

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Star Wars: Outbound Flight

Timothy Zahn

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About the Book

It began as the ultimate voyage of discovery ... only to become a dark chapter in Jedi history. Now acclaimed author Timothy Zahn returns to tell the whole extraordinary story of the remarkable - and doomed - Outbound Flight Project.

The Clone Wars have yet to erupt when Jedi Master Jorus C'boath petitions the Senate for support of an ambitious mission: to contact intelligent life and colonize undiscovered worlds beyond the known galaxy. But government bureaucracy threatens to scuttle the expedition before it can even start - until Master C'boath foils a murderous conspiracy plot, winning him the political capital he needs to set in motion the dream of Outbound Flight.

Or so it would seem. The evil Sith Lord, Darth Sidious, has his own interests in Outbound Flight. Yet he is not the mission's most dangerous challenge. Once under way, the starship crosses paths with the forces of the alien Chiss Ascendancy and the brilliant mastermind best known as 'Thrawn'. Thus what begins as a peaceful Jedi mission is violently transformed into an all-out war for survival.

About the Book

Timothy Zahn has been writing science fiction since 1975 and sold his first story to *Analog* in 1978. Since then Zahn has published nearly seventy short stories and novelettes, nineteen novels, and three short fiction collections. Along the way he has won a Hugo Award (for the novella *Cascade Point* in 1984) and has been nominated twice more. He is best known for his five Star Wars books (*Heir to the Empire*, *Dark Force Rising*, *The Last Command*, *Specter of the Past*, and *Vision of the Future*). His most recent publication is *Dragon and Thief*, the first book of a six-part young-adult Dragonback SF series. He has a B.S. in Physics from Michigan State University, and a M.S. in Physics from the University of Illinois. He lives with his family on the Oregon coast.

Also By Timothy Zahn

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A Coming of Age

Cobra

Spinneret

Cobra Strike

Cascade Point and Other Stories

The Backlash Mission

Triplet

Cobra Bargain

Time Bomb and Zahndry Others

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Distant Friends

Conquerors' Pride

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OUTBOUND FLIGHT

TIMOTHY ZAHN



To Michael A. Stackpole

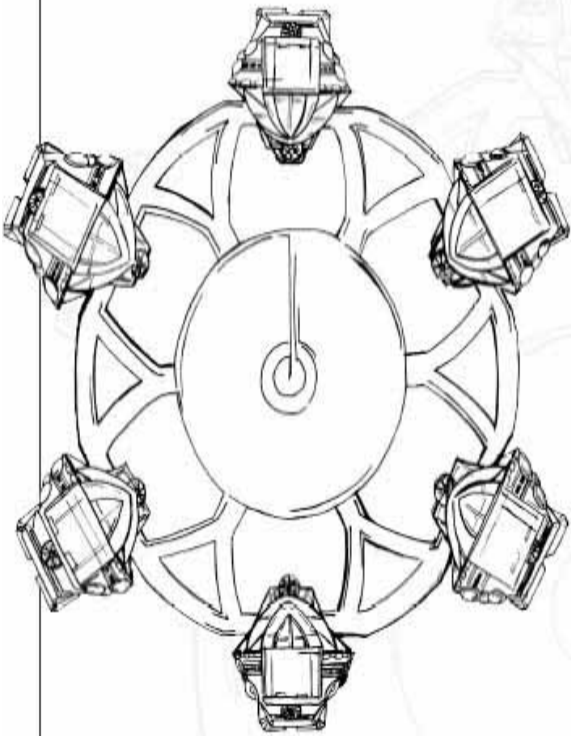
For his contributions to the *Star Wars* universe:

Words of prose, words of advice, and, occasionally, words of
somewhat less consequence.

And in regards to that last category, one of these days I *will*
beat you at *Star Wars* Trivial Pursuit.

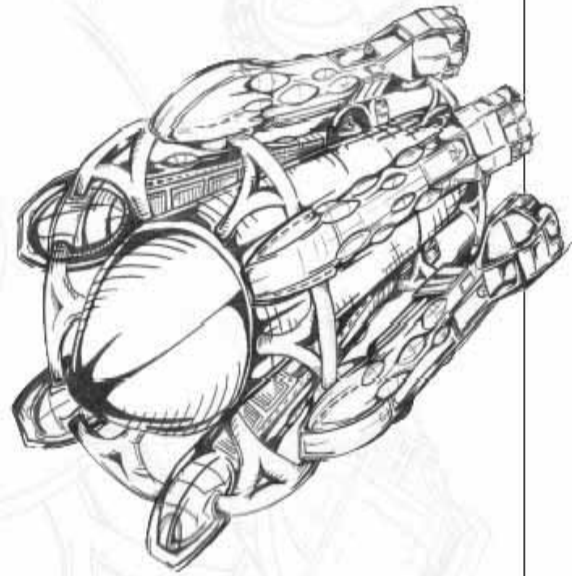
THE STAR WARS NOVELS TIMELINE

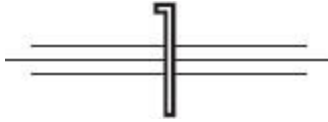




OUTBOUND FLIGHT:
Dreadnaughts and core,
front view

OUTBOUND FLIGHT:
Six Dreadnaughts arranged
around a central core.





THE LIGHT FREIGHTER *Bargain Hunter* moved through space, silver-gray against the blackness, the light of the distant stars reflecting from its hull. Its running lights were muted, its navigational beacons quiet, its viewports for the most part as dark as the space around it.

Its drive gunning for all it was worth.

“Hang on!” Dubrak Qennto barked over the straining roar of the engines. “Here he comes again!”

Clenching his teeth firmly together to keep them from chattering, Jorj Car’das got a grip on his seat’s armrest with one hand as he finished punching coordinates into the nav computer with the other. Just in time; the *Bargain Hunter* jinked hard to the left as a pair of brilliant green blaster bolts burned past the bridge canopy. “Car’das?” Qennto called. “Snap it up, kid.”

“I’m snapping, I’m snapping,” Car’das called back, resisting the urge to point out that the outmoded nav equipment was Qennto’s property, not his. As was the lack of diplomacy and common sense that had gotten them into this mess in the first place. “Can’t we just talk to them?”

“Terrific idea,” Qennto bit out. “Be sure to compliment Progga on his fairness and sound business sense. That always works on Hutts.”

The last word was punctuated by another cluster of blaster shots, this group closer than the last. “Rak, the engines can’t hold this speed forever,” Maris Ferasi warned

from the copilot's seat, her dark hair flashing with green highlights every time a shot went past.

"Doesn't have to be forever," Qennto said with a grunt. "Just till we have some numbers. Car'das?"

On Car'das's board a light winked on. "Ready," he called, punching the numbers over to the pilot's station. "It's not a very long jump, though—"

He was cut off by a screech from somewhere aft, and the flashing blaster bolts were replaced by flashing starlines as the *Bargain Hunter* shot into hyperspace.

Car'das took a deep breath, let it out silently. "This is *not* what I signed up for," he muttered to himself. Barely six standard months after signing on with Qennto and Maris, this was already the second time they'd had to run for their lives from someone.

And this time it was a *Hutt* they'd frizzled. Qennto, he thought darkly, had a genuine talent for picking his fights.

"You okay, Jorj?"

Car'das looked up, blinking away a drop of sweat that had somehow found its way into his eye. Maris was swiveled around in her chair, looking back at him with concern. "I'm fine," he said, wincing at the quavering in his voice.

"Of course he is," Qennto assured Maris as he also turned around to look at their junior crewer. "Those shots never even got close."

Car'das braced himself. "You know, Qennto, it may not be my place to say this—"

"It isn't; and don't," Qennto said gruffly, turning back to his board.

"Progga the Hutt is *not* the sort of person you want mad at you," Car'das said anyway. "I mean, first there was that Rodian—"

"A word about shipboard etiquette, kid," Qennto cut in, turning just far enough to send a single eye's worth of glower at Car'das. "You don't argue with your captain. Not

ever. Not unless you want this to be your first *and* last tour with us.”

“I’d settle for it not being the last tour of my life,” Car’das muttered.

“What was that?”

Car’das grimaced. “Nothing.”

“Don’t let Progga worry you,” Maris soothed. “He has a rotten temper, but he’ll cool off.”

“Before or after he racks the three of us and takes all the furs?” Car’das countered, eyeing the hyperdrive readings uneasily. That mauvine nullifier instability was definitely getting worse.

“Oh, Progga wouldn’t have racked us,” Qennto scoffed. “He’d have left *that* to Drixo when we had to tell her he’d snatched her cargo. You *do* have that next jump ready, right?”

“Working on it,” Car’das said, checking the computer. “But the hyperdrive—”

“Heads up,” Qennto interrupted. “We’re coming out.”

The starlines collapsed back into stars, and Car’das keyed for a full sensor scan.

And jerked as a salvo of blaster shots sizzled past the canopy.

Qennto barked a short expletive. “What the *frizz*?”

“He *followed* us,” Maris said, sounding stunned.

“And he’s got the range,” Qennto snarled as he threw the *Bargain Hunter* into another series of stomach-twisting evasive maneuvers. “Car’das, get us out of here!”

“Trying,” Car’das called back, fighting to read the computer displays as they bounced and wobbled in front of his eyes. There was no way it was going to calculate the next jump before even Qennto’s luck ran out and the fuming Hutt back there finally connected.

But if Car’das couldn’t find a place for them to go, maybe he could find all the places for them *not* to go ...

The sky directly ahead was full of stars, but there was plenty of empty black between them. Picking the biggest of the gaps, he punched the vector into the computer. "Try this one," he called, keying it to Qennto.

"What do you mean *try*?" Maris asked.

The freighter rocked as a pair of shots caught it squarely on the aft deflector. "Never mind," Qennto said before Car'das could answer. He punched the board, and once again the starlines lanced out and faded into the blotchy hyperspace sky.

Maris exhaled in a huff. "That was *too* close."

"Okay, so maybe he *is* mad at us," Qennto conceded. "Now. Like Maris said, kid, what do you mean, *try* this one?"

"I didn't have time to calculate a proper jump," Car'das explained. "So I just aimed us into an empty spot with no stars."

Qennto swiveled around. "You mean an empty spot with no *visible* stars?" he asked ominously. "An empty spot with no collapsed stars, or pre-star dark masses, or something hidden behind dust clouds? *That* kind of empty spot?" He waved a hand toward the canopy. "*And* out toward the Unknown Regions on top of it?"

"We don't have enough data in that direction for him to have done a proper calculation anyway," Maris said, coming unexpectedly to Car'das's defense.

"That's not the point," Qennto insisted.

"No, the point is that he got us away from Progga," Maris said. "I think that deserves at least a thank-you."

Qennto rolled his eyes. "*Thank* you," he said. "Such thanks to be rescinded if and when we run through a star you didn't see, of course."

"I think it's more likely the hyperdrive will blow up first," Car'das warned. "Remember that nullifier problem I told you about? I think it's getting—"

He was cut off by a wailing sound from beneath them, and with a lurch the *Bargain Hunter* leapt forward like a giffa on a scent.

“Running hot!” Qennto shouted, spinning back to his board. “Maris, shut ’er down!”

“Trying,” Maris called back over the wailing as her fingers danced across her board. “Control lines are looping—can’t get a signal through.”

With a curse, Qennto popped his straps and heaved his bulk out of his seat. He sprinted down the narrow aisle, his elbow barely missing the back of Car’das’s head as he passed. Poking uselessly at his own controls, Car’das popped his own strap release and started to follow.

“Car’das, get up here,” Maris called, gesturing him forward.

“He might need me,” Car’das said as he nevertheless reversed direction and headed forward.

“Sit,” she ordered, nodding sideways at Qennto’s vacated pilot’s seat. “Help me watch the tracker—if we veer off this vector before Rak figures out how to pull the plug, I need to know about it.”

“But Qennto—”

“Word of advice, friend,” she interrupted, her eyes still on her displays. “This is Rak’s ship. If there are any tricky repairs to be made, he’s the one who’ll make them.”

“Even if I happen to know more about a particular system than he does?”

“*Especially* if you happen to know more about it than he does,” she said drily. “But in this case, you don’t. Trust me.”

“Fine,” Car’das said with a sigh. “Such trust to be rescinded if and when we blow up, of course.”

“You’re learning,” she said approvingly. “Now run a systems check on the scanners and see if the instability’s bled over into them. Then do the same for the nav computer. Once we get through this, I want to make sure we can find our way home again.”

It took Qennto over four hours to find a way to shut down the runaway hyperdrive without slagging it. During that time Car'das offered his help three times, and Maris offered hers twice. All the offers were summarily refused.

Sometime during the first hour, as near as Car'das could figure from the readings tumbling across the displays, they left the relatively well-known territory of the Outer Rim, passing into a shallow section of the far less well-known territory known as Wild Space. Sometime early in the fourth hour, they left even that behind and crossed the hazy line into the Unknown Regions.

At which point, where they were or what exactly they were flying into was anyone's guess.

But at last the wailing faded away, and a few minutes later the hyperspace sky collapsed into starlines and then into stars. "Maris?" Qennto's voice called from the comm panel.

"We're out," she confirmed. "Running a location check now."

"I'll be right there," Qennto said.

"Wherever we are, we're a long way from home," Car'das murmured, gazing out at a small but brilliant globular star cluster in the distance. "I've never seen anything like *that* from any of the Outer Rim worlds I've been to."

"Me, neither," Maris agreed soberly. "Hopefully, the computer can sort it out."

The computer was still sifting data when Qennto reappeared on the bridge. Car'das had made sure to be back at his own station by then. "Nice cluster," the big man commented as he dropped into his seat. "Any systems nearby?"

"Closest one's about a quarter light-year directly ahead," Maris said, pointing.

Qennto grunted and punched at his board. "Let's see if we can make it," he said. "Backup hyperdrive should still

have enough juice for a jump that short.”

“Can’t we work on the ship just as well out here?” Car’das asked.

“I don’t like interstellar space,” Qennto said distractedly as he set up the jump. “It’s dark and cold and lonely. Besides, that system up there might have a nice planet or two.”

“Which means a possible source of supplies, in case we end up staying longer than we expect,” Maris explained.

“Or a possible place to settle down away from the noise and fluster of the Republic for a while,” Qennto added.

Car’das felt his throat tighten. “You don’t mean—?”

“No, he doesn’t,” Maris assured him. “Rak always talks about getting away from it all whenever he’s in trouble with someone.”

“He must talk that way a lot,” Car’das muttered.

“What was that?” Qennto asked.

“Nothing.”

“Didn’t think so. Here we go.” There was a screech, more genteel than the sound from the *Bargain Hunter’s* main hyperdrive, and the stars stretched out into starlines.

Silently, Car’das counted off the seconds to himself, fully expecting the backup hyperdrive to crash at any time. But it didn’t, and after a few tense minutes the starlines collapsed again to reveal a small yellow sun directly ahead.

“There we go,” Qennto said approvingly. “All the comforts of home. You figure out yet where we are, Maris?”

“Computer’s still working on it,” Maris said. “But it looks like we’re about two hundred fifty light-years into Unknown Space.” She lifted her eyebrows at him. “I’m thinking we’re going to have a stack of late-delivery penalties when we finally get to Comra.”

“Oh, you worry too much,” Qennto chided. “It won’t take more than a day or two to fix the hyperdrive. If we push it a little, we shouldn’t be more than a week overdue.”

Car'das suppressed a grimace. Pushing the hyperdrive, if he recalled correctly, was what had wrecked the thing to begin with.

There was a twitter from the comm. "We're being hailed," he reported, frowning as he keyed it on. He threw a look at the visual displays, searching for their unknown caller—

And felt his whole body go rigid. "Qennto!" he snapped. "It's—"

He was cut off by a deep rumbling chuckle from the comm. "So, Dubrak Qennto," an all-too-familiar voice rumbled in Huttese. "You think to escape me so easily?"

"You call that *easy*?" Qennto muttered as he keyed his transmitter. "Oh, hi, Progga," he said. "Look, like I told you before, I can't let you have these furs. I've already contracted with Drixo—"

"Ignore the furs," Progga cut in. "Show me your hidden treasure hoard."

Qennto frowned at Maris. "My *what*?"

"Do not play the fool," Progga warned, his voice going an octave deeper. "I know your sort. You do not simply run *from* something, but run rather *to* something else. This is the lone star system along this vector; and behold, you are here. What could you have run to but a secret base and treasure hoard?"

Qennto muted the transmitter. "Car'das, where is he?"

"A hundred kilometers off the starboard bow," Car'das told him, his hands shaking as he ran a full scan on the distant Hutt ship. "And he's coming up fast."

"Maris?"

"Whatever you did to shut down the hyperdrive, you did a great job," she said tightly. "It's completely locked. We've still got the backup, but if we try to run and he tracks us again—"

"And he will," Qennto growled. Taking a deep breath, he switched the transmitter back on. "It wasn't like that,

Progga," he said soothingly. "We were just trying to—"

"Enough!" the Hutt bellowed. "Lead me to this base. Now."

"There isn't any base," Qennto insisted. "This is the Unknown Regions. Why would I set up a base out *here*?"

A light flashed on Car'das's proximity sensor. "Incoming!" he snapped, his eyes darting back and forth among the displays as he searched for the source of the attack.

"Where?" Qennto snapped back.

Car'das had it now, coming from directly beneath the *Bargain Hunter*: a long, dark missile arrowing straight toward them. "There," he said, pointing a finger straight down as he stared at the display.

It was only then that his brain caught up with the fact that this wasn't the vector a missile would take from the approaching Hutt ship. He was opening his mouth to point that out when the missile burst open, its nose ejecting a wad of some kind of material. The wad began to expand as it cleared the shards of its container, opening like a fast-blooming flower into a filmy wall stretching over a kilometer across.

"Power off!" Qennto snapped, lunging across his board to the row of master power switches. "Hurry!"

"What is it?" Car'das asked, grabbing for his board's own set of cutoffs.

"A Connor net, or something like it," Qennto gritted out.

"What, *that* size?" Car'das asked in disbelief.

"Just *do* it," Qennto snarled. Status lights were winking red and going out now as the three of them raced against the incoming net.

The net won. Car'das had made it through barely two-thirds of his switches when the rippling edges came into sight around the sides of the hull. They folded themselves inward, curling around toward the bridge—

"Close your eyes," Maris warned.

Car'das squeezed his eyes shut. Even through the lids he saw a hint of the brilliant flash as the net dumped its high-voltage current into and through the ship, sending a brief coronal tingling across his skin.

And when he carefully opened his eyes again, every light that had still been glowing across the bridge had gone dark.

The *Bargain Hunter* was dead.

Through the canopy came a flicker of light from the direction of the Hutt ship. "Looks like they got Progga, too," he said, his voice sounding unnaturally loud in the sudden silence.

"I doubt it," Qennto rumbled. "His ship's big enough to have cap drains and other stuff to protect him from tricks like this."

"Ten to one he'll fight, too," Maris murmured, her voice tight.

"Oh, he'll fight, all right," Qennto said heavily. "He's way too stupid to realize that anyone who can make a Connor net that big will have plenty of other tricks up his sleeve."

A multiple blaze of green blasterfire erupted from the direction of the Hutt ship. It was answered by brilliant blue flashes vectoring in from three different directions, fired from ships too small or too dark to see at the *Bargain Hunter's* range. "You think whoever this is might get so busy with Progga that they'll forget about us?" Maris asked hopefully.

"I don't think so," Car'das said, gesturing out the canopy at the small gray spacecraft that had taken up position with its nose pointed at the freighter's portside flank. It was about the size of a shuttle or heavy fighter, built in a curved, flowing design of a sort he'd never seen before. "They've left us a guard."

"Figures," Qennto said, glancing once at the alien ship and then turning back to the green and blue flashes. "Fifty

says Progga lasts at least fifteen minutes and takes one of his attackers with him.”

Neither of the others took him up on the bet. Car'das watched the fight, wishing he had his sensors back. He'd read a little about space battle tactics in school, but the attackers' methodology didn't seem to fit with anything he could remember. He was still trying to figure it out when, with a final salvo of blue light, it was over.

“Six minutes,” Qennto said, his voice grim. “Whoever these guys are, they're good.”

“You don't recognize them, either?” Maris asked, looking out at their silent guard.

“I don't even recognize the design,” he grunted, popping his restraints and standing up. “Let's go check on the damage, see if we can at least get her ready for company. Car'das, you stay here and mind the store.”

“Me?” Car'das asked, feeling his stomach tighten. “But what if they—you know—signal us?”

“What do you think?” Qennto grunted as he and Maris headed aft. “You answer them.”



THE VICTORS TOOK their time poking or prodding or gloating over whatever was left of the Hutt ship. From the number of maneuvering drives Car'das could see winking on and off, he guessed there were just the three ships that had been involved in the battle itself, plus the one still standing watchful guard off their flank.

Connor nets, like ion cannons, were designed to disable and hold rather than destroy, and Qennto and Maris had most of the systems back online by the time their keeper finally made its move. "Qennto, he's shifting position," Car'das called into the comm, watching as the gray ship drifted leisurely past the canopy and settled into a new spot with his stern above and in front of the *Bargain Hunter's* bow. "Looks like he's setting up for us to follow him."

"On our way," Qennto called back. "Run the drive up to quarter power."

The gray ship was starting to pull away when he and Maris returned. "Here we go," Qennto muttered, dropping into his seat and easing them forward. "Any idea where we're going?"

"The rest of the group's still over by the Hutt ship," Car'das said, squeezing carefully past Maris as he headed back to his own station. "Maybe he's taking us there."

"Yeah, looks like it," Qennto agreed as he fed more power to the drive. "So far, they're not shooting. That's usually a good sign."

There were indeed three alien vessels hovering around the remains of Progga's ship when they arrived. Two were

duplicates of their fighter-sized escort, while the third was considerably larger. "Not that much bigger than a Republic cruiser, though," Car'das pointed out. "Pretty small, considering what it just did."

"Looks like they're opening a docking bay for us," Maris said.

Car'das measured the opening port cover with his eyes. "Not much room in there."

"Our bow will fit," Qennto assured him. "We can use the forward service tube to get out."

"We're going to go into their ship?" Maris asked, her voice shaking slightly.

"Unless they want to use the tube to come in here instead," Qennto told her. "The guys with the guns get to make those decisions." He lifted a warning finger. "The key is for us to keep control of the situation while they're doing it."

He half turned toward Car'das. "That means *I* do all the talking. Unless they ask you something directly, in which case you give them exactly as much answer as they have question. No more. Got it?"

Car'das swallowed. "Got it."

Their escort led them to the larger ship's side, and two minutes later Qennto had the *Bargain Hunter's* bow snugged securely inside the docking collar. A boarding tunnel began extending itself toward the service hatch as Qennto shifted the systems to standby, and by the time the three of them had made it down the ladder the exit sensors indicated the tunnel was in place and pressurized. "Here we go," Qennto muttered, drawing himself up to his full height and keying the release. "Remember, let me do the talking."

Two of the crew were waiting outside the hatch as it slid open: blue-skinned humanoids with glowing red eyes and blue-black hair, dressed in identical black uniforms sporting green shoulder patches. Each of them had a small but

nasty-looking handgun belted at his waist. "Hello," Qennto greeted them as he took a step into the tunnel. "I'm Dubrak Qennto, captain of the *Bargain Hunter*."

The aliens didn't answer, but merely moved to either side and gestured down the tunnel. "This way?" Qennto asked, pointing with one hand as he took Maris's arm with the other. "Sure."

He and Maris headed down the tunnel, the ribbed material of the floor bouncing like a swinging bridge with each step. Car'das followed close behind them, studying the aliens out of the corner of his eye as he passed between them. Aside from the unusual skin color and those glowing eyes, they were remarkably human looking. Some offshoot of humanity's ancient expansion into the galaxy? Or were they their own people, with the resemblance purely coincidental?

Two more aliens were waiting just inside the ship proper, dressed and armed the same way as the first pair except that their shoulder patches were yellow and blue instead of green. They turned in military precision as the three humans arrived and led the way down a smoothly curved corridor made of a pearl-like material with a soft, muted sheen. Car'das ran his fingertips gently along the wall as they walked, trying to decide whether it was metal, ceramic, or some kind of composite.

Five meters down the corridor their guides came to a halt outside an open doorway and planted themselves on either side. "In there, huh?" Qennto asked. "Sure." He squared his shoulders the way Car'das had often seen him do just before a negotiating session. Then, still holding Maris's arm, he headed inside. Taking one last look at the corridor walls, Car'das followed.

The room was small and simple, its furnishings consisting of a table and half a dozen chairs. A conference room, Car'das tentatively identified it, or possibly a duty crew meal room. Another of the blue-skinned aliens was

seated on the far side of the table, his glowing eyes steady on his visitors. He wore the same black as their escorts, but with a larger burgundy patch on his shoulder and a pair of elaborately tooled silver bars on his collar. An officer? "Hello," Qennto said cheerfully, coming to a stop at the edge of the table. "I'm Dubrak Qennto, captain of the *Bargain Hunter*. I don't suppose you happen to speak Basic?"

The alien didn't reply, but Car'das thought he saw his eyebrow twitch slightly. "Maybe we should try one of the Outer Rim trade languages," he offered.

"Thanks for that brilliant suggestion," Qennto said with a touch of sarcasm. "Greetings to you, noble sir," he continued, switching to Sy Bisti. "We're travelers and traders from a far world, who mean no harm to you or your people."

Again, there was no response. "You could try Taarja," Maris said.

"I don't know Taarja very well," Qennto said, still in Sy Bisti. "How about you?" he added, turning to look at the two guards who had followed them into the room. "Do any of you understand Sy Bisti? How about Taarja? Meese Caulf?"

"Sy Bisti will do," the alien behind the table said calmly in that language.

Qennto turned back, blinking in surprise. "Did you just say—?"

"I said Sy Bisti will do," the alien repeated. "Please; be seated."

"Ah ... thank you," Qennto said, pulling out chairs for himself and Maris and nodding to Car'das to do likewise. The chair backs were contoured a bit oddly for humans, Car'das noticed as he sat down, but not uncomfortably so.

"I'm Commander Mitth'raw'nuruodo of the Chiss Ascendancy," the alien continued. "This is the *Springhawk*,

Picket Force Two command vessel of the Expansionary Defense Fleet.”

Expansionary Fleet. Car'das felt a shiver run up his back. Did the name imply this Chiss Ascendancy was in the process of expanding outward?

He hoped not. The last thing the Republic needed right now was a threat from outside its borders. Supreme Chancellor Palpatine was doing his best, but there was a lot of resistance to change in the old business-as-usual attitudes and casual corruption of the Coruscant government. Even now, five years after its little misadventure on Naboo, the Trade Federation had yet to be punished for its blatant aggression, despite Palpatine's best efforts to bring it to judgment. Resentment and frustration simmered throughout the galaxy, with rumors of new reform or secession movements surfacing every other week.

Qennto loved it, of course. Government bureaucracies with their dozens of fees, service charges, and flat-out prohibitions were an ideal operating environment for small-scale smuggling operations like his. And Car'das had to admit that during his time aboard the *Bargain Hunter*, their activities had earned a very respectable profit.

What Qennto perhaps failed to understand was that while a little governmental instability could be useful, too much would be as bad for smugglers as it would be for anyone else.

A full-scale war, needless to say, would be as bad as it got. For everyone.

“And you are ...?” Mitth'raw'nuruodo asked, shifting his glowing red eyes to Car'das.

Car'das opened his mouth— “I'm Dubrak Qennto, Commander,” Qennto put in before he could speak. “Captain of the—”

“And *you* are ...?” Mitth'raw'nuruodo repeated, his eyes still on Car'das, a slight but noticeable emphasis on the

pronoun.

Car'das looked sideways at Qennto, got a microscopic nod. "I'm Jorj Car'das," he said. "Crewer on the freighter *Bargain Hunter*."

"And these?" Mitth'raw'nuruodo asked, gesturing to the others.

Again, Car'das looked at Qennto. The other's expression had gone rather sour, but he nevertheless gave his junior crewer another small nod. "This is my captain, Dubrak Qennto," Car'das told the commander. "And his—" *Girlfriend? Copilot? Partner?* "—his second in command, Maris Ferasi."

Mitth'raw'nuruodo nodded to each in turn, then turned back to Car'das. "Why are you here?"

"We're Corellian traders, from one of the systems in the Galactic Republic," Car'das said.

"K'rell'n," Mitth'raw'nuruodo said, as if trying out the word. "Traders, you say? Not explorers or scouts?"

"No, not at all," Car'das assured him. "We hire out our ship to take cargo between star systems."

"And the other vessel?" Mitth'raw'nuruodo asked.

"Pirates of some sort," Qennto put in before Car'das could answer. "We were running from them when we had some trouble with our hyperdrive, which is how we ended up here."

"Did you know these pirates?" Mitth'raw'nuruodo asked.

"How could we possibly—?" Qennto began.

"Yes, we've had trouble with them before," Car'das interrupted. There'd been something in Mitth'raw'nuruodo's voice as he asked that question ... "I think they were gunning specifically for us."

"You must be carrying a valuable cargo."

"It's nothing fancy," Qennto said, shooting a warning look at Car'das. "A shipment of furs and exotic luxury garments. We're most grateful to you for coming to our aid."

Car'das felt his throat tighten. The bulk of their cargo was indeed luxury clothing, but sewn into the filigree collar of one of the furs was an assortment of smuggled firegems. If Mitth'raw'nuruodo decided to search the shipment and found them, there was going to be a very unhappy Drixo the Hutt in the *Bargain Hunter's* future.

"You're welcome," Mitth'raw'nuruodo said. "I'd be curious to see what your people consider luxury garments. Perhaps you'll show me your cargo before you leave."

"I'd be delighted," Qennto said. "Does that mean you're releasing us?"

"Soon," Mitth'raw'nuruodo assured him. "First I need to examine your vessel and confirm that you're indeed the innocent travelers you claim."

"Of course, of course," Qennto said easily. "We'll give you a complete tour anytime you want."

"Thank you," Mitth'raw'nuruodo said. "But that can wait until we reach my base. Until then, resting quarters have been prepared for you. Perhaps later you'll permit me to show you Chiss hospitality."

"We would be both grateful and honored, Commander," Qennto said, inclining his head in a small bow. "I'd just like to mention, though, that we're on a very tight schedule, which our unexpected detour has made that much tighter. We'd appreciate it if you could send us on our way as quickly as possible."

"Of course," Mitth'raw'nuruodo said. "The base isn't far."

"Is it in this system?" Qennto asked. He lifted a hand before the Chiss could answer. "Sorry, sorry—none of my business."

"True," Mitth'raw'nuruodo agreed. "However, it will do no harm to tell you that it's in a different system entirely."

"Ah," Qennto said. "May I ask when we'll be leaving to go there?"

“We’ve already left,” Mitth’raw’nuruodo said mildly. “We made the jump to hyperspace approximately four standard minutes ago.”

Qennto frowned. “Really? I didn’t hear or feel anything.”

“Perhaps our hyperdrive systems are superior to yours,” Mitth’raw’nuruodo said, standing up. “Now, if you’ll follow me, I’ll escort you to the resting area.”

He led the way another five meters down the corridor to another door, where he touched a striped panel on the wall. “I’ll send word when I want you again,” he said as the door slid open.

“We’ll look forward to further conversation,” Qennto said, giving a truncated bow as he eased Maris behind him through the doorway. “Thank you, Commander.”

The two of them disappeared inside. Inclining his head to the commander, Car’das followed.

The room was compactly furnished, containing a three-tier bunk bed against one wall and a fold-down table and bench seats on the other. Beside the bunk bed were three large drawers built into the wall, while to the right was a door leading into what seemed to be a compact refresher station.

“What do you think he’s going to do with us?” Maris murmured, looking around.

“He’ll let us go,” Qennto assured her, glancing into the refresher station and then sitting down on the lowest cot, hunching forward to keep from bumping his head on the one above it. “The real question is whether we’ll be taking the firegems with us.”

Car’das cleared his throat. “Should we be talking about this?” he asked, looking significantly around the room.

“Relax,” Qennto growled. “They don’t speak a word of Basic.” His eyes narrowed. “And as long as we’re on the subject of speaking, why the frizz did you tell him we knew Progga?”