

STAR WARS



TM

SHADOW GAMES



MICHAEL REAVES

New York Times bestselling author of *Star Wars: Coruscant Nights*

and **MAYA KAATHRYN BOHNHOFF**

Contents

About the Authors
Also by Michael Reaves
Title Page
Dedication
Acknowledgments
The Star Wars Novels Timeline
Dramatis Personae

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine
Chapter Thirty
Chapter Thirty-One
Chapter Thirty-Two
Chapter Thirty-Three

Copyright

About the Authors

Michael Reaves received an Emmy Award for his work on the *Batman* animated TV series. He has worked for Spielberg's DreamWorks, among other studios, and has written fantasy novels and supernatural thrillers for Tor Books. He is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Star Wars: Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter*; co-writer (with Steve Perry) of the two *Star Wars: MedStar* novels and *Star Wars: Death Star*; and the author of the three *Star Wars: Coruscant Nights* novels. He lives in the Los Angeles area.

Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff is the author of the novels *Magic Time: Angelfire*, *The Meri*, *Taminy*, *The Crystal Rose*, and *The Spirit Gate*, as well as a slew of short speculative fiction in such magazines as *Analog*, *Amazing Stories*, *Realms of Fantasy*, *Paradox*, and *Interzone*. Her short fiction has been nominated for the Nebula and British Science Fiction awards. She lives in San Jose, California.

ALSO BY MICHAEL REAVES

Star Wars: Coruscant Nights I: Jedi Twilight

Star Wars: Coruscant Nights II: Street of Shadows

Star Wars: Coruscant Nights III: Patterns of Force

Star Wars: Death Star (with Steve Perry)

Star Wars: Medstar I: Battle Surgeons (with Steve Perry)

Star Wars: Medstar II: Jedi Healer (with Steve Perry)

Star Wars: Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter

STAR WARS™

SHADOW GAMES

MICHAEL REAVES AND
MAYA KAATHRYN BOHNHOFF



arrow books

This one's for Gerry Conway
—MR

For Stan Schmidt,
who bought my first-ever science fiction story
—MKB

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to thank our inestimable editors, David Pomerico and Shelly Shapiro, who herded their cats with patience and good humor. (I especially appreciated David's "out-of-office messages.") Also thanks to Sue and Leland at Lucasfilm, Ltd. for their assistance with research and continuity, to Dan Wallace and Jason Fry for their very helpful resource manual, and to the team of researchers who put together the Star Wars Encyclopedia that now resides on my laptop. Also, kudos to the team of volunteers at Wookieepedia for helping me to find things. And a special shout-out to all the fans who have built beautiful *Star Wars*-related websites as a labor of love. You guys are why we write these books in the first place.

—MKB

THE STAR WARS NOVELS TIMELINE

OLD REPUBLIC 5000–33 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Lost Tribe of the Sith*

Precipice
Skyborn
Paragon
Savior
Purgatory
Sentinel

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

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 33–0 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 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

*An eBook novella

**Forthcoming

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

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 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

Fool's Bargain*

Survivor's Quest

*An eBook novella

**Forthcoming

THE STAR WARS NOVELS TIMELINE



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
Omen
Abyss
Backlash
Allies
Vortex
Conviction
Ascension
Apocalypse**

*An eBook novella

**Forthcoming

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Arno D’Vox; commander, Bannistar Station (human male)
Arruna Var; Javul Charn’s engineer (Twi’lek female)
Bran Finnick; first officer, *Nova’s Heart* (human male)
Dash Rendar; smuggler (human male)
Eaden Vrill; smuggler (Nautolan male)
Edge; assassin (Anomid male)
Ian Solo; captain, *Millennium Falcon* (human male)
Lityamun “Hitch” Kris; Black Sun Vigo (human male)
Lavul Charn; holostar (human female)
Lendara “Spike” Farlion; Javul Charn’s road manager
(human female)
Leebo; repair droid (masculine droid)
Ljik; cargo master’s assistant (Sullustan male)
Loto; service droid (masculine droid)
Red” Rishyk; security chief Bannistar Station (human male)
Lerdor Marrak; captain, *Nova’s Heart* (Zabrak male)
Lereez Dza’lar; Javul Charn’s costumier (Bothan female)
Lanus Melikan; Javul Charn’s cargo master (human male)

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

ONE

“THIS IS IT, Eaden. This is the day we one-up Solo.”

Dash Rendar sat back in the pilot’s chair of the *Outrider*, feeling an almost palpable sense of satisfaction. It was a good feeling—nearly tingly, in fact. And he expected to relive it every time he bragged about how fast he’d done the Kessel Run. It was, after all, acknowledged to be the ultimate test of a pilot’s skill ... and propensity for risk taking. Every time you ran it, you risked your cargo, your life, and your reputation, but you got your goods where they were going faster than more cautious pilots *and* you could walk into any port with a swagger in your step. The faster your time, the bigger your swagger.

“Hubris,” said Eaden Vrill, his dark, liquid gaze on the tactical display. His voice was a low rumble, more suited for underwater communication than atmospheric, and his Basic took some getting used to, with its hard-edged fricatives and sibilants. Dash was used to it; he and the Nautolan had been partners for some time.

“Confidence,” Dash retorted, annoyed at being pulled out of his pleasant reverie. “The *Outrider* is twice the ship the *Falcon* is.” As far as he was concerned Solo’s boat was a scow compared with Dash’s heavily modified YT-2400.

Eaden glanced at him. “You confuse pride of possession with a distinct entity. The ship is not you, nor did you build

it. Its speed—”

“Is largely the result of *my* expert modifications.”

“Beg to differ,” the Nautolan replied. “The improvements are almost entirely the result of repairs carried out by LE-BO2D9. The rest is unarguably the result of my superior navigation skills.”

Dash glanced at his navigator. “*Now* who’s overweening? Hubris, my—”

“You imply that I’m boasting. I’m not—but feel free to correct me if I’ve misinterpreted your colorful patois. I am concentrating.” He hesitated, then added: “We’re entering the Pit.”

Reason enough to concentrate, Dash knew. He rocked his seat forward, hitting the comm button on the pilot’s console as he did. “Hey, Leebo, we’re headed into the Pit.”

“Imagine my excitement.” The reply came back in the sarcastic voice of the repair droid’s previous owner, Kood Gareeda—a stand-up comic who toured the Rim perpetually. Dash had seen Gareeda’s routine; he was wise to keep moving.

“I guess I’ll have to,” he said in response.

“Try not to break the ship—again,” Leebo added. “And try especially hard not to give me anything to shoot at.”

“Do my best.” Dash took the steering yoke and turned off the autopilot. “Course?” he prompted Eaden.

The Nautolan navigator locked the course coordinates into the navicomp, and Dash watched them appear as a bright saffron arc on the tactical display. He frowned at the solid yellow line. “Hey, this isn’t a leisurely holiday tour.”

“You refer to the arc of our course?”

Dash sighed and pointed at the navicomp monitor. “Look at the blasted line. Do you see red?”

Eaden looked. “I see no red.”

“That’s because the course you set is *safe*.”

“And this is a problem because?”

“Because safe isn’t gonna better Solo’s time.”

Eaden Vrill blinked his extraordinarily large maroon eyes. Two of his fourteen tentacle-like tresses lifted their tips toward Dash. “You wish me to recalculate?”

“What I wish is to beat Solo’s alleged record.”

“I’m simply being careful. We have an expensive cargo that we have yet to be paid for.”

“All the more reason to get it to port *quickly*,” Dash said. He gestured at the monitor. “So reset the course, please. We have to skate as close to the Maw as Solo did. Closer, if possible.”

Eaden made an almost subsonic rumble of disapproval and ran nimble fingers over the console. The arc of light on the tactical display shot forth again. The curve was more pronounced now, running closer to the Maw, where the color deepened from yellow to orange to a satisfying shade of crimson.

“Keep in mind,” Eaden cautioned, “that nothing in the galaxy is static. The orbital trajectories of stars, systems—”

“Are negligible within the context of human and humanoid life spans. If I were a Cephalon, say, it might be something to worry about.” Dash took the steering yoke in hand, aimed the *Outrider* along the flaming arc, and punched the hyperdrive.

It was just a microjump to put them in the vicinity. To fly hyper along the edge of the Pit was almost impossible. For one thing, the gravity well could yank you out of hyperspace in a heartbeat even if you’d tinkered with your failsafes—which, of course, Dash had. Then there was the fact that the hard radiation from the nebula that cradled the asteroid field played havoc with instrumentation—adhering to a set sublight course that skirted the fringes of the Pit was about the only way Dash knew he could come through in one piece. Deviation on one side could result in clipping a wandering asteroid; deviation on the other would send the ship into the gravitational pull of the Maw, a cluster of black holes that warped local space. Fly too close

to one of those singularities and all kinds of bad things could happen—not the least of which was having one’s atoms stretched to an infinite length by the tidal forces that waited to tear everything apart.

He was counting down to the end of the jump when the *Outrider* trembled abruptly, the unexpected vibration passing through Dash’s hands and up his arms. He frowned. That wasn’t right. He opened his mouth to say something to Eaden when the ship bucked like a fractious tauntaun and dropped out of hyperspace.

“*What the—*”

“Oh, mother of chaos!” Leebo’s bleat came through the com in a wash of static. “Incoming!”

“Incoming *what?*” Dash looked frantically at the tac display—which made no sense. There was no gravity well here—

“Incoming Imperials! There’s an Imperial cruiser bearing down on us from astern—*Interceptor*-class!”

Dash swore in three languages—adding several choice moans in Wookieespeak. The Interceptors had gravity generators—four of them—that could suck a smaller ship right out of hyperspace or keep it from fleeing by producing a false gravity well. They’d flown right into a trap—probably set up here at the top of the Kessel run for the express purpose of catching smugglers.

The ship rocked violently to port and Leebo uttered a shrill, metallic squeal.

Before Dash’s eyes the tac display finally made sense. *Outrider* had dropped back into realspace close enough to the contents of the Pit that they were practically kissing the asteroid field. If the cruiser’s gravity well had hit them a few seconds sooner, they might have hit something big enough to hurt. Bad.

He pushed the thought down and focused on the display. A slowly rotating planetoid the shape of an egg and the size of an old-style generation ship lay several hundred clicks

off their port bow. It was moving lazily across the general flow of rocky traffic, rolling on its long axis. In a split second, he'd made his decision. They'd hide behind that and use it to guard their flank while they made their getaway.

He manhandled the steering yoke hard to port and hit the ion drives hard. The *Outrider* leapt toward the egg-shaped planetoid, nosing down slightly in anticipation of dropping beneath the great rock.

When they were close enough that the bulging flanks of the planetoid filled the forward viewport, there was a resonant ping from the proximity sensors and Eaden sat bolt upright. "Target dead ahead!"

"And up!" Leebo screeched through the intercom. A barrage of laser fire erupted from the *Outrider's* cannon emplacement at the upper horizon of the planetoid. Dash looked up and felt his blood run cold. Over the close horizon of the great gray egg loomed the bow of an Imperial light cruiser, its laser ports glowing red. Leebo's useless salvo had pattered harmlessly against its heavy shielding.

Dash thrust the steering yoke forward. The ship plummeted in response, accelerating as she dived beneath the planetoid. A trail of laserfire from the Imperial ship lit up her wake.

"What are you *doing*?" cried Leebo.

"Proving that size isn't everything!"

Dash continued to accelerate, giving the *Outrider* even more juice as they passed beneath the long axis of the planetoid and began ascending. The cruiser was five times bigger than the *Outrider*, which meant it was, at minimum, at least five times less maneuverable. By the time the captain figured out what Dash was doing and was able to turn the ship or order up a new firing solution, the target would be gone.

He hoped.

The *Outrider* described a perfect semicircle in the void of space, pressor beams providing maneuverability in the vacuum. It sailed around the planetoid upside down relative to the cruiser and whizzed over it toward the Maw.

"I need a quick course adjustment," he told his navigator, then spared a second to glance at the rearview screen. As he had hoped, the Imperial captain had read his move as an attempt to flee and had started to turn his ship in anticipation of pursuit into the Pit. He was still swinging to port as the *Outrider* streaked away in the opposite direction, toward the cluster of black holes.

"I sometimes think," said Eaden, as his webbed fingers played over the instrumentation, "that you are a certifiable madman. I assume you want a course that the Imperials will be loath to follow."

"I want the Imperials to think I've chosen death over dishonor."

The Nautolan gave him a sidewise glance. "You may well have done just that."

"Cute. Range to the rim of the Maw?"

"Two-point-three light-hours and closing."

Dash's gaze swept the tactical display, taking in the diffuse rims of the gravity wells, depicted in the display as broad, glowing bands of faded orange. If they eluded the cruiser, and went to hyperspace at the right moment and dived into the Maw at just the right angle, they could, with more luck than anyone had any right to expect, use their superluminal velocity to skip them along the outer edge of the region like a flat stone across a lake. Theoretically, anyway. *If* the gravitational waves generated by the various collapsed masses didn't muck up their navigation or suck them out of hyperspace again. *If* they could maintain a safe course through the complicated orbital arabesques being performed by the singularities. *If* they could get far enough from the Imperial's gravity generators to make the jump in the first place.

Eaden pointed out these various risks with maddening calm, and Leebo chimed in over the comm with even more maddening hysteria. Dash shouted them both down.

“As much as I hate to quote an adversary,” he said, “remember what Han says in situations like this?”

“Enlighten me,” Eaden replied. It was, Dash thought, hard to believe that an amphibious humanoid could manage so dry a tone.

“Never tell me the odds.”

The navicomp beeped, and he punched the ion drives. Hard.

TWO

I LOVE TO Watch Your show, and will always come Back for more. I'll be Coming For about the tenth time to see You At Your Next Concert. —a Die-Hard fan

Javul Charn stared at the holographic message that hovered in the air before her face. On the surface it looked just like all the other fan mail she'd gotten in this packet, but her gut told her it wasn't fan mail at all. It was a warning.

Reading it over for the second time, she used the tip of her finger to select the oddly capitalized words from the text and drag them to a separate line, wondering how it had gotten past Kendara Farlion, her road manager and professional worrywart. Dara was used to seeing quirky holomail, but quiriness usually had a pattern to it.

This wasn't a pattern.

Javul looked at the finished sentences hovering before her eyes: *Watch Your Back. Coming For You At Your Next Concert. Die-Hard.*

Was that last just a throwaway line or something more? A clue, perhaps?

At your next concert, the message said, but that didn't guarantee that something wouldn't happen before then. Her next concert was a little over a week away on Rodia,

and would kick off a tour that would take them all the way to the Core Worlds, ending on Alderaan.

Panic fluttered beneath Javul's breastbone and she felt suddenly, unutterably alone. Beyond the door of the luxurious cabin on her equally luxurious private yacht, the *Nova's Heart*—named after her first holo-album to sell ten billion copies—her entourage and crew went about the hundreds of daily tasks that were integral to producing and maintaining her seemingly endless cycles of live concerts, holocasts, personal appearances, and travel. And yet—here, in her private sanctum, no less—someone had managed to breach the battlements of her life.

A slender arm the color of burnished bronze thrust over her shoulder, its index finger pointing at the curt warning still hanging in the air. "Chaos Hell, JC! What the blazes is *that*?"

Javul only just kept herself from falling out of her chair onto the carpeted deck. "Blast it, Dara! Can't you make some noise when you enter a room? Can't you *ping*?" She killed the message and swung around, catching the crest-fallen expression on the other woman's face.

"Since when do I have to ping to come into your office? And—hey—language? You talk like that in front of a holocam, and your name will be mud in households from here to the Rim."

Javul gestured helplessly. "I'm sorry, but you scared the fr—" She swallowed. "You scared me."

"I'm not surprised. Who sent that?"

"Sent what?" Javul said innocently.

"Too late. I saw it. *Watch your back*? What's up with that? I didn't see *that* in your mail."

"It was part of a longer communication. There were capitalized words that spelled out this—message."

"Warning," Dara said.

Javul worried her lower lip with her teeth, reluctant to admit that she'd come to the same conclusion. "I don't

know that *warning* is—”

“Oh, it is. Trust me on this one, JC.” Kendara’s dark violet eyes were huge. “You have a stalker. What remains to be seen is how serious he, she, or it is.”

A stalker. There—the word had been spoken, and made real. *Okay. Deeeep breath.*

“Yeah. Looks like it,” she said. “This ... this isn’t the first one of these I’ve gotten. There was one in the batch of holomail after the previous concert, too. Remember the black fire lilies?”

“Do I? Yeah, I should say I do. You mean, that wasn’t a compliment?”

Javul shook her head, remembering the rain of gleaming black, pungently fragrant blooms that had fallen all around her and her entourage as they’d ascended the landing ramp of her yacht after an appearance on Imperial Center. “I think that was a warning, too. He wanted me to know the sort of thing he could arrange.”

“He?”

“I’m assuming—the messages are anonymous.”

“I see. Then all that stuff about cultural relativity and how the black lilies were especially prized by the Elom as —”

“I made it up. I didn’t want you guys to ... you know.”

Kendara put her hands on her hips and glared down at Javul, one bright orange curl falling over her forehead. “Yeah, I know. You didn’t want us to know your life was in danger. Which is kinda—what’s the word I’m searching for? Oh, yeah—*stupid*. Of course, I’m just your road manager, the head of your entourage. What good’s an entourage if you won’t let us take care of you?”

“I can’t believe you’d leave me out of the loop on something like this. I’m not just your road manager. I’m your best friend. I’m the one who’s been pulling you out of scrapes since we were teenagers. Do I have to remind you of the lengths to which obsessed individuals will go? Do you

remember any of our so-called adventures on Tatooine? That Zabrak spacer who thought you'd make the perfect little wifey. That guy who wanted to buy out Chalmun and set you up as the house chanteuse? The stormtroopers who —"

Javul raised her hands against the volley of words. "You're right. Of course, you're right. I should have said something before. But ... well, at first I was thinking it was just an overzealous fanboy and then ... I don't know. I figured if the guy was on Coruscant—I mean, Imperial Center—and we were leaving ..."

"Yeah, well, apparently he's taking his show on the road, too."

The truth of that statement made Javul's throat tighten. She clasped her hands together in her lap, flexing her fingers to make the rainbow stones inlaid into each nail glitter and flash. "So now you know. What do you think we should do?"

Kendara tilted her head to one side in thought. Then she said, "Two things. One, I'd split us into two travel parties. Second, I'd hire bodyguards."

"Okay on the splitting up—but bodyguards?"

"Yeah. Steely-eyed, laser-toting, massively intimidating bodyguards."

Javul shook her head. "I don't know, Dara. It's already freakishly hard to keep a low profile in this business, and if we contract with a security company, we increase our footprint, our baggage ... and the number of people who have to have oversight."

"I'm not thinking of hiring from a security firm."

"Then where am I supposed to come by these steely-eyed, laser-toting ... characters?"

A smile curved Kendara Farlion's lips and her teeth showed, white and even in her face. "I never thought I'd say this, but there are advantages to being from Mos Eisley. I know *exactly* where to look for that kind of character."

THREE

LEEBO OBJECTED TO the idea of jumping to hyperspace at the very edge of the Maw. Vociferously.

“Stop shrieking like a stuck mynock and secure the weapons battery,” Dash ordered, while inwardly kicking himself for ever thinking that having a droid whose subroutines included a fear of mortality that bordered on paranoia was in any way a good idea. Especially subroutines so deeply embedded in its firmware that it would require major restructuring to root them out, and would likely leave Leebo the cybernetic equivalent of a ripe purnix.

Still, at times like these it was hard to see that as a downside ...

To Eaden, Dash said, “Give me a mark at ...” He checked the tactical. “Point-oh-three.”

“A bit close.”

“You think? Leebo, prepare countermeasures.”

“You want me to jettison some junk, boss?”

“Yeah, but *prepare countermeasures* sounds more professional.”

“They are continuing to fire on us,” said Eaden.

“Good. In a moment, they’re going to think they got lucky.”

“Mark,” said Eaden dubiously.

Dash adjusted their attitude and increased their speed again. The tactical display tracked the cruiser's last shot. The ship shivered as it glanced off her shields.

"Release countermeasures."

"Junk away."

In the rearview screen, Dash saw the debris field spread across their wake in an arc as gravitational waves and eddies tugged it this way and that. A second later the *Outrider* began to fight him, the yoke pulling at his hands as if she were yearning to be at the heart of one of the singularity fields—which, in a manner of speaking, she was. He gritted his teeth harder and began to count: "One-one-hundred, two-one-hundred, three-one-hundred, four-one—"

"Mark point-oh-three."

Dash yanked back on the yoke and accelerated, yet again, hauling the ship out of her dive into a shallow reverse arc. They were about as close to superluminal speed as they could get without jumping to hyperspace. The Maw pulled at them like an undertow, drawing the little ship toward its crushing depths. The *Outrider* quivered; the quivering became a steady vibration that increased until the vessel shuddered as if caught in the throes of a seizure.

"Our port engine is approaching failure," said Eaden quietly, his dark gaze on the internal sensor display. Unlike the tactical readouts, those were working just fine.

Blast. Why couldn't it have at least been the central drive? That could go belly-up without causing instability, even if they lost some thrust by using just the peripherals. Cursing steadily, Dash wrenched at the yoke, flipping the ship over by ninety degrees and—he hoped—increasing their arc.

"Port drive intermittent."

He could feel that as a series of tiny bumps punctuating the trembling of the ship. There was a moist tickle between his shoulder blades. He was sweating. The realization made him sweat harder. Perspiration stood out on his forehead

and began to trickle from his hairline down the sides of his face. He didn't dare spare a hand to whisk it away—and if they didn't pull out of this climb into free space in the next several seconds it wouldn't matter. The drive would fail and they'd go into a spin. But if he cut the drive they'd be sucked into the Maw.

Unless ...

"Kill the failsafes. We're going to hyperdrive."

"We are too close—"

"I know! *Do it!*"

"We are headed into Wild Space."

"*I know! Do it!*"

Eaden cut the hyperdrive's failsafes. Dash activated the drive. Nothing happened.

Dash glared at the Nautolan. "I said kill the failsafes!"

"*I did.*"

"Then what the hell is—"

"Clearly, we have sustained damage."

"Great. Go to secondary drive."

Eaden shunted the power to the backup hyperdrive. It ramped up quickly—more quickly than was strictly safe, especially in this situation—but it still felt like a long, miserable year to Dash. He felt his navigator's gaze on him.

"We are in jeopardy of—"

"*I know* what we're in jeopardy of," Dash snarled, his own eyes never leaving the power-up gauge on the console. The second the drive came fully online, he activated it.

The ship seemed to hesitate for an instant—an illusion, but terrifying nonetheless—then the stars blurred comfortingly and they leapt out of realspace and away from the Maw and into the Wild.

"We-e-e-ell," said Leebo's voice through the com. "That was a *lot* of fun. Please tell me we won't be doing it again in the near future. Or, for that matter, the far—"

"Hey! A moment of congratulations is in order, okay?" Dash relaxed back on the steering yoke and took a moment

to wipe sweat from his forehead and brush his hair back. "We just foiled an Imperial ambush, escaped certain death and ..." He checked the chrono. "*Hah! And* cut point-three-three-three parsecs off the Kessel Run."

"Except," said Eaden, "that we are headed *away* from Kessel ... and Nal Hutta."

Dash made a dismissive gesture. He felt exhilarated and lightheaded. "No problem, we'll drop out of hyperspace as soon as we're out of this bad neighborhood, then set course for Nal Hutta. We'll be ahead of schedule *and* earn enough to get the drive fixed twice over."

Eaden was staring morosely at the control console. "Alas, I think not."

"And why is that?"

As if in response, *Outrider* dropped suddenly and emphatically out of hyperspace, stranding them at the edge of the Wild.

"Because," said Eaden, "our secondary hyperdrive has also expired."

A cursory examination of both drives showed that there was no hope of swiping enough working parts from one to repair the other. In the end, they were left with no choice but to patch up the ion engines and make the nearest port at sublight speed, which would take—

"Thirty-two-point-six Standard hours," Eaden announced after consulting the bridge navicomp. "But there is no repair facility there."

So much for the nearest port. Dash stared, unfocused, at the sparse points of light beyond the viewport. "And Nal Hutta?"

"Forty-four-point-seven."

Dash did some quick calculations. With the Imperials patrolling the well-used smuggling corridors, trying to make Nal Hutta on ion power alone was chancy. It severely limited their ability to escape another trap.

"What'll it take to get to Tatooine?"

“Roughly thirty-six hours. Why Tatooine?”

Why, indeed. Tatooine was the lint-stuffed belly button of the universe, but—

“Because that’s where Kerlew is. And Kerlew knows these drives inside out. He’s the only mech-tech I trust to mess with *Outrider’s* innards.”

“Humans,” observed Eaden, “are so sentimental.”

“They’re soft in the head, is what they are,” observed Leebo dryly from his post in engineering. “You realize, of course, that the cargo will have to be shipped on to Nal Hutta on a different freighter, which means we’ll have to share the take with another space jockey. I mean, who knows if we’re going to have any creds left after that to even get this bucket fi—?”

Dash killed the feed from Leebo’s comlink, cutting him off mid-rant. “Well, what are you waiting for?” he asked Eaden. “Set course for Tatooine.”

FOUR

THE BAD NEWS was that the *Outrider* was going to be in spacedock for a while. The worse news was that it was going to cost them. And since they were now going to have to farm out the cargo delivery to another spacer, it might eat up all their profits. Then, of course, there was the difficulty of finding someone in Mos Eisley who was (a) trustworthy, (b) in need of quick credits, and (c) willing to take freight to Nal Hutta in the middle of a particularly nasty bit of business between the Jiliac and Besadii clans—mostly orchestrated by the ever-scheming Jabba.

To that end, Dash and Eaden left the ship berthed in Docking Bay 92 behind Spacers' Row and made their way to Chalmun's Cantina, just off Kerner Plaza. Few actually called the place Chalmun's Cantina. It was simply the Cantina or the Mos Eisley Cantina, with emphasis on *the*. There were other cantinas in Mos Eisley, but of them all, Chalmun's was the largest and the easiest to lose oneself in. This, when one was doing business that was less than legitimate, was a plus. Chalmun's possessed a warren of booths and small back rooms for private conferences. And, of course, a back door and a cellar retreat that led to yet another escape route.

Dash was not in a good mood when he and Eaden stepped down from the cantina's foyer into the noisy main

room, but he plastered a false smile on his face and gave the room a once-over, scanning for familiar faces. He saw quite a few, but only a handful were pilots he'd trust with their cargo. Most of the patrons, in fact, were aging Podracers, recognizable for the most part by their various honorary badges. Which, among other things, entitled them to free drinks.

"Must be a convention in town," Dash muttered. "Eaden, how about you take the left side of the room. I'll take the right. We'll shmooze a little bit—see if anyone's looking for a quick turnaround."

The Nautolan fixed him with an eloquent maroon stare. "I do not ... what was that word? 'Shmooze.' "

In the many months he'd been working with the Nautolan, Dash had yet to arrive at a definitive list of all the things Eaden considered beneath his dignity. "How do you know you don't do it? Do you even know what it means?"

"Whatever it means, I don't do it. I will ask likely candidates if they are in need of a cargo and are willing to take it to Nal Hutta. That's all."

Dash raked his fingers through his thick hair and sighed. *Probably not a good idea to tell him that's a textbook definition of shmooze.* "Okay, look. Let's at least make sure we're in the same starlane when it comes to what we're looking for."

His partner gave him another impenetrable look. "Free of current commitments and desperate for credits?"

"And trustworthy. Don't forget trustworthy. It's bad enough we're losing the full commission. If whoever we hire to take it to Nal Hutta is dishonest ..."

Eaden Vrill surveyed the cantina. Then he turned his oversized eyes back to Dash with a blink so exaggerated it used both sets of eyelids, *and* produced an audible *click*—the Nautolan equivalent of an eyebrow raised in irony.