

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Star Wars: Cloak Of Deception

James Luceno

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About the Book

Mired in greed and corruption, tangled in bureaucracy, the Galactic Republic is crumbling. In the outlying systems, where the Trade Federation maintains a stranglehold on shipping routes, tensions are boiling over – and now even the comfort of Coruscant is being invaded, as Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn and his apprentice Obi-Wan Kenobi foil an assassination attempt on Supreme Chancellor Valorum.

As humans and aliens gather for an emergency trade summit, conspiracies sealed with large sums of money run rampant, and no one is entirely above suspicion. But the greatest threat of all remains unknown to everyone except three members of the Trade Federation who have entered into a shadowy alliance with a dark overlord. While the trio will be content with more money and fewer problems, Darth Sidious has grander, far more terrifying plans.

About the Author

James Luceno is best known as half of the writing duo that was Jack McKinney, author of the Robotech series; the other half was Brian Daley, of Star Wars fame. Jim lives in Annapolis, Maryland, with his wife and youngest child.

Also by James Luceno

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FEARFUL SYMMETRY

ILLEGAL ALIEN

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TAR WARS: THE NEW JEDI ORDER: AGENTS OF CHAOS I: HERO'S TRIAL

TAR WARS: THE NEW JEDI ORDER: AGENTS OF CHAOS II: JEDI ECLIPSE



**CLOAK OF
DECEPTION**

JAMES LUCENO



arrow books

For Karen-Ann, one of the few people I know who has made
a true difference in the world—most assuredly in mine

A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY. . . .

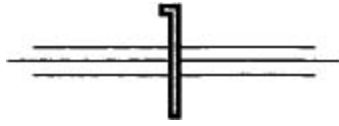
**AFTER A THOUSAND GENERATIONS OF PEACE, THE
GALACTIC REPUBLIC IS CRUMBLING. ON
CORUSCANT, AT THE CENTER OF CIVILIZED SPACE,
GREED AND CORRUPTION RIDDLE THE SENATE,
BEYOND EVEN THE ABILITIES OF SUPREME
CHANCELLOR VALORUM TO REMEDY. AND IN THE
OUTLYING SYSTEMS, THE TRADE FEDERATION
DOMINATES THE HYPERLANES WITH ITS
GARGANTUAN VESSELS.**

**BUT NOW EVEN THE TRADE FEDERATION FINDS
ITSELF ASSAILED FROM ALL QUARTERS, PREYED
UPON BY PIRATES AND RAIDERS, AND VICTIMIZED
BY TERRORISTS, WHO DEMAND AN END TO THE
FEDERATION'S TYRANNICAL PRACTICES.**

**IT IS A TIME THAT TESTS THE METTLE OF ALL
THOSE WHO STRIVE TO HOLD THE REPUBLIC
TOGETHER—NONE MORE THAN THE JEDI
KNIGHTS, WHO HAVE LONG BEEN THE REPUBLIC'S
BEST HOPE FOR PRESERVING PEACE AND JUSTICE .**

. .

DORVALLA



LUXURIATING IN THE unfailing light of countless stars, the Trade Federation freighter *Revenue* lazed at the edge of Dorvalla's veil of alabaster clouds.

Indistinguishable from its myriad brethren, the freighter resembled a saucer, whose center had been pared away to create two massive hangar arms and a stalked centersphere that housed the great ship's hyperdrive reactors. Forward, the curving arms fell short of each other, as if in a failed attempt to close the circle. But, in fact, the gap was there by design, with each arm terminating in colossal docking claws and gaping hangar portals.

Like some gluttonous beast, a Trade Federation vessel didn't so much load as gobble cargo, and for close to three standard days, the *Revenue* had been feeding at Dorvalla.

The outlying planet's principal commodity was lommite ore, a major component in the production of transparisteel viewports and starfighter canopies. Ungainly transports ferried the strip-mined ore into high orbit, where the payloads were transferred to a fleet of self-propelled barges, tenders, and cargo pods, many of them as large as shuttles, and all bearing the Spherical Flame sigil of the Trade Federation.

By the hundreds the unpiloted crafts streamed between the Dorvallan transports and the ring-shaped freighter, lured to the breach in the curving arms by powerful tractor beams. There the docking claws nudged the crafts through

the magnetic containment fields that sealed the rectangular maws of the hangars.

Safeguarding the herd from attacks by pirates or other raiders flew patrols of bullet-nosed, quad-thruster starfighters, wanting shields but armed with rapid-fire laser cannons. The droids that piloted the ships answered to a central control computer located in the freighter's centersphere.

At the aft curve of the centersphere stood a command and control tower. The ship's bridge occupied the summit, where a robed figure paced nervously before an array of inwardly inclined viewports. The interrupted view encompassed the distal ends of the hangar arms and the seemingly ceaseless flow of pods, their dorsal surfaces aglow with sunlight. Beyond the arms and the rust-brown pods spun translucent-white Dorvalla.

"Status," the robed figure hissed.

The *Revenue's* Neimoidian navigator responded from a thronelike chair set below the burnished floor of the bridge walkway.

"The last of the cargo pods is being taken aboard, Commander Dofine." Neimoidian speech, while lilting, favored first syllables and elongated words.

"Very well, then," Dofine replied. "Recall the starfighters."

The navigator swiveled in his chair to face the walkway. "So soon, Commander?"

Dofine ceased his relentless pacing to cast a dubious look at his shipmate. Months in deep space had so honed Dofine's natural distrust that he was no longer certain of the navigator's intent. Was the navigator questioning his command in the hope of gaining status, or was there some good reason to delay recalling the starfighters? The distinction troubled Dofine, since he risked losing face by airing his suspicions and being proven wrong. He decided

to gamble that the question had been prompted by concern and contained no hidden challenges.

"I want those fighters recalled. The sooner we leave Dorvalla, the better."

The navigator nodded. "As you will, Commander."

Captain of the *Revenue's* skeleton crew of living beings, Dofine had a pair of front-facing red oval eyes, a prominent muzzle, and a fish-lipped slash of mouth. Veins and arteries pulsed visibly beneath the surface of puckered and mottled pale-green skin. Small for his species—the runt of his hive, some said behind his back—his thin frame was draped in blue robes and a tufted, shoulder-padded mantle more appropriate for a cleric than a ship's commander. A tall cone of black fabric, even his headpiece suggested wealth and high office.

The navigator was similarly attired in robes and headpiece, though his floor-length mantle was solid black and of a simpler design. He communicated with the devices that encircled the shell-like pilot's chair by means of data readout goggles that cupped his eyes and a disk-shaped comlink that hid his mouth.

The *Revenue's* communications technician was a jowled and limpid-eyed Sullustan. The officer who interfaced with the central control computer was a Gran—three-eyed, with a hircine face. Beaked and green-complexioned, the ship's assistant bursar was an Ishi Tib.

Dofine hated having to suffer aliens aboard his bridge, but he was compelled to do so as an accommodation to the lesser shipping concerns that had allied with the Trade Federation; small companies like Viraxo Shipping, and powerful shipbuilders like TaggeCo and Hoersch-Kessel.

Humaniform droids saw to all other tasks on the bridge.

Dofine had resumed his pacing when the Sullustan spoke.

"Commander, Dorvalla Mining reports that the payment they received is short one hundred thousand Republic

credits.”

Dofine waved his long-fingered hand in dismissal. “Tell her to recheck her figures.”

The Sullustan relayed Dofine’s words and waited for a reply. “She claims that you said the same thing the last time we were here.”

Dofine exhaled theatrically and gestured to a large circular screen at the rear of the bridge. “Display her.”

The magnified image of a red-haired, freckle-faced human woman was resolving on the screen by the time Dofine reached it.

“I am not aware of any missing credits,” he said without preamble.

The woman’s blue eyes flashed. “Don’t lie to me, Dofine. First it was twenty thousand, then fifty, now one hundred. How much will we have to forfeit the next time the Trade Federation graces Dorvalla with a visit?”

Dofine glanced knowingly at the Ishi Tib, who returned a faint grin. “Your world is far removed from normal space lanes,” he said calmly toward the screen. “As far from the Rimma Trade Route as from the Corellian Trade Spine. Your situation, therefore, demands additional expenditures. Of course, if you are displeased, you could always do business with some other concern.”

The woman snorted a rueful laugh. “Other concern? The Trade Federation has put everyone else under.”

Dofine spread his large hands. “Then what is a hundred thousand credits, more or less?”

“Extortion is what it is.”

The sour expression Dofine adopted came naturally to his slack features. “I suggest you file a complaint with the Trade Commission on Coruscant.”

The woman fumed; her nostrils flared and her cheeks reddened. “You haven’t heard the last of this, Dofine.”

Dofine’s mouth approximated a smile. “Ah, once again, you are mistaken.” Abruptly, he ended the transmission,

then swung back to face his fellow Neimoidian. "Inform me when the loading process is concluded."

Deep in the hangar arms, droids supervised the disposition of the cargo pods from traffic stations located high above the deck. Humpbacked craft with bulbous noses that gave them an animated appearance, the pods entered through the hangars' magcon orifices on repulsorlift power and were routed according to contents and destination, as designated by codes stenciled on the hulls. Each hangar arm was divided into three zones, partitioned by sliding bulkhead doors, twenty stories high. Normally, zone three, closest to the centersphere, was filled first. But pods containing goods bound for destinations other than Coruscant or other Core worlds were directed to berthing bays in zones one or two, regardless of when they were brought aboard.

Scattered throughout the hangars were security automata toting modified BlasTech combat rifles, some with dispersal tips. Where the worker droids might be hollow-bodied asps, limber-necked PKs, boxy GNKs, or flatfooted binary loadlifters, the security droids appeared to have been inspired by the skeletal structure of any number of the galaxy's bipedal life-forms.

Lacking both the rounded head and alloy musculature of its near cousin, the protocol droid, the security droid had a narrow, half-cylindrical head that tapered forward to a speech processor and, at the opposite end, curved down over a stiff, backwardly canted neck. What distinguished the droid, however, was its signal boost backpack and the retractable antennae that sprouted from it.

The majority of the droids that comprised the *Revenue's* security force were simply appendages of the freighter's central control computer, but a few had been equipped with a small measure of intelligence. The foreheads and chest plastrons of these lanky commanders were emblazoned

with yellow markings similar to military unit flashes, though less for the sake of other droids than for the flesh and bloods to whom the commanders ultimately answered.

OLR-4 was one such commander.

Blaster rifle gripped in both hands and angled across his chest, the droid stood in zone two of the ship's starboard hangar arm, halfway between the bulkheads that defined the immense space. OLR-4 was aware of the activity around him—the current of cargo pods moving toward zone three, the noise of other pods settling to the deck, the incessant whirrs and clicks of machines in motion—but only in a vague way. Rather, OLR-4 had been tasked by the central control computer to watch for anything out of the ordinary—for any event that fell outside performance parameters defined by the computer itself.

The resounding thud that accompanied the roosting of a nearby cargo pod was, given the size of the craft, well within those parameters. So, too, were the sounds emanating from inside the pod, which could be ascribed to a shifting of whatever cargo the pod contained. But the same couldn't be said for the hissing of pressure relief valves or the metallic clanks and stridencies that prefaced the slow rise of the pod's uncommonly large, circular forward hatch.

OLR-4's long head pivoted and his oblique optical sensors fixed on the pod. Magnified and sharpened, the captured image was transmitted to the central control computer, which instantly compared it to a catalog of similar images.

Discrepancies were noted.

Even as OLR-4's photoreceptors were scrutinizing the rising hatch, additional security droids were already hurrying to assume positions on all sides of the suspect pod. OLR-4 planted his bootlike feet in a combat stance and leveled his blaster rifle.

The open hatch should have revealed the interior of the pod, but instead it exposed what seemed to be yet another hatch, sealed shut. OLR-4 did succeed in identifying the composition of the inner hatch, but the droid's puny processor was not up to the task of making sense of what it was seeing. That was the province of the central control computer, which was quick to solve the puzzle—though not quick enough.

Before OLR-4 could move, the inner hatch had telescoped from the pod with enough force to launch two security droids and three worker droids halfway across the hangar. Immediately, OLR-4 and three others opened fire on the battering ram and the cargo pod itself, but the blaster bolts were deflected and sent ricocheting through the hold.

A pair of droids leapt onto the wide-bodied pod, hoping to attack the striking device from behind, but their efforts were in vain. Blaster bolts found them first, quartering one, and all but obliterating the other. It was only then that OLR-4 realized, in his limited capacity, that there were unfriendlies *behind* the battering ram. And judging by the precision of the bolts, the intruders were flesh and bloods.

With cargo pods gliding overhead and a hundred labor droids continuing to tend to their tasks, oblivious to the firefight occurring in their midst, OLR-4 rushed to one side, firing steadily and intent on gaining a better vantage on the intruders. Bolts sought him as he moved, sizzling past his head and shoulders, and streaking between his pumping legs.

In front of him two security droids lost their heads to well-placed shots. A third droid remained intact, but dropped to the deck nevertheless, hopelessly dazzled by untamed, coruscating electrical charges.

OLR-4's internal monitors told him that his blaster was overheating and close to depletion. Though obviously aware of the droid's predicament, the central control

computer did not countermand its orders; so OLR-4 kept firing while he attempted to angle behind the battering ram.

Off to his right another droid was blasted from the top of the pod, its torso sent twirling in clumsy circles as it flew off into the hangar, only to collide with a settling cargo pod. A droid with a missing leg hopped as it shot, until its sound leg was blown out from under it, and it fell, skidding across the deck, sparks flying from its vocoder chin.

OLR-4 shifted left and right, dodging blaster bolts. He had almost reached the pod when a bolt caught him in the left shoulder, spinning him through a complete circle. He staggered, but somehow managed to remain upright, until a second bolt struck him in the opposite shoulder. Spun through another circle, he landed on his back, with his legs wedged beneath the pod. Looking up, he had a glimpse of the armed force that had infiltrated the freighter: a dozen or so bipedal flesh and bloods, sheathed in mimetic suits and black body armor, their faces hidden behind rebreather masks, whose oxygen recyclers resembled fangs.

OLR-4's photoreceptors focused on a human with long black hair that fell in thick coils to his broad shoulders. The servomotors of the droid's right hand tightened on the blaster's trigger bar, but the fatigued and overheated weapon's only response was a mournful whirr, as it powered down and shut off.

"Uh-oh," OLR-4 said.

Glimpsing him, the long-haired human swung and fired.

OLR-4's heat sensors redlined and his overloaded systems wailed. Circuits melting, he relayed a final image to the central control computer, then winked out of existence.

The reassuring hum of machines on the *Revenue's* bridge was interrupted by a grating tone from the scanner array.

Gliding across the command walkway, Daultay Dofine queried the droid stationed at the scanner.

"Long-range monitors report a cluster of small ships advancing all speed on our position," the droid answered in a metallic monotone.

"What? What did you say?"

The Sullustan elaborated. "Authenticators identify the ships as CloakShapes and one *Tempest*-class gunship."

Dofine's jaw dropped. "An attack?"

"Commander," the droid intoned, "the ships are continuing to advance."

Dofine gestured wildly to the outsize display screen. "I want to see them!" He had started for the screen when another worrisome tone sounded, this time from the station of the systems officer, which was also set below the walkway.

"The central control computer is reporting a disturbance in zone two of the starboard hangar arm."

Dofine gaped at the Gran. "What sort of disturbance?"

"The droids are firing on one of the cargo pods."

"Those brainless machines! If they ruin any of the cargo —"

"Commander, starfighters are onscreen," the Sullustan reported.

"It could be nothing more than a glitch," the Gran went on.

Dofine's blinking red orbs darted from one alien to the other in mounting concern.

"Starfighters changing vector. Breaking into two elements." The Sullustan turned to Dofine. "Flying the imprint of the Nebula Front."

"The Nebula Front!" Dofine rushed to the display screen, then raised his long, fat forefinger to indicate the jet-black gunship. "That ship—"

"The *Hawk-Bat*," the Sullustan said in a rush. "The ship of Captain Cohl."

"Impossible!" Dofine snapped. "Cohl was reported to be at Malastare only yesterday."

Jowls quivering slightly, the Sullustan regarded the screen. "But that is his ship. And where the *Hawk-Bat* ventures, Cohl is not far behind!"

"Starfighters are forming up for attack," the droid updated.

Dofine turned to the navigator. "Enable defense systems!"

"Central control computer reports continued blasterfire in the starboard hangar. Eight security droids destroyed."

"Destroyed?"

"Defense system has the Nebula Front starfighters in target lock. Deflector shields are raised—"

"Starfighters firing!"

Intense light exploded behind the rectangular viewports and shook the bridge hard enough to rattle a droid off its feet.

"Turbolasers responding!"

Dofine swung to the viewports in time to see hyphens of pulsed, red light streak from the freighter's equatorially mounted batteries.

"Where is our closest reinforcement?"

"One star system distant," the navigator said. "The *Acquisitor*. More heavily armed than the *Revenue*."

"Send a distress call!"

"Is that wise, Commander?"

Dofine understood the implication. Rescue was always a belittling event. But Dofine was certain that he could offset the humiliation by protecting the *Revenue*'s cargo.

"Just do as I say," he told the navigator.

"Starfighter elements are forming up for a second run," the Sullustan updated.

"Where are the starfighters? Why aren't they moving in to engage?"

“You recalled them, Commander,” the navigator reminded.

Dofine gestured wildly. “Well, relaunch them, relaunch them!”

“Central control computer requests permission to isolate zone two of starboard hangar.”

“Seal it!” Dofine sputtered. “Seal it now!”



THE MASKED GROUP that had infiltrated the *Revenue* were a diverse lot—as varied as the starfighters that were flying support—humans and nonhumans, male and female, stocky and slender. Protected by camouflage suits and matte-black armorply, and sporting gripsole deckboots and combat goggles, they emerged from behind the battering ram that had afforded them an element of surprise, firing state-of-the-art assault rifles and shoulder-slung field disruptors.

The handful of security droids that were still standing collapsed to the deck, limbs splayed or hopelessly entwined.

The human OLR-4 had nearly gotten the drop on strode fearlessly to the center of the yawning hangar, checked a readout on his wrist comm, and tugged the rebreather and goggles from his face.

The firefight had left a vagrant tang in the air, the smell of ozone and scorched alloy.

“Atmosphere is enabled,” he told the rest of his band. “But oxygen levels are equivalent to what you’d find at four thousand meters. Off your masks, but keep them handy—especially you t’bac addicts.”

With some muffled laughter, the team complied.

Beneath the apparatus, the human’s dark-complexioned face was still a mask: thickly bearded with coarse black hair, and rashed from temple to temple with small diamond-shaped tattoos. His violet eyes surveyed the damage with obvious dispassion.

There wasn't a security droid in sight, but the deck was littered with their remains. Labor droids of several varieties continued to route a few pods to berthing spaces.

A human member of the team kicked aside the severed arm of a security droid. "These things could be dangerous if they ever learn to think straight."

"Shoot straight," the bearded man amended.

"Tell that to Rasper, Captain Cohl," another said—Boiny, a Rodian. "It was a droid that sent Rasper on his way." A green-skinned and round-eyed male, Boiny had a tapered snout and a crest of pliant yellow spines.

"A lucky droid, a luckier shot," a Rodian female remarked.

"That doesn't mean we treat this like an exercise," Cohl warned, eyeing everyone. "The central control computer will be deploying backup units soon enough, and we've got a kilometer to go before we hit the centersphere."

The infiltrators glanced down the curved hangar toward a bulkhead that loomed in the distance. High overhead were massive box girders and I-beams, cranes, maintenance gantries, and hoists, a puzzle of atmosphere and vectoring ducts.

A human female—the only among them—whistled softly. "Stars' end, you could hide an invasion force in here."

As dark-complexioned as Cohl, she had short brown hair and an elegantly angular face. Even the mimetic suit could not camouflage her shapeliness.

"That would mean spending some of the profits, Rella," a male human said. "And the Neimoidians don't do that unless they can spend it on new robes."

Boiny loosed a high-pitched laugh. "You grow up a half-starved Neimoidian grub, that's what happens."

Cohl raised his bearded chin to two of his band. "Stay with the pod. We'll make contact when we have the bridge." He swung to the others. "Team one, take the outer rim corridor. The rest of you are with me."

The *Revenue* shuddered slightly. Muted explosions could be heard in the distance.

Cohl cocked an ear. "That'll be our ships."

Sirens began to blare throughout the hangar. The labor droids stopped in their tracks, as a basso rumble gathered underfoot.

Rella gazed at the far-off bulkhead. "They're sealing off the hangar."

Cohl waved a gesture to the first team. "Move out. We'll rendezvous at the starboard turbolifts. Set your suits to pulse—that ought to confuse the droids—and use the concussion grenades sparingly. And remember to monitor your oxygen levels."

He took a few steps, then stopped. "One more thing: You get blasted by a droid, bacta rehabilitation comes out of your pay."

Daultay Dofine stood rigidly on the bridge's walkway, watching in arrant horror as the *Nebula Front* showed his ship no mercy.

The motley starfighters fell on the *Revenue* in full force, picking away at the freighter's fat arms and triple-thrustered hindquarters like ravenous birds of prey. Many of the unshielded droid ships were annihilated as soon as they emerged from the vessel's protective force field.

Emboldened by their effortless mastery, the enemy craft violated the embrace the hangar arms threw about the centersphere by strafing the command tower at close quarter. Ion cannon fire from the gunship sent waves of aggravation through the *Revenue's* deflector shield. Violent light washed against the bridge viewports.

It was all Dofine could do to keep himself rooted on the walkway, as he cursed the terrorists under his breath.

In return for having been awarded what amounted to exclusive rights to trade in the outlying star systems, the Trade Federation had pledged to the Galactic Senate on

Coruscant that it would content itself with remaining a mercantile power, and refrain from becoming a naval power through the accumulation of war machines. However, the further the giant ships traveled from the Core, the more often they fell victim to attacks by pirates, privateers, and terrorist groups like the Nebula Front, whose broad membership had grievances not only with the Trade Federation, but also with distant Coruscant itself.

As a result, the senate had granted permission for the freighters to be equipped with weapons of defense, to safeguard them in the unpoliced systems strewn between the major trade routes and hyperlanes. But that had only forced the raiders to upgrade their armaments and, in turn, prepared the way for periodic strengthenings of Trade Federation defenses.

Skirmishes in the Mid and Outer Rims—throughout the so-called free trade zones—had since become commonplace. But Coruscant was a long way off, even by light-speed, and it was not always easy to ascertain who was at fault and who had fired first. By the time matters reached the courts, it often came down to the word of one party against the word of another, without resolution.

Things might have gone differently for the Trade Federation but for the Neimoidians, who were as penurious as they were avaricious. When it had come to fortifying the giant ships, they had sought out the most cut-rate suppliers, and they had insisted that protecting the cargo was their paramount concern.

Against all sound judgment, it was the Neimoidians who had dictated the placement of quad laser batteries around the outer wall of the hangar arms. While the equatorial arrangement was adequate for repelling lateral attacks, it proved completely ineffective for countering attacks launched from above or below, where nearly all the freighters' crucial systems were located: tractor beam and

deflector shield generators, hyperdrive reactors, and the central control computer.

Thus the Trade Federation had been forced to invest in bigger and better shield generators, thicker armor plating, and, ultimately, in squadrons of starfighters. But starfighter allotments were subject to senate sanction, and freighters like the *Revenue* frequently found themselves defenseless against fighter craft piloted by seasoned raiders.

Well aware of these shortcomings, Daultay Dofine saw the ship and its cargo of precious lommite rapidly slipping from his grasp.

"Shields holding at fifty percent," the Gran reported from across the bridge, "but we are imperiled. A few more strikes and we'll be disabled."

"Where is the *Acquisitor*?" Dofine whined. "It should have arrived by now!"

A volley from the Nebula Front's gunship—Captain Cohl's personal gunship—rocked the bridge. As Dofine had learned in previous engagements, sheer size was no guarantee of protection, much less victory, and the freighter's three-kilometer diameter only made it a target that couldn't be missed.

"Shields marginal at forty percent."

"Quad lasers one through six are not responding," the Sullustan added. "The starfighters are concentrating fire on the deflector shield generator and drive reactors."

Dofine firmed his fleshy lips in anger. "Instruct the central control computer to activate all droids, all ship defenses, and prepare to repel boarders," he brayed. "Over my dead body will Captain Cohl set foot on this bridge."

In the starboard hangar arm, Cohl's team had barely made it through the bulkhead door when every device in zone three conspired to prevent them from getting one meter closer to the acceleration compensator shaft that connected the centersphere to its embracing arms.

Overhead cranes threw grappling claws at them; towering derricks toppled in their path; binary loadlifters dogged them like mechanical nightmares; and oxygen levels plummeted. Even worker droids joined the fray, brandishing fusioncutters and power calibrators as if they were flame projectors and vibroblades.

"Central control's turned the entire ship against us," Cohl yelled.

Rella squeezed off bolts at a posse of hydrospanner-wielding PK droids. "What did you expect, Cohl—the royal welcome?"

Cohl gestured Boiny, Rella, and the rest of his team toward the final bulkhead that stood between them and the centersphere turbolifts. Sirens shrieked and howled in the thin air. Crisscrossing and ricocheting blaster bolts created a pyrotechnic display worthy of a Republic Day parade on Coruscant.

Cohl fired on the run, losing count of how many droids he had dropped and how many blaster gas cartridges his weapon had expended. Two of his band were pinned down by droid fire, but there was little he or anyone else could do to help them. With luck they would get to the rendezvous point, even if they had to drag themselves there.

Pursued by three binary loadlifters, the team raced through the final bulkhead door and fought their way to the closest bank of turbolifts.

The hatch that accessed the transfer tubes was locked down.

"Boiny!" Cohl shouted.

The Rodian holstered his blaster and hurried forward, eyeing the hatch up and down, then moved to the control panel set into the wall. Preparing to slice the code, he rubbed his palms together and cracked his long, suction-tip-equipped fingers. Before he could lay a hand on the panel keys, Cohl slapped him in the back of the head.

“What is this, amateur night?” Cohl asked with a menacing scowl. “Blow the thing.”

Dofine was pacing the walkway when the bridge hatch blew inward, loosing a brief storm of paralyzing heat that tumbled him to the deck.

Cohl’s band of six hurried in behind a roiling cloud of smoke, their mimetic suits allowing them to blend even with the burnished bulkheads of the bridge. Quickly and efficiently, they disarmed the Gran and shot restraining bolts onto the chest plastrons of the droids.

Cohl waved one of his men toward the communications station.

“Contact the *Hawk-Bat*. Tell them we’ve secured the bridge. Have the starfighters deploy for defense, and stand by to cover our exfiltration.”

He waved another of his cohorts toward the Gran’s duty station. “Order the central control computer to stand down. Have it open all bulkheads in the hangar arms.”

The human nodded and dropped down below the walkway.

Cohl tapped a code into his wrist comlink and raised it to his mouth. “Base team, we have the bridge. Move the pod into zone three and set it down as close as possible to the inner wall hangar portal. We’ll be there soon enough.”

Cohl zeroed the comlink. His eyes roamed over the faces of his five living captives, settling finally on Dofine. Then he drew his blaster.

Spreading his arms wide in a gesture of surrender, Dofine took two backward steps as Cohl approached.

“You would shoot an unarmed individual, Captain Cohl?”

Cohl pressed the barrel of the weapon to Dofine’s ribcage. “I’d shoot an unarmed Neimoidian—and I’d sleep better for it.”

He glared at Dofine for a long moment, then holstered the blaster and turned to the Rodian member of his band.

“Boiny, get to work. And be quick about it.”

Cohl swung back to Dofine.

“Where’s the rest of your crew, Commander?”

Dofine swallowed and found his voice. “Returning by shuttle from Dorvalla.”

Cohl nodded. “Good, that’ll simplify things.”

Repeatedly poking Dofine in the chest with his forefinger, Cohl moved him backwards along the walkway until they reached the navigator’s chair. A final poke sent Dofine off the walkway and into the seat.

Cohl jumped down to face him. “We need to discuss your cargo, Commander.”

“The cargo?” Dofine stammered. “Lommite—destined for Sluis Van.”

“To the depths with the ore,” Cohl snarled. “I’m talking about the aurodium.”

Dofine tried to keep his red eyes from bulging. His nictitating membranes spasmed, and he blinked half a dozen times. “Aurodium?”

Cohl leaned toward him. “You’re carrying two billion in aurodium ingots.”

Dofine stiffened under Cohl’s gaze. “You—you must be mistaken, Captain. The *Revenue* is carrying ore.”

Cohl raised himself to his considerable height. “I’ll say it once more. You’re carrying aurodium ingots—bribes proffered by Outer Rim worlds to ensure the continued blessing of the Trade Federation.”

Dofine sneered, in spite of himself. “So it is currency you seek. I had always heard that the notorious Captain Cohl was an idealist. Now I see that he is a simple thief.”

Cohl almost grinned. “We can’t all be licensed thieves like you and the rest of your bunch.”

“The Trade Federation does not deal in violence and death, Captain.”

Cohl grabbed two fistfuls of Dofine’s rich raiment and yanked him halfway out of the chair. “Not yet you don’t.”

He pushed Dofine back into the seat. "But we'll save that for another day. What matters now is the aurodium."

"And should I refuse to submit?"

Without taking his eyes from Dofine, Cohl pointed to his Rodian comrade. "Boiny, there, is affixing a thermal detonator to the *Revenue's* fuel-driver control system. As I understand it, the device will trigger an explosion large enough to destroy your ship in . . . Boiny?"

"Sixty minutes, Captain," Boiny shouted, holding aloft a metallic sphere the size of a stinkmelon.

Cohl pulled an object from the thigh pouch pocket of his mimetic suit and slapped it against the back of Dofine's left hand. Dofine saw that it was a timer, already counting down from sixty minutes. He raised his eyes to Cohl's steadfast gaze.

"About the ingots," Cohl said.

Dofine nodded. "Yes, all right—if you promise to spare the ship."

Cohl laughed shortly. "The *Revenue* is history. But you have my word I'll spare your life if you do as you're told."

Again, Dofine nodded. "That way I'll at least live to see you executed."

Cohl shrugged. "You never know, Commander." He straightened and grinned at Rella. "What did I tell you? Easy as—"

"Captain," Cohl's man at the communications station cut him off. "Vessel emerging from hyperspace. Authenticators paint her as the TradeFed freighter *Acquisitor*."

Rella made a plosive sound. "You were saying, Cohl?"

The look Cohl directed at Dofine was one of genuine surprise. "Maybe you're not as thick-skulled as you look." He leapt up onto the walkway and turned to the viewport array. Rella joined him.

"The scenario has changed," Cohl announced to everyone. "The *Acquisitor* will launch starfighters as soon