had been a drunk and a misanthrope, but she'd been magic with a transmitter and she'd written obscene poetry with Namir on late, dull nights. She and her idiot droid had died in the bombardment on Asyrphus.

"Say again," Namir tried. "Are we ready to load?"

This time the answer came through clearly. "Support teams are crating up food and equipment," the voice said. "If you've got a lead on medical supplies, we'd love more for the *Thunderstrike*. Otherwise, get to the rendezvous—we only have a few hours before reinforcements show."

"Tell support to grab hygiene items this time," Namir said. "Anyone who says they're luxuries needs to smell the barracks."

There was another burst of static, and maybe a laugh. "I'll let them know. Stay safe."

Charmer was finishing his study of the bodies, checking each for a heartbeat and identification. He shook his head, silent, as he straightened.

"Atrocity." The hulking figure wrapped in the tarp had finally approached. His voice was deep and resonant. Two

meaty, four-fingered hands kept the tarp clasped at his shoulders, while a second pair of hands loosely carried a massive blaster cannon at waist level. "How can anyone born of flesh do this?"

Charmer bit his lip. Namir shrugged. "Could've been combat droids, for all we know."

"Unlikely," the hulking figure said. "But if so, responsibility belongs to the governor." He knelt beside one of the corpses and reached out to lid its eyes. Each of his hands was as large as the dead man's head.

"Come on, Gadren," Namir said. "Someone will find them."

Gadren stayed kneeling. Charmer opened his mouth to speak, then shut it. Namir wondered whether to push the point and, if so, how hard.

Then the wall next to him exploded and he stopped worrying about Gadren.

Fire and metal shards and grease and insulation pelted his spine. He couldn't hear and couldn't guess how he ended up in the middle of the road among the bodies, one leg bent beneath him. Something tacky was stuck to his chin and his helmet's visor was cracked; he had enough presence of mind to feel lucky he hadn't lost an eye.

Suddenly he was moving again. He was upright, and hands—Charmer's hands—were dragging him backward, clasping him below the shoulders. He snarled the native curses of his homeworld as a red storm of particle bolts flashed among the fire and debris. By the time he'd pushed Charmer away and wobbled onto his feet, he'd traced the bolts to their source.

Four Imperial stormtroopers stood at the mouth of an alley up the street. Their deathly pale armor gleamed in the rain, and the black eyepieces of their helmets gaped like pits. Their weapons shone with oil and machined care, as if the squad had stepped fully formed out of a mold.

Namir tore his gaze from the enemy long enough to see that his back was to a storefront window filled with video screens. He raised his blaster rifle, fired at the display, then climbed in among the shards. Charmer followed. The storefront wouldn't give them cover for long—certainly not if the stormtroopers fired another rocket—but it would have to be enough.

“Check for a way up top,” Namir yelled, and his voice sounded faint and tinny. He couldn't hear the storm of blaster bolts at all. “We need covering fire!” Not looking to see if Charmer obeyed, he dropped to the floor as the stormtroopers adjusted their aim to the store.

He couldn't spot Gadren, either. He ordered the alien into position anyway, hoping he was alive and that the comlinks still worked. He lined his rifle under his chin, fired twice in the direction of the stormtroopers, and was rewarded with a moment of peace.

“I need you on target, Brand,” he growled into his link. “I need you here *now*.”

If anyone answered, he couldn't hear it.

Now he glimpsed the stormtrooper carrying the missile launcher. The trooper was still reloading, which meant Namir had half a minute at most before the storefront came tumbling down on top of him. He took a few quick shots and saw one of the other troopers fall, though he doubted he'd hit his target. He guessed Charmer had found a vantage point after all.

Three stormtroopers remaining. One was moving away from the alley while the other stayed to protect the artilleryman. Namir shot wildly at the one moving into the street, watched him skid and fall to a knee, and smiled grimly. There was something satisfying about seeing a trained stormtrooper humiliate himself. Namir's own side did it often enough.

Jerky movements drew Namir's attention back to the artilleryman. Behind the stormtrooper stood Gadren, both

sets of arms gripping and lifting his foe. Human limbs flailed, and the missile launcher fell to the ground. White armor seemed to crumple in the alien's hands. Gadren's makeshift hood blew back, exposing his head: a brown, bulbous, widemouthed mass topped with a darker crest of bone, like some amphibian's nightmare idol. The second trooper in the alley turned to face Gadren and was promptly slammed to the ground with his comrade's body before Gadren crushed them both, howling in rage or grief.

Namir trusted Gadren as much as he trusted anyone, but there were times when the alien terrified him.

The last stormtrooper was still down in the street. Namir fired until flames licked a burnt and melted hole in the man's armor. Namir, Charmer, and Gadren gathered back around the bodies and assessed their own injuries.

Namir's hearing was coming back. The damage to his helmet extended far beyond the visor—a crack ran along its length—and he found a shallow cut across his forehead when he tossed the helmet to the street. Charmer was picking shards of shrapnel from his vest but made no complaints. Gadren was shivering in the warm rain.

"No Brand?" Gadren asked.

Namir only grunted.

Charmer laughed his weird, hiccuping laugh and spoke. He swallowed the words twice, three, four times as he went, half stuttering as he had ever since the fight on Blacktar Cyst. "Keep piling bodies like this," he said, "we'll have the best vantage point in the city."

He gestured at Namir's last target, who had fallen directly onto one of the civilian corpses.

"You're a sick man, Charmer," Namir said, and swung an arm roughly around his comrade's shoulders. "I'll miss you when they boot you out."

Gadren grunted and sniffed behind them. It might have been dismay, but Namir chose to take it as mirth.

Officially, the city was Haidoral Administrative Center One, but locals called it Glitter after the crystalline mountains that limned the horizon. In Namir's experience, what the Galactic Empire didn't name to inspire terror—its stormtrooper legions, its Star Destroyer battleships—it tried to render as drab as possible. This didn't bother Namir, but he wasn't among the residents of the planets and cities being labeled.

Half a dozen rebel squads had already arrived at the central plaza when Namir's team marched in. The rain had condensed into mist, and the plaza's tents and canopies offered little shelter; nonetheless, men and women in ragged armor squeezed into the driest corners they could find, grumbling to one another or tending to minor wounds and damaged equipment. As victory celebrations went, it was subdued. It had been a long fight for little more than the promise of a few fresh meals.

"Stop admiring yourselves and do something *useful*," Namir barked, barely breaking stride. "Support teams can use a hand if you're too good to play *greeter*."

He barely noticed the squads stir in response. Instead, his attention shifted to a woman emerging from the shadows of a speeder stand. She was tall and thickly built, dressed in rugged pants and a bulky maroon jacket. A scoped rifle was slung over her shoulder, and the armor mesh of a retracted face mask covered her neck and chin. Her skin was gently creased with age and as dark as a human's could be, her hair cropped close to her scalp, and she didn't so much as glance at Namir as she arrived at his side and matched his pace through the plaza.

"You want to tell me where you were?" Namir asked.

"You missed the second fire team. I took care of it," Brand said.

Namir kept his voice cool. "Drop me a hint next time?"

"You didn't need the distraction."

Namir laughed. "Love you, too."

Brand cocked her head. If she got the joke—and Namir expected she did—she wasn't amused. "So what now?" she asked.

"We've got eight hours before we leave the system," Namir said, and stopped with his back to an overturned kiosk. He leaned against the metal frame and stared into the mist. "Less if Imperial ships come before then, or if the governor's forces regroup. After that, we'll divvy up the supplies with the rest of the battle group. Probably keep an escort ship or two for the *Thunderstrike* before the others split off."

"And we abandon this sector to the Empire," Brand said.

By this time, Charmer had wandered off and Gadren had joined Namir and Brand. "We will return," he said gravely.

"Right," Namir said, smirking. "Something to look forward to."

He knew they were the wrong words at the wrong time.

Eighteen months earlier, the Rebel Alliance's Sixty-First Mobile Infantry—commonly known as Twilight Company—had joined the push into the galactic Mid Rim. The operation was among the largest the Rebellion had ever fielded against the Empire, involving thousands of starships, hundreds of battle groups, and dozens of worlds. In the wake of the Rebellion's victory against the Empire's planet-burning Death Star battle station, High Command had believed the time was right to move from the fringes of Imperial territory toward its population centers.

Twilight Company had fought in the factory-deserts of Phorsa Gedd and taken the Ducal Palace of Bamayar. It had established beachheads for rebel hover tanks and erected bases from tarps and sheet metal. Namir had seen soldiers lose limbs and go weeks without proper treatment. He'd trained teams to construct makeshift bayonets when blaster power packs ran low. He'd set fire to cities and watched the Empire do the same. He'd left friends behind on broken worlds, knowing he'd never see them again.

On planet after planet, Twilight had fought. Battles were won and battles were lost, and Namir stopped keeping score. Twilight remained at the Rebellion's vanguard, forging ahead of the bulk of the armada, until word came down from High Command nine months in: The fleet was overextended. There was to be no further advance—only defense of the newly claimed territories.

Not long after that, the retreat began.

Twilight Company had become the rear guard of a massive withdrawal. It deployed to worlds it had helped capture mere months earlier and evacuated the bases it had built. It extracted the Rebellion's heroes and generals and pointed the way home. It marched over the graves of its own dead soldiers. Some of the company lost hope. Some became angry.

No one wanted to go back.

When the civilians came out of hiding and into the plaza, the open recruit began.

Sergeant Zab's squad—the squad Namir had once called, in a moment of pique, “morons who could make a hydrospanner backfire”—had somehow smuggled an astromech droid into the city surveillance center. From there, they'd accessed the public address system and broadcast the captain's message: Twilight Company would soon depart Haidoral Prime. Those on Haidoral who shared the Rebellion's ideals of freedom and democracy could remain to defend their homes, or they could sign on with Twilight to take the fight to the enemy. To go where the Rebellion was needed most. And so forth.

The captain recorded a new broadcast every time Twilight went looking to bolster its ranks, tailored to the needs and the circumstances of the local population. To Namir, all the messages sounded alike.

Open recruitments were technically against Rebel Alliance security policy, but they were a Twilight Company tradition and the captain was insistent the practice continue. So long as the Rebellion sent Twilight into hell time and again—and so long as Twilight *survived*—the company would replenish its losses from the ranks of the willing. On Haidoral Prime, seven Twilight soldiers had died. Namir hadn't yet seen their names. Twilight would need seven newcomers to balance those losses, and still more to make up for those who'd died elsewhere in recent weeks.

Dozens of men and women trickled into the plaza over the space of an hour, hand-checked by Twilight "greeters" for weapons and concealed explosives. Not all of them were there to be recruited: Barefoot women with callused hands begged Twilight to stay; hunched, elderly men screamed for the company to leave. A disorganized band of locals voiced their desire to keep fighting the Empire on Haidoral—these were given what few weapons Twilight had to spare and sent away with meaningless well-wishing and invocations of "the cause."

The genuine recruits were a motley assortment of young and old, pampered and desperate. Namir paced among them, watched their eyes, and passed his assessments on to the recruiting officer. A bearded and bedraggled man had the look of a street person but the carriage of a bureaucrat; Namir pegged him as an Imperial spy. A pug-nosed woman shifted her eyes to an escape route when Namir casually moved his weapon from one hand to the other; a petty criminal looking for an easy way off the planet, he thought.

That day's recruiting officer—Hober, a withered and creak-kneed quartermaster with a knack for card games—took Namir's recommendations with a shrug. "You know Howl's orders," he said.

Namir did. Captain Evon—"Howl" when outside earshot—liked to err on the side of welcome. He and Namir had

spoken at length about that particular policy.

“Just keep an eye out,” Namir said. “You have to be a special kind of crazy to jump aboard a sinking ship.”

Hober snorted and shook his head. “Say that louder, and we can close up early.”

Namir didn’t say it louder. A bit of crazy wasn’t always a bad thing. Still, he needed recruits he could train, not deserters or unhinged killers.

The line moved slowly. Hober engaged the potential recruits with questions, chatted about their pastimes and families as much as their combat experience. Hober was good at his job, good at judging who would last and who would panic and get someone killed. Namir paced and tried to stay out of the way; intellectually, he knew what the recruits felt like, knew they’d be more likely to come clean when relaxed. He’d been in their position less than three years before. But at the moment, he couldn’t muster either interest or sympathy.

Someone in the line shouted. Namir turned to see three locals grappling with one another. Two of them were cursing and striking the third—a pale, gangly girl with a bolt of red hair. The apparent victim went down four times in as many seconds, popped back up after each hit, and seemed ready to keep brawling. Not a good fighter, but Namir gave her credit for persistence.

He fired three shots above the trio. They went still. The red-haired girl couldn’t have been more than a teenager, and the other two looked scarcely older.

“Do I need to care what’s going on here?” Namir asked, then cut the air horizontally with his hand before anyone could answer. “We’ll all be happier if you say no.”

The three youths shook their heads.

“Fight on my ship, and you’ll be sealed in a maintenance closet until you starve to death,” Namir said. “I won’t waste blaster bolts on you. I won’t waste oxygen shooting you out an air lock. You’ll die slowly because I *don’t care*.”

Namir lacked both the callousness and the authority to carry out that particular threat, but the would-be recruits didn't know it. One of the older pair hesitated, then turned and stalked away. The other two lowered their eyes.

"How old are you?" Namir asked the red-haired kid.

"Twenty," she said, jerking her head back up.

That didn't seem likely, but there was no time for background checks. Nor would she be the first sixteen-year-old to enlist in the Alliance.

Namir turned and nodded his approval to Hober. The old quartermaster looked skeptical. Namir wondered if Hober would admit the girl into the ranks of Twilight's fresh meat, but he suspected the man would do so against his own better judgment.

It wasn't about being *welcoming*. These days, Twilight Company couldn't afford to be choosy.

Three hours into the open recruit, word came down that Namir's squad was needed outside the governor's mansion. It was a welcome distraction.

Twilight had locked down the mansion during the first day of fighting. The compound of multi-tiered domes was on the outskirts of the city, impractically far from the center of Imperial power but possessed of an impressive view of the crystalline mountains. After the initial skirmishing, Captain Howl had ordered half a dozen rebel squads stationed around its perimeter, within a stone's throw of its scorched but intact outer wall. No attempt to capture it had been made; with its occupants contained, the mansion itself had seemed strategically insignificant.

Since then, the situation had evolved.

"Mouse droid rolled out through a side entrance half an hour ago," Sergeant Fektrin said. "We figured it was rigged to blow. Turned out clean. It was carrying a written message from a 'rebel sympathizer' inside the mansion."