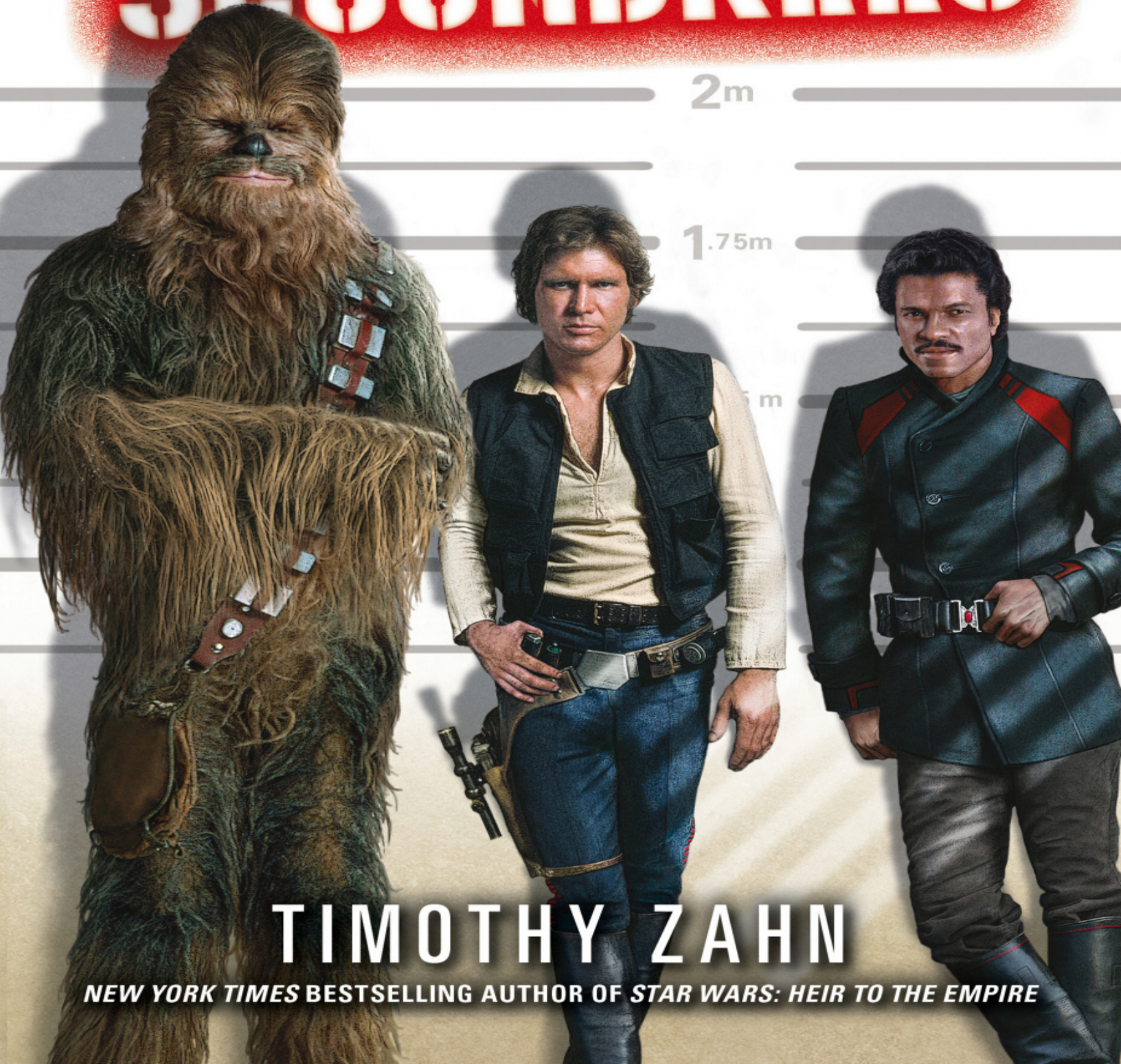


STAR WARS™

SCOUNDRELS



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TIMOTHY ZAHN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF STAR WARS: HEIR TO THE EMPIRE

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About the Book

Han Solo should be basking in his moment of glory. After all, the cocky smuggler and captain of the *Millennium Falcon* just played a key role in the daring raid that destroyed the Death Star and landed the first serious blow to the Empire in its war against the Rebel Alliance. But after losing the reward his heroics earned him, Han's got nothing to celebrate. Especially since he's deep in debt to the ruthless crime lord Jabba the Hutt. There's a bounty on Han's head - and if he can't cough up the credits, he'll surely pay with his hide. The only thing that can save him is a king's ransom. Or maybe a gangster's fortune? That's what a mysterious stranger is offering in exchange for Han's less-than-legal help with a riskier-than-usual caper. The pay-off will be more than enough for Han to settle up with Jabba - and ensure he never has to haggle with the Hutts again.

All he has to do is infiltrate the ultra-fortified stronghold of a Black Sun crime syndicate underboss and crack the galaxy's most notoriously impregnable safe. It sounds like a job for miracle workers . . . or madmen. So Han assembles a gallery of rogues who are a little of both - including his indispensable sidekick Chewbecca and the cunning Lando Calrissian. If anyone can dodge, deceive, and defeat heavily armed thugs, killer droids, and Imperial agents alike - and pull off the heist of the century - it's Solo's scoundrels. But will their crime really pay, or will it cost them the ultimate price?

About the Author

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, numerous 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 original five Star Wars novels (*Heir to the Empire*, *Dark Force Rising*, *The Last Command*, *Specter of the Past*, and *Vision of the Future*), as well as *Star Wars: Survivor's Quest*, *Outbound Flight*, *Allegiance*, and *Choices of One*. His most recent publications have been the science-fiction Cobra series and the six-part young adult series Dragonback. He has a B.S. in physics from Michigan State University, and an M.S. in physics from the University of Illinois.

Also by Timothy Zahn

STAR WARS

STAR WARS: Scoundrels

STAR WARS: Choices of One

STAR WARS: Allegiance

STAR WARS: Outbound Flight

STAR WARS: Survivor's Quest

STAR WARS: Vision of the Future

STAR WARS: Specter of the Past

STAR WARS: The Last Command

STAR WARS: Dark Force Rising

STAR WARS: Heir to the Empire

ALSO

Cobra Alliance

The Judas Solution

Conquerors' Legacy

Conquerors' Heritage

Conquerors' Pride

Cobra Bargain

Cobra Strike

The Backlash Mission

Cobra

The Blackcollar

STAR WARS™

SCOUNDRELS

TIMOTHY ZAHN



CENTURY

THE STAR WARS NOVELS TIMELINE



BEFORE THE REPUBLIC 37,000–25,000 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

c. 25,793 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Dawn of the Jedi: Into the Void**



OLD REPUBLIC 5000–67 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Lost Tribe of the Sith[†]

Precipice
Skyborn
Paragon
Savior
Purgatory
Sentinel

3954 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Old Republic: Revan

3650 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Old Republic: Deceived

Lost Tribe of the Sith[†]

Pantheon
Secrets

Red Harvest

The Old Republic: Fatal Alliance

The Old Republic: Annihilation

2975 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Lost Tribe of the Sith[†]

Pandemonium

1032 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Knight Errant

Darth Bane: Path of Destruction

Darth Bane: Rule of Two

Darth Bane: Dynasty of Evil



RISE OF THE EMPIRE 67–0 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

67 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Darth Plagueis

33 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Darth Maul: Saboteur*

Cloak of Deception

Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter

32 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

STAR WARS: EPISODE I THE PHANTOM MENACE

Rogue Planet
Outbound Flight
The Approaching Storm

22 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

STAR WARS: EPISODE II ATTACK OF THE CLONES

22–19 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Clone Wars
The Clone Wars: Wild Space
The Clone Wars: No Prisoners

Clone Wars Gambit

Stealth
Siege

Republic Commando

Hard Contact
Triple Zero
True Colors
Order 66

Shatterpoint

The Cestus Deception

The Hive*

MedStar I: Battle Surgeons

MedStar II: Jedi Healer

Jedi Trial

Yoda: Dark Rendezvous

Labyrinth of Evil

19 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

STAR WARS: EPISODE III REVENGE OF THE SITH

Dark Lord: The Rise of Darth Vader

Imperial Commando

501st

Coruscant Nights

Jedi Twilight
Street of Shadows
Patterns of Force

The Last Jedi**

*An eBook novella

**Forthcoming

† *Lost Tribe of the Sith: The Collected Stories*

THE STAR WARS NOVELS TIMELINE

19 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

The Han Solo Trilogy
 The Paradise Snare
 The Hutt Gambit
 Rebel Dawn
 The Adventures of Lando Calrissian
 The Force Unleashed
 The Han Solo Adventures
 Death Troopers
 The Force Unleashed II



REBELLION 0–5 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

Death Star
 Shadow Games

0

STAR WARS: EPISODE IV A NEW HOPE

Tales from the Mos Eisley Cantina
 Tales from the Empire
 Tales from the New Republic
 Winner Lose All*
 Scoundrels
 Allegiance
 Choices of One
 Galaxies: The Ruins of Dantooine
 Splinter of the Mind's Eye

3 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

STAR WARS: EPISODE V THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

Tales of the Bounty Hunters
 Shadows of the Empire

4 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

STAR WARS: EPISODE VI THE RETURN OF THE JEDI

Tales from Jabba's Palace
The Bounty Hunter Wars
 The Mandalorian Armor
 Slave Ship
 Hard Merchandise
 The Truce at Bakura
 Luke Skywalker and the Shadows of Mindor



NEW REPUBLIC 5–25 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

X-Wing
 Rogue Squadron
 Wedge's Gamble
 The Krytos Trap
 The Bacta War
 Wraith Squadron
 Iron Fist
 Solo Command

The Courtship of Princess Leia
 A Forest Apart*
 Tatooine Ghost

The Thrawn Trilogy
 Heir to the Empire
 Dark Force Rising
 The Last Command

X-Wing: Isard's Revenge

The Jedi Academy Trilogy
 Jedi Search
 Dark Apprentice
 Champions of the Force

I, Jedi
 Children of the Jedi
 Darksaber
 Planet of Twilight
 X-Wing: Starfighters of Adumar
 The Crystal Star

The Black Fleet Crisis Trilogy
 Before the Storm
 Shield of Lies
 Tyrant's Test

The New Rebellion

The Corellian Trilogy
 Ambush at Corellia
 Assault at Selonia
 Showdown at Centerpoint

The Hand of Thrawn Duology
 Specter of the Past
 Vision of the Future

Scourge
 Fool's Bargain*
 Survivor's Quest

*An eBook novella



NEW JEDI ORDER 25–40 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

Boba Fett: A Practical Man*

The New Jedi Order
 Vector Prime
 Dark Tide I: Onslaught
 Dark Tide II: Ruin
 Agents of Chaos I: Hero's Trial
 Agents of Chaos II: Jedi Eclipse
 Balance Point
 Recovery*
 Edge of Victory I: Conquest
 Edge of Victory II: Rebirth
 Star by Star
 Dark Journey
 Enemy Lines I: Rebel Dream
 Enemy Lines II: Rebel Stand
 Traitor
 Destiny's Way
 Ylesia*
 Force Heretic I: Remnant
 Force Heretic II: Refugee
 Force Heretic III: Reunion
 The Final Prophecy
 The Unifying Force

35 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

The Dark Nest Trilogy
 The Joiner King
 The Unseen Queen
 The Swarm War



LEGACY 40+ YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

Legacy of the Force
 Betrayal
 Bloodlines
 Tempest
 Exile
 Sacrifice
 Inferno
 Fury
 Revelation
 Invincible
 Crosscurrent
 Riptide
 Millennium Falcon

43 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

Fate of the Jedi
 Outcast
 Omens
 Abyss
 Backlash
 Allies
 Vortex
 Conviction
 Ascension
 Apocalypse
 X-Wing: Mercy Kill

45 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

Crucible**

*An eBook novella
 **Forthcoming

dramatis personae

Han Solo; smuggler (human male)

Chewbacca; smuggler (Wookiee male)

Lando Calrissian; gambler (human male)

Bink Kitik; ghost thief (human female)

Tavia Kitik; electronics expert, ghost thief assistant (human female)

Dozer Creed; ship thief (human male)

Zerba Cher'dak; pickpocket, sleight-of-hand expert (Balosar male)

Winter; living recording rod (human female)

Rachele Ree; acquisitions, intel (human female)

Kell Tainer; explosives, droid expert (human male)

Eanjer Kunarazti; robbery victim, funding (human male)

Avrak Villachor; Black Sun sector chief (human male)

Qazadi; Black Sun vigo (Falleen male)

Dayja; Imperial Intelligence agent (human male)

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

CHAPTER ONE

THE STARLINES COLLAPSED into stars, and the Imperial Star Destroyer *Dominator* had arrived. Standing on the command walkway, his hands clasped stiffly behind his back, Captain Worhven glared at the misty planet floating in the blackness directly ahead and wondered what in blazes he and his ship were doing here.

For these were not good times. The Emperor's sudden dissolution of the Imperial Senate had sent dangerous swells of uncertainty throughout the galaxy, which played into the hands of radical groups like the so-called Rebel Alliance. At the same time, criminal organizations like Black Sun and the Hutt syndicates openly flaunted the law, buying and selling spice, stolen merchandise, and local and regional officials alike.

Even worse, Palpatine's brand-new toy, the weapon that was supposed to finally convince both insurgents and lawbreakers that the Empire was deadly serious about taking them down, had inexplicably been destroyed at Yavin. Worhven still hadn't heard an official explanation for that incident.

Evil times indeed. And evil times called for a strong and massive response. The minute the word came in from Yavin, Imperial Center should have ordered a full Fleet deployment, concentrating its efforts on the most important, the most insubordinate, and the most jittery systems. It was the classic response to crisis, a method that dated back thousands of years, and by all rights and logic the *Dominator* should have been at the forefront of any such deployment.

Instead, Worhven and his ship had been pressed into mule cart duty.

“Ah—Captain,” a cheery voice boomed behind him.

Worhven took a deep, calming breath. “Lord d’Ashewl,” he replied, making sure to keep his back to the other while he forced his expression into something more politically proper for the occasion.

It was well he’d started rearranging his face when he did. Barely five seconds later d’Ashewl came to a stop beside him, right up at his side instead of stopping the two steps back that Worhven demanded of even senior officers until he gestured them forward.

But that was hardly a surprise. What would a fat, stupid, accidentally rich member of Imperial Center’s upper court know of ship’s protocol?

A rhetorical question. The answer, of course, was nothing.

But if d’Ashewl didn’t understand basic courtesy, Worhven did. And he would treat his guest with the proper respect. Even if it killed him. “My lord,” he said politely, turning to face the other. “I trust you slept well.”

“I did,” d’Ashewl said, his eyes on the planet ahead. “So that’s Wukkar out there, is it?”

“Yes, my lord,” Worhven said, resisting the urge to wonder aloud if d’Ashewl thought the *Dominator* might have somehow drifted off course during ship’s night. “As per your orders.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” d’Ashewl said, craning his neck a little. “It’s just so hard to tell from this distance. Most worlds out there look distressingly alike.”

“Yes, my lord,” Worhven repeated, again resisting the words that so badly wanted to come out. That was the kind of comment made only by the inexperienced or blatantly stupid. With d’Ashewl, it was probably a toss-up.

“But if you say it’s Wukkar, then I believe it,” d’Ashewl continued. “Have you compiled the list of incoming yachts

that I asked for?”

Worhven suppressed a sigh. Not just mule cart duty, but handmaiden duty as well. “The comm officer has it,” he said, turning his head and gesturing toward the starboard crew pit. Out of the corner of his eye he saw now that he and d’Ashewl weren’t alone: d’Ashewl’s young manservant, Dayja, had accompanied his superior and was standing a respectful half dozen steps back along the walkway.

At least one of the pair knew something about proper protocol.

“Excellent, excellent,” d’Ashewl said, rubbing his hands together. “There’s a wager afoot, Captain, as to which of our group will arrive first and which will arrive last. Thanks to you and your magnificent ship, I stand to win a great deal of money.”

Worhven felt his lip twist. A ludicrous and pointless wager, to match the *Dominator’s* ludicrous and pointless errand. It was nice to know that in a universe on the edge of going mad, there was still ironic symmetry to be found.

“You’ll have your man relay the data to my floater,” d’Ashewl continued. “My man and I shall leave as soon as the *Dominator* reaches orbit.” He cocked his head. “Your orders *were* to remain in the region in the event that I needed further transport, were they not?”

The captain allowed his hands, safely out of d’Ashewl’s sight at his sides, to curl into frustrated fists. “Yes, my lord.”

“Good,” d’Ashewl said cheerfully. “Lord Toorfi has been known to suddenly change his mind on where the games are to continue, and if he does, I need to be ready to once again beat him to the new destination. You’ll be no more than three hours away at all times, correct?”

“Yes, my lord,” Worhven said. Fat, stupid, and a cheat besides. Clearly, all the others involved in this vague high-stakes gaming tournament had arrived at Wukkar via their own ships. Only d’Ashewl had had the supreme gall to talk

someone on Imperial Center into letting him borrow an Imperial Star Destroyer for the occasion.

“But for now, all I need is for your men to prepare to launch my floater,” d’Ashewl continued. “After that, you may take the rest of the day off. Perhaps the rest of the month as well. One never knows how long old men’s stamina and credits will last, eh?”

Without waiting for a reply—which was just as well, because Worhven didn’t have any that he was willing to share—the rotund man turned and waddled back along the walkway toward the aft bridge. Dayja waited until he’d passed, then dropped into step the prescribed three paces behind him.

Worhven watched until the pair had passed beneath the archway and into the aft bridge turbolift, just to make sure they were truly gone. Then, unclenching his teeth, he turned to the comm officer. “Signal Hangar Command,” he ordered. “Our passenger is ready to leave.”

He threw a final glower at the aft bridge. Take the day off, indeed. Enough condescending idiocy like that from the Empire’s ruling class, and Worhven would be sorely tempted to join the Rebellion himself. “And tell them to make it quick,” he added. “I don’t want Lord d’Ashewl or his ship aboard a single millisecond longer than necessary.”

“I should probably have you whipped,” d’Ashewl commented absently.

Dayja half turned in the floater’s command chair to look over his shoulder. “Excuse me?” he asked.

“I said I should probably have you whipped,” d’Ashewl repeated, gazing at his datapad as he lazed comfortably on the luxurious couch in the lounge just behind the cockpit.

“Any particular reason?”

“Not really,” d’Ashewl said. “But it’s becoming the big thing among the upper echelon of the court these days, and I’d hate to be left out of the truly important trends.”

“Ah,” Dayja said. “I trust these rituals aren’t done in public?”

“Oh, no, the sessions are quite private and secretive,” d’Ashewl assured him. “But that’s a good point. Unless we happen to meet up with others of my same lofty stature, there really wouldn’t be any purpose.” He considered. “At least not until we get back to Imperial Center. We may want to try it then.”

“Speaking only for myself, I’d be content to put it off,” Dayja said. “It *does* sound rather pointless.”

“That’s because you have a lower-class attitude,” d’Ashewl chided. “It’s a conspicuous-consumption sort of thing. A demonstration that one has such an overabundance of servants and slaves that he can afford to put one out of commission for a few days merely on a whim.”

“It still sounds pointless,” Dayja said. “Ripping someone’s flesh from his body is a great deal of work. I prefer to have a good reason if I’m going to go to that much effort.” He nodded at the datapad. “Any luck?”

“Unfortunately, the chance cubes aren’t falling in our favor,” d’Ashewl said, tossing the instrument onto the couch beside him. “Our tip-off came just a bit too late. It looks like Qazadi is already here.”

“You’re sure?”

“There were only eight possibilities, and all eight have landed and their passengers dispersed.”

Dayja turned back forward, eyeing the planet rushing up toward them and trying to estimate distances and times. If the yacht carrying their quarry had *just* landed, there might still be a chance of intercepting him before he went to ground.

“And the latest was over three hours ago,” d’Ashewl added. “So you might as well ease back on the throttle and enjoy the ride.”

Dayja suppressed a flicker of annoyance. "So in other words, we took the *Dominator* out of service for nothing."

"Not entirely," d'Ashewl said. "Captain Worhven had the opportunity to work on his patience level."

Despite his frustration, Dayja had to smile. "You *do* play the pompous-jay role very well."

"Thank you," d'Ashewl said. "I'm glad my talents are still of *some* use to the department. And don't be too annoyed that we missed him. It would have been nicely dramatic, snatching him out of the sky as we'd hoped. But such a triumph would have come with its own set of costs. For one thing, Captain Worhven would have had to be brought into your confidence, which would have cost you a perfectly good cover identity."

"And possibly yours?"

"Very likely," d'Ashewl agreed. "And while the Director has plenty of scoundrel and server identities to pass out, he can slip someone into the Imperial court only so often before the other members catch on. They may be arrogant and pompous, but they're not stupid. All things considered, it's probably just as well things have worked out this way."

"Perhaps," Dayja said, not entirely ready to concede the point. "Still, he's going to be harder to get out of Villachor's mansion than he would have been if we'd caught him along the way."

"Even so, it will be easier than digging him out of one of Black Sun's complexes on Imperial Center," d'Ashewl countered. "Assuming we could find him in that rat hole in the first place." He gestured toward the viewport. "And don't think it would have been *that* easy to pluck him out of space. Think Xizor's *Virago*, only scaled up fifty or a hundred times, and you'll get an idea what kind of nut it would have been to crack."

"All nuts can be cracked," Dayja said with a shrug. "All it takes is the right application of pressure."

“Provided the nutcracker itself doesn’t break in the process,” d’Ashewl said, his voice going suddenly dark. “You’ve never tangled with Black Sun at this level, Dayja. I have. Qazadi is one of the worst, with every bit of Xizor’s craftiness and manipulation.”

“But without the prince’s charm?”

“Joke if you wish,” d’Ashewl rumbled. “But be careful. If not for yourself, for me. I have the ghosts of far too many lost agents swirling through my memory as it is.”

“I understand,” Dayja said quietly. “I’ll be careful.”

“Good.” D’Ashewl huffed out a short puff of air, an affectation Dayja guessed he’d picked up from others of Imperial Center’s elite. “All right. We still don’t know why Qazadi is here: whether he’s on assignment, lying low, or in some kind of disfavor with Xizor and the rest of the upper echelon. If it’s the third, we’re out of luck.”

“As is Qazadi,” Dayja murmured.

“Indeed,” d’Ashewl agreed. “But if it’s one of the first two ...” He shook his head. “Those files could rock Imperial Center straight out of orbit.”

Which was enough reason all by itself for them to play this whole thing very carefully, Dayja knew. “But we’re sure he’ll be staying at Villachor’s?”

“I can’t see him coming to Wukkar and staying anywhere but the sector chief’s mansion,” d’Ashewl said. “But there may be other possibilities, and it wouldn’t hurt for you to poke around a bit. I’ve downloaded everything we’ve got on Villachor, his people, and the Marblewood Estate for you. Unfortunately, there isn’t much.”

“I guess I’ll have to get inside and see the place for myself,” Dayja said. “I’m thinking the upcoming Festival of Four Honorings will be my best bet.”

“*If* Villachor follows his usual pattern of hosting one of Iltarr City’s celebrations at Marblewood,” d’Ashewl warned. “It’s possible that with Qazadi visiting he’ll pass that role to someone else.”

“I don’t think so,” Dayja said. “High-level Black Sun operatives like to use social celebrations as cover for meetings with offworld contacts and to set up future opportunities. In fact, given the timing of Qazadi’s visit, it’s possible he’s here to observe or assist with some particularly troublesome problem.”

“You’ve done your homework,” d’Ashewl said. “Excellent. Do bear in mind, though, that the influx of people also means Marblewood’s security force will be on heightened alert.”

“Don’t worry,” Dayja said calmly. “You can get through any door if you know the proper way to knock. I’ll just keep knocking until I find the pattern.”

According to Wukkar’s largest and most influential fashion magazines, all of which were delighted to run extensive stories on Avrak Villachor whenever he paid them to do so, Villachor’s famed Marblewood Estate was one of the true showcases of the galaxy. It was essentially a country manor in the midst of Iltarr City: a walled-off expanse of landscaped grounds surrounding a former governor’s mansion built in classic High Empress Teta style.

The more breathless of the commentators liked to remind their readers of Villachor’s many business and philanthropic achievements and awards, and predicted that there would be more such honors in the future. Other commentators, the unpaid ones, countered with more ominous suggestions that Villachor’s most likely achievement would be to suffer an early and violent death.

Both predictions were probably right; the thought flicked through Villachor’s mind as he stood at the main entrance to his mansion and watched the line of five ordinary-looking landspeeders float through the gate and into his courtyard.

In fact, there was every chance that he was about to face one or the other of those events right now.

The only question was which one.

Proper etiquette on Wukkar dictated that a host be waiting beside the landspeeder door when a distinguished guest emerged. In this case, though, that would be impossible. All five landspeeders had dark-tint windows, and there was no way to know which one his mysterious visitor was riding in. If Villachor guessed wrong, not only would he have violated prescribed manners, but he would also look like a fool.

And so he paused on the bottom step until the landspeeders came to a well-practiced simultaneous halt. The doors of all but the second vehicle opened and began discharging the passengers, most of them hard-faced human men who would have fit in seamlessly with Villachor's own cadre of guards and enforcers. They spread out into a loose and casual-looking circle around the vehicles, and one of them murmured something into the small comlink clip on his collar. The final landspeeder's doors opened—

Villachor felt his throat tighten as he caught his first glimpse of gray-green scales above a colorful beaded tunic. This was no human. This was a *Falleen*.

And not just one, but an entire landspeeder full of them. Even as Villachor started forward, two Falleen emerged from each side of the vehicle, their hands on their holstered blasters, their eyes flicking to and past Villachor to the mansion towering behind him. Special bodyguards, which could only be for an equally special guest. Villachor picked up his pace, trying to hurry without looking like it, his heart thudding with unpleasant anticipation. If it was Prince Xizor in that landspeeder, this day was likely to end very badly. Unannounced visits from Black Sun's chief nearly always did.

It was indeed another Falleen who stepped out into the sunlight as Villachor reached his proper place at the vehicle's side. But to his quiet relief, it wasn't Xizor. It was merely Qazadi, one of Black Sun's nine vigos.

It was only as Villachor dropped to one knee and bowed his head in reverence to his guest that the significance of that thought belatedly struck him. *Only* one of the nine most powerful beings in Black Sun?

Just because the Falleen standing in front of him wasn't Xizor didn't mean the day might not still end in death.

"I greet you, Your Excellency," Villachor said, bowing even lower. If he was in trouble, an extra show of humility probably wouldn't save him, but it might at least buy him a less painful death. "I'm Avrak Villachor, chief of this sector's operations, and your humble servant."

"I greet you in turn, Sector Chief Villachor," Qazadi said. His voice was smooth and melodious, very much like Xizor's, but with a darker edge of menace lurking beneath it. "You may rise."

"Thank you, Your Excellency," Villachor said, getting back to his feet. "How may I serve you?"

"You may take me to a guest suite," Qazadi said. His eyes seemed to glitter with private amusement. "And then you may relax."

Villachor frowned. "Excuse me, Your Excellency?" he asked carefully.

"You fear that I've come to exact judgment upon you," Qazadi said, his voice still dark yet at the same time oddly conversational. The gray-green scales of his face were changing, too, showing just a hint of pink on his upper cheeks. "And such thoughts should never be simply dismissed," the Falleen added, "for I don't leave Imperial Center without great cause."

"Yes, Your Excellency," Villachor said. The sense of dark uncertainty still hung over the group like an early morning fog, but to his mild surprise he could feel his heartbeat

slowing and an unexpected calm beginning to flow through him. Something about the Falleen's voice was more soothing than he'd realized.

"But in this case, the cause has nothing to do with you," Qazadi continued. "With Lord Vader's absence from Imperial Center leaving his spies temporarily leaderless, Prince Xizor has decided it would be wise to shuffle the cards a bit." He gave Villachor a thin smile. "In this case, a most appropriate metaphor."

Villachor felt his mouth go suddenly dry. Was Qazadi actually talking about—? "My vault is at your complete disposal, Your Excellency," he managed.

"Thank you," Qazadi said, as if Villachor actually had a choice in the matter. "While my guards bring in my belongings and arrange my suite, we will go investigate the security of your vault."

The breeze that had been drifting across Villachor's face shifted direction, and suddenly the calmness that had settled comfortably across his mind vanished. It hadn't been Qazadi's voice at all, Villachor realized acidly, but just another of those cursed body-chemical tricks Falleen liked to pull on people. "As you wish, Your Excellency," he said, bowing again and gesturing to the mansion door. "Please, follow me."

The hotel that d'Ashewl had arranged for was in the very center of Iltarr City's most exclusive district, and the Imperial Suite was the finest accommodation the hotel had to offer. More important, from Dayja's point of view, the humble servants' quarters tacked onto one edge of the suite had a private door that opened right beside one of the hotel's back stairwells.

An hour after d'Ashewl finished his grand midafternoon dinner and retired to his suite, Dayja had changed from servant's livery to more nondescript clothing and was on the streets. A few minutes' walk took him out of the enclave

of the rich and powerful and into a poorer, nastier section of the city.

Modern Intelligence operations usually began at a field officer's desk, with a complete rundown of the target's communications, finances, and social webs. But in this case, Dayja knew, such an approach would be less than useless. Black Sun's top chiefs were exceptionally good at covering their tracks and burying all the connections and pings that could be used to ensnare lesser criminals. In addition, many of those hidden connections had built-in flags to alert the crime lord to the presence of an investigation. The last thing Dayja could afford would be to drive Qazadi deeper underground or, worse, send him scurrying back to Imperial Center, where he would once again be under the direct protection of Xizor and the vast Black Sun resources there.

And so Dayja would do this the old-fashioned way: poking and prodding at the edges of Black Sun's operations in Iltarr City, making a nuisance of himself until he drew the right person's attention.

He spent the rest of the evening just walking around, observing the people and absorbing the feel and rhythms of the city. As the sky darkened toward evening he went back to one of the three clandestine dealers he'd spotted earlier and bought two cubes of Nyriaan spice, commenting casually about the higher quality of the drug that he was used to.

By the time he was ready to head back to the hotel he had bought samples from two more dealers, making similar disparaging observations each time. Black Sun dealt heavily in Nyriaan spice, and there was a good chance that all three dealers were connected at least peripherally to Villachor. With any luck, news of this contemptuous stranger would begin filtering up the command chain.

He was within sight of the upper-class enclave's private security station when he was jumped by three young

toughs.

For the first hopeful moment he thought that perhaps Black Sun's local intel web was better than he'd expected. But it was quickly clear that the thugs weren't working for Villachor or anyone else, but merely wanted to steal the cubes of spice he was carrying. All three of the youths carried knives, and one of them had a small blaster, and there was a burning fire in their eyes that said they would have the spice no matter what the cost.

Unfortunately for them, Dayja had a knife, too, one he'd taken off the body of a criminal who'd had similar plans. Thirty seconds later, he was once again walking toward home, leaving the three bodies dribbling blood into the drainage gutter alongside the walkway.

Tomorrow, he decided, he would suggest that d'Ashewl make a show of visiting some of the local cultural centers, where Dayja would have a chance to better size up the city's ruling class. Then it would be another solo excursion into the fringes, and more of this same kind of subtle troublemaking. Between the high classes and the low, sooner or later Villachor or his people were bound to take notice.

He was well past the security station, with visions of a soft bed dancing before his eyes, before the police finally arrived to collect the bodies he'd left behind.

CHAPTER TWO

HAN SOLO HAD never been in Reggilio's Cantina before. But he'd been in hundreds just like it, and he knew the type well. It was reasonably quiet, though from wariness rather than good manners; slightly boisterous, though with the restraint that came of the need to keep a low profile; and decorated in dilapidated scruffiness, with no apologies offered or expected.

It was, in short, the perfect place for a trap.

A meter away on the other half of the booth's wraparound seat, Chewbacca growled unhappily.

"No kidding," Han growled back, tapping his fingertips restlessly against the mug of Corellian spiced ale that he still hadn't touched. "But if there's even a chance this is legit, we have to take it."

Chewbacca rumbled a suggestion.

"No," Han said flatly. "They're running a rebellion, remember? They haven't got anything extra to spare."

Chewbacca growled again.

"Sure we're worth it," Han agreed. "Shooting those TIEs off Luke alone should have doubled the reward. But you saw the look on Dodonna's face—he wasn't all that happy about giving us the first batch. If Her Royal Highness hadn't been standing right there saying good-bye, I'm pretty sure he would have tried to talk us down."

He glared into his mug. Besides, he didn't add, asking Princess Leia for replacement reward credits would mean he'd have to tell her how he'd lost the first batch. Not in gambling or bad investments or even drinking, but to a kriffing pirate.

And then she would give him one of those looks.

There were, he decided, worse things than being on Jabba's hit list.

On the other hand, if this offer of a job he'd picked up at the Ord Mantell drop was for real, there was a good chance Leia would never have to know.

"Hello there, Solo." The raspy voice came from Han's right. "Eyes front, hands flat on the table. You too, Wookiee."

Han set his teeth firmly together as he let go of his mug and laid his hands palms down on the table. So much for the job offer being legit. "That you, Falsta?"

"Hey, good memory," Falsta said approvingly as he sidled around into Han's view and sat down on the chair across the table. He was just as Han remembered him: short and scrawny, wearing a four-day stubble and his usual wraparound leather jacket over yet another from his collection of flame-bird shirts. His blaster was even uglier than his shirt: a heavily modified Clone Wars-era DT-57.

Falsta liked to claim the weapon had once been owned by General Grievous himself. Han didn't believe that any more than anyone else did.

"I hear Jabba's mad at you," Falsta continued, resting his elbow on the table and leveling the barrel of his blaster squarely at Han's face. "Again."

"I hear *you've* branched out into assassinations," Han countered, eyeing the blaster and carefully repositioning his leg underneath the table. He would have just one shot at this.

Falsta shrugged. "Hey, if that's what the customer wants, that's what the customer gets. I can tell you this much: Black Sun pays a whole lot better for a kill than Jabba does for a grab." He wiggled the barrel of his blaster a little. "Not that I don't mind picking up a few free credits. As long as I just happen to be here anyway."

“Sure, why not?” Han agreed, frowning. That was a strange comment. Was Falsta saying that he *wasn't* the one who'd sent Han that message?

No—ridiculous. The galaxy was a huge place. There was no possible way that a bounty hunter could have just *happened* to drop in on a random cantina in a random city on a random world at the same time Han was there. No, Falsta was just being cute.

That was fine. Han could be cute, too. “So you're saying that if I gave you double what Jabba's offering, you'd get up and walk away?” he asked.

Falsta smiled evilly. “You got it on you?”

Han inclined his head toward Chewbacca. “Third power pack down from the shoulder.”

Falsta's eyes flicked to Chewbacca's bandoleer—

And in a single contorted motion Han banged his knee up, slamming the table into Falsta's elbow and knocking his blaster out of line as he grabbed his mug and hurled the Corellian spiced ale into Falsta's eyes. There was a brief flash of heat as the bounty hunter's reflexive shot sizzled past Han's left ear.

One shot was all Falsta got. An instant later his blaster was pointed harmlessly at the ceiling, frozen in place by Chewbacca's iron grip around both the weapon and the hand holding it.

That should have been the end of it. Falsta should have conceded defeat, surrendered his blaster, and walked out of the cantina, a little humiliated but still alive.

But Falsta had never been the type to concede anything. Even as he blinked furiously at the ale still running down into his eyes, his left hand jabbed like a knife inside his jacket and emerged with a small hold-out blaster.

He was in the process of lining up the weapon when Han shot him under the table. Falsta fell forward, his right arm still raised in Chewbacca's grip, his hold-out blaster clattering across the tabletop before it came to a halt.

Chewbacca held that pose another moment, then lowered Falsta's arm to the table, deftly removing the blaster from the dead man's hand as he did so.

For a half dozen seconds Han didn't move, gripping his blaster under the table, his eyes darting around the cantina. The place had gone quiet, with practically every eye now focused on him. As far as he could tell no one had drawn a weapon, but most of the patrons at the nearest tables had their hands on or near their holsters.

Chewbacca rumbled a warning. "You all saw it," Han called, though he doubted more than a few of them actually had. "He shot first."

There was another moment of silence. Then, almost casually, hands lifted from blasters, heads turned away, and the low conversation resumed.

Maybe this sort of thing happened all the time in Reggilio's. Or maybe they all knew Falsta well enough that no one was going to miss him.

Still, it was definitely time to move on. "Come on," Han muttered, holstering his blaster and sliding around the side of the table. They would go back to the spaceport area, he decided, poke around the cantinas there, and see if they could snag a pickup cargo. It almost certainly wouldn't net them enough to pay off Jabba, but it would at least get them off Wukkar. He stood up, giving the cantina one final check—

"Excuse me?"

Han spun around, reflexively dropping his hand back to the grip of his blaster. But it was just an ordinary human man hurrying toward him.

Or rather, *most* of a man. Half of his face was covered in a flesh-colored medseal that had been stretched across the skin and hair, with a prosthetic eye bobbing along at the spot where his right eye would normally be.

It wasn't just any eye, either. It was something alien-designed, glittering like a smaller version of an Arconian

multifaceted eye. Even in the cantina's dim light the effect was striking, unsettling, and strangely hypnotic.

With a jolt, Han realized he'd been staring and forced his gaze away. Not only was it rude, but a visual grab like that was exactly the sort of trick a clever assassin might use to draw his victim's attention at a critical moment.

But the man's hands were empty, with no blaster or blade in sight. In fact, his right hand wouldn't have been of any use anyway. Twisted and misshapen, it was wrapped tightly in the same medseal as his face. Either it had been seriously damaged or else there was a prosthetic under there that had come from the same aliens who'd supplied him with that eye. "You might want to see about getting a different eye," Han suggested, relaxing a bit.

"I need to see about a great many things," the man said, stopping a couple of meters back. His remaining eye flicked to Han's blaster, then rose with an effort back to his face. "Allow me to introduce myself," he continued. "My name is Eanjer—well, my surname isn't important. What *is* important is that I've been robbed of a great deal of money."

"Sorry to hear it," Han said, backing toward the door. "You need to talk to the Iltarr City police."

"They can't help me," Eanjer said, taking one step forward with each backward one Han took. "I want my credits back, and I need someone who can handle himself and doesn't mind working outside law or custom. That's why I'm here. I was hoping I could find someone who fits both those criteria." His eye flicked to Falsta's body. "Having seen you in action, it's clear that you're exactly the type of person I'm looking for."

"It was self-defense," Han countered, picking up his pace. The man's problem was probably a petty gambling debt, and he had no intention of getting tangled up in something like that.

But whatever else Eanjer might be, the man was determined. He sped up to match Han's pace, staying right with him. "I don't want you to do it for free," he said. "I can pay. I can pay very, very well."

Han slowed to a reluctant halt. It was probably still something petty, and hearing the guy out would be a complete waste of time. But sitting around a spaceport cantina probably would be, too.

And if he *didn't* listen, there was a good chance the pest would follow him all the way to the spaceport. "How much are we talking about?" he asked.

"At a minimum, all your expenses," Eanjer said. "At a maximum—" He glanced around and lowered his voice to a whisper. "The criminals stole a hundred sixty-three million credits. If you get it back, I'll split it with you and whoever else you call in to help you."

Han felt his throat tighten. This could still be nothing. Eanjer might just be spinning cobwebs.

But if he was telling the truth ...

"Fine," Han said. "Let's talk. But not here."

Eanjer looked back at Falsta's body, a shiver running through him. "No," he agreed softly. "Anyplace but here."

"The thief's name is Avrak Villachor," Eanjer said, his single eye darting around the diner Han had chosen, a more upscale place than the cantina and a prudent three blocks away. "More precisely, he's the leader of the particular group involved. I understand he's also affiliated with some larger criminal organization—I don't know which one."

Han looked across the table at Chewbacca and raised his eyebrows. The Wookiee gave a little shrug and shook his head. Apparently he'd never heard of Villachor, either. "Yeah, there are lots to choose from," he told Eanjer.

"Indeed." Eanjer looked down at his drink as if noticing it for the first time, then continued his nervous scanning of