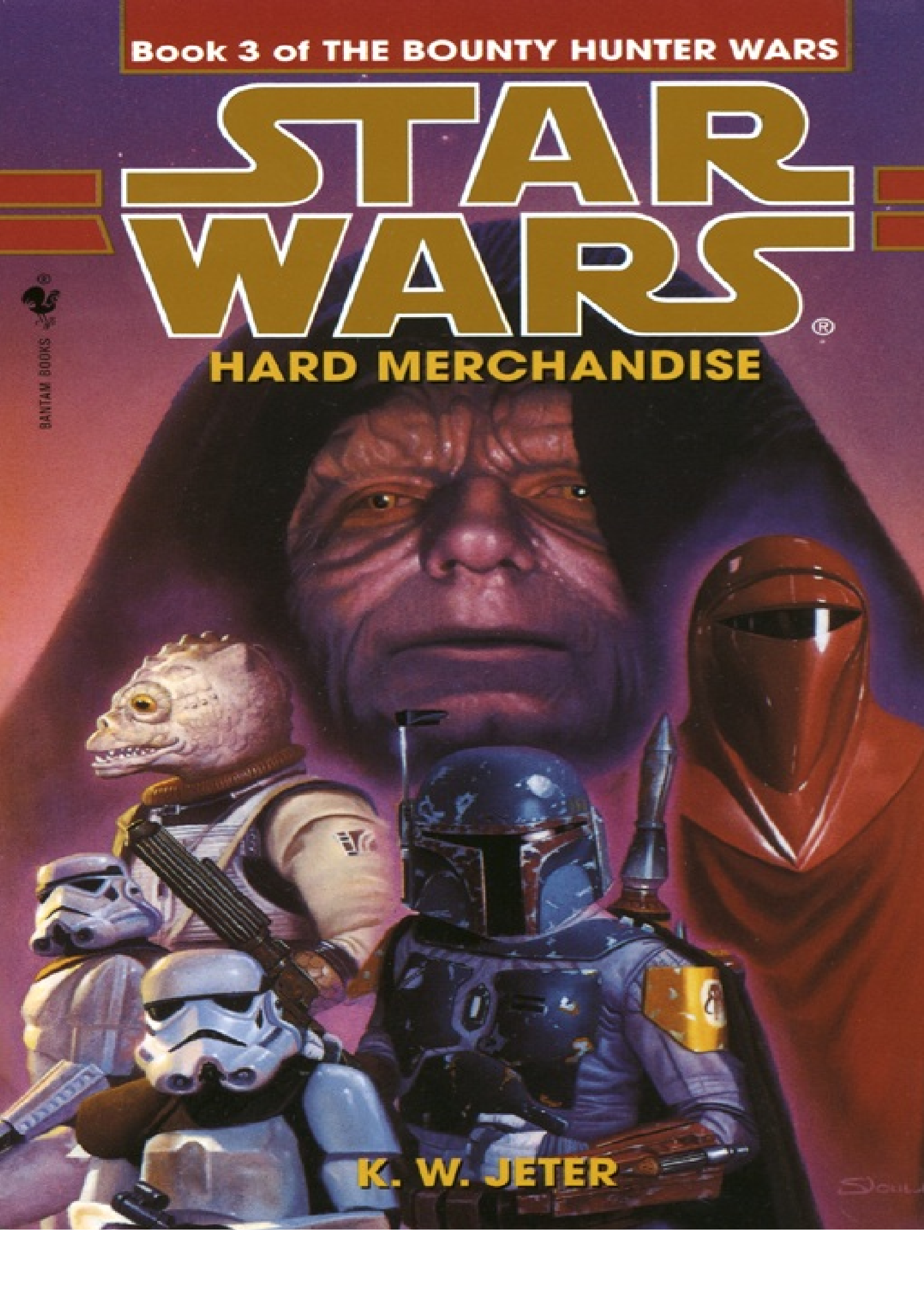


Book 3 of THE BOUNTY HUNTER WARS

STAR WARS®

HARD MERCHANDISE

BANTAM BOOKS



K. W. JETER

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STAR WARS®

THE BOUNTY HUNTER WARS

BOOK THREE

HARD MERCHANDISE

K. W. Jeter



BANTAM BOOKS

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To Mark & Elizabeth Bourne

and Austin Lawhead

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Introduction to the Rebellion Era

Introduction to the New Republic Era

Introduction to the New Jedi Order Era

Introduction to the Legacy Era

Star Wars Novels Timeline

NOW ...

(DURING THE EVENTS OF STAR WARS:

RETURN OF THE JEDI)

Two bounty hunters sat in a bar, talking.

“Things aren’t what they used to be,” said Zuckuss morosely. As a member of one of the ammonia-breathing species of his homeworld Gand, he had to be careful in establishments such as this. Intoxicants and stimulants that produced feelings of well-being in other creatures often evoked a profound melancholy in him. Even in a high-class place that supposedly catered to all known physiologies—the soothing, programmed play of lights across the columned walls, the shifting spectra that were supposed to relax weary travelers’ central nervous systems, struck Zuckuss as crepuscular and depressing as the faded hopes of his youth. *I had ambitions once*, he told himself, leaning over the tall, blue-tinged glass in front of him. *Big ones. Where had they gone?*

“I wouldn’t know,” said Zuckuss’s companion. The droid bounty hunter 4-LOM sat across from him, an untouched drink—perhaps only water—in front of him. A mere formality: the drink had been taken away twice already and replaced with exactly the same thing, so the charges could be rung up on 4-LOM’s tab. That was the only way that nonimbibing constructs such as droids could make themselves welcome in any kind of watering hole. “Your attitude continued 4-LOM, “implies a value judgment on your part. That is, that things were better one time than they are now. I don’t make those kinds of judgments. I merely deal with things as they are.”

You would, thought Zuckuss. This was what he got for hooking up with a cold-blooded, cold-circuited, at least—creature like 4-LOM. There were plenty of excitable droids in the galaxy—Zuckuss had run into a few—but the ones that were attracted to the bounty hunting trade all shared the same vibroblade-edged logic and absolute-zero emotional tone. They hunted, and killed when necessary, without even the tiniest acceleration of electrons along their inner connectors.

The bar’s soft, dirgelike background music—it was supposed to be soothing as well, with harmonic overtones of almost narcotic languor—made Zuckuss think of his previous partner, Bossk. The Trandoshan bounty hunter had been cold-blooded, literally so, but one would never have guessed it from the way he’d carried on.

“Now *that*,” said Zuckuss with a slow, emphatic nod, “that was *real* bounty hunting. That had some *passion* to it. Real excitement.” He extended the retractable pipette from the lower part of his face mask and sucked up another swallow of the drink, though he knew it would only deepen and darken his mood. “We had some good times together, me and Bossk ...”

“That wasn’t what you said when you agreed to become partners with me once more.” 4-LOM’s photo-optical receptors kept a slow, careful scan around the bar and its other occupants, even as the droid kept up his end of the conversation. He talked for no reason

other than to avoid drawing attention to himself and Zuckuss as they waited for their quarry to make an appearance. “Value judgments aside, the exact record of your statement is that you had had enough of Bossk’s way of doing business. Too much danger—if that’s what you mean by ‘excitement’—and not enough credits. So you wanted a change.”

“Don’t use my own words against me.” Zuckuss knew that he had gotten what he had asked for. And what could be worse than that?

“Mourn the old days if you want,” said 4-LOM after a few moments of silence had passed. “We have business to take care of. Please direct your waning attention toward the entrance.”

Worse than dealing with Boba Fett, grumbled Zuckuss to himself. At least when you got involved with Fett, you were assured that you were face-mask-to-helmet with the best bounty hunter in the galaxy, someone who had plenty of reason for taking such a high-and-mighty attitude. Where did 4-LOM get off, lording it over him this way? If it hadn’t been for some stretches of bad luck, and a few unfortunate strategic decisions, it would have been the droid that had been looking to hook up with him again, rather than the other way around. Though they had been partners before, and for a lot longer than Zuckuss had been hooked up with Bossk, the relationship between them could never be the same. Back then, 4-LOM had even saved Zuckuss’s life, when he had been dying from his ammonia-breathing lungs having been exposed to an accidental inhalation of oxygen. The two of them had even made other plans together, of working for the Rebel Alliance in some way ...

Those plans hadn’t worked out, though. Their time as members of the Rebel Alliance—double agents, actually, since they had kept secret their new allegiance to the Rebel cause—had been occupied with one significant operation: an attempt to snatch from Boba Fett the carbonite slab with Han Solo frozen inside it, before Fett could deliver the prize to Jabba the Hutt. The plan, using several other bounty hunters as unwitting dupes, had had disastrous results. It hadn’t succeeded, and 4-LOM had needed a complete core-to-sheath rebuild to get back on his feet. *And*, mused Zuckuss, *he wasn’t the same after that*. This idealism that had led 4-LOM to join the Rebel Alliance had all but evaporated, replaced by his former cold-spirited greed. Zuckuss supposed that came from hanging out once again with the other bounty hunters; he had felt their mercenary natures rubbing off onto him as well.

Plus there was one factor that both of them hadn’t counted on when they had joined the Alliance. A factor that made all the difference in the universe—

Being a Rebel didn’t pay.

At least not in credits. And there were still so many tempting targets all through the galaxy, the kind of hard merchandise that a smart, fast bounty hunter could get rich from. Like the one that Zuckuss and 4-LOM had come here to get.

Zuckuss took another sip of his drink. *Triple agents*, he thought. *That must be what we are now*. Neither he nor 4-LOM had ever formally renounced allegiance to the Rebel Alliance, but they had both been taking care of their own business for some time now.

Moodily, he shook his head. He’d have to think about all the rest of those things some other time; right now, there were more pressing matters at hand.

Zuckuss did as he’d been instructed by 4-LOM. The entrance to the bar was the other direction, in back of 4-LOM, that the droid bounty hunter couldn’t scan without cranking around his head unit. Bright laughter, some of it as high-pitched and sharp-edged as breaking glass, and a tangled whirl of gossiping conversations sounded in Zuckuss’s ears as he lifted h

gaze toward the entrance's fluttering circumference. Beyond it, a sloping tunnel led up to the surface of the planet and its night sky filled with a chain of pearl-like moons. Smaller and more avid orbs dotted the length of the entrance tunnel; those were the eyes of the tiny ergovore creatures that scuttled and darted in and out of the soft, trembling crevices.

As a way of keeping weapons out of the establishment, metal detector units would have been both useless and insulting; the bar catered to a clientele that not only included independent droids such as 4-LOM, who could pay their way handsomely enough, but also any number of the galaxy's most aristocratic and stiff-necked bloodlines. From the rims of his own large, insectoid eyes, Zuckuss could spot some of the galaxy's richest and most glittering denizens, devoted to spending their vast inherited wealth in as ostentatious a manner as possible. For many of them, their weapons were ceremonial ornaments, dictated by fierce custom and the privileges given to their rank; to have asked them to divest of even the smallest dagger or low-penetration blaster would have been an insult, expiable only by the death of the establishment's proprietor, a stub-fingered Bergamasque named Salla C'airam. The only acceptable alternative, preserving their honor and the bar's decorum, was to ask them to hand over the power sources for their blasters and similar high-tech weapons, thus limiting the damage and potential loss of life to what could be achieved with inert metal. C'airam kept the ergovores in the entrance tunnel hungry enough that their sensitive antennae were at constant quivering alert for the emanations from even the smallest power cell, no matter how well hidden; their flocking and chittering toward any they detected was a sure giveaway of anyone trying to violate the house rules.

All of which meant that the blaster holstered at Zuckuss's hip was useless at the moment that was an uncomfortable feeling for him. It was little consolation that everyone else in the bar was similarly disarmed. He would have preferred the usual setup that he encountered at the watering holes in which he more often hung out, where everyone including the bartenders was armed to the teeth. *Then you know where you stand*, thought Zuckuss. *The other stuff's too tricky.*

"How much longer?" He leaned forward to ask the question of 4-LOM. "Until the merchandise is supposed to show up?" He didn't have much patience for waiting, either. He hadn't become a bounty hunter in order to sit around waiting.

"His arrival is precisely fixed," replied 4-LOM. "Such precision of movement and timing is nearly the equal of my own; in that, I admire the creature. Especially given that there is a price on his head, a bounty that it is our intention to collect. Many other sentient creatures, given those circumstances, would try to make their comings and goings erratic, to vary their movements in such a way as to frustrate pursuers in determining their target's patterns of behavior. But he has confidence in the precautions that he has taken, including the limiting of his public recreational activities to this establishment." 4-LOM rested his hands unmoving on the table. "We shall soon determine if the merchandise's confidence is rewarded with a continuation of freedom."

There was no point in arguing with a droid such as 4-LOM. One might as well have had a conversation with the tracking systems aboard a standard pursuit ship. Even worse, Zuckuss knew that 4-LOM was correct; there had been a good reason for arriving at this place so far ahead of their quarry, getting set up and letting the minutes pass until the moment of action came. He knew all that; he just didn't care for what he knew.

If only ... Zuckuss kept an eye on the bar's entrance and allowed his thoughts to slip back into brooding about the past.

If only the old Bounty Hunters Guild hadn't broken up. If only its successor organization—the short-lived True Guild and Guild Reform Committee factions, hadn't fallen apart with the speed of a core meltdown. Those were big ifs, Zuckuss knew, especially when it was taken into account that the main reason the Guild and everything that came after it had disintegrated so rapidly and thoroughly was the basic greed and irascibility that lay at the center of every bounty hunter's heart—or whatever a droid like 4-LOM had instead.

That was the real reason. Zuckuss took another sip of the drink in front of him. *Boba Fett was just the excuse.* There were plenty of bounty hunters, former members of the vanished Guild who blamed Fett for everything that had happened. And it was true, up to a point, that Boba Fett's entry into the old Bounty Hunters Guild had been the event that had brought about the organization's disintegration, and that had put every creature in it at the throat of those he had previously called his brothers. But Zuckuss knew that Boba Fett had been no more than the key in the lock that had let free all the forces of avarice and conspiracy that had been bottled up inside the Guild for so long, getting stronger and more malignant all the while. It was amazing that the Bounty Hunters Guild had even endured as long as it had, given the irascible and hungry natures of its members; that was a tribute to the organizational skills of its final leader, the Trandoshan Cradossk. He had probably been the only creature in the galaxy ruthless and clever enough to have kept a lid on the Guild's rank and file.

We did it to ourselves, thought Zuckuss glumly. The drink, and the ones before it, had done nothing to lift his spirits. *Now we have to live with the consequences.* He knocked back the soiled dregs at the bottom of the glass.

"You know what?" Zuckuss let his thoughts turn into spoken words. "It's a cold, hard galaxy we live in."

4-LOM gave him a typically unemotional droid glance. "If you say so."

Nothing that the Rebel Alliance could do was likely to change that, either. The Rebels didn't have a chance of winning, anyway, not against the massed strength of the Empire and all of Palpatine's deep, enfolding cunning. In the darker corners of the galaxy, where surreptitiously acquired information was bought and sold, traded in whispers from one furtive creature to the next, rumors had been heard of a gathering of the Imperial forces somewhere out near a moon called Endor—like a fist clenching together, into a hammer that would crush the Alliance forever, and end once and for all its crazy dreams of freedom. And now, the galaxy's bounty hunters were without the Guild that had preciously enforced professional relations among its members—the Hunter's Creed had at least kept them from murdering one another outright in the course of pursuing business. Small, upstart organizations had sprung up in the power vacuum created by the old Guild's destruction, but they were still too weak to create order among such naturally violent and greed-driven creatures. Most hunters were still on their own, friendless except for whatever partnership they could forge with one another. Zuckuss had been partners with different bounty hunters before, even while the Guild had been going through its ugly process of disintegration. He had even been partners with Boba Fett, on more than one occasion—but somehow, he had never come out any the better for it. Typically, Boba Fett wound up getting what he wanted after, and all the rest were lucky if they were still alive afterward. Doing business with Fe

was a recipe for disaster.

Truth to tell, though, Zuckuss's other partnerships hadn't gone much better. Whatever his personal feelings about 4-LOM, he could swallow those easily enough, given that the two of them had actually been putting credits into their pockets since hooking up. They seemed to have complementary skills: Zuckuss operated on instinct, the way most organic creatures were capable of, and 4-LOM possessed the cold logic of a machine. What had made Boba Fett such a fearsome individual in the bounty hunter trade was that he had all of those capabilities, and more, inside a single skin.

"Here he comes—"

Zuckuss's musings were interrupted by the soft-spoken announcement from 4-LOM. Even without facing the entrance, the droid bounty hunter had been able to detect the sudden flamboyant appearance of their quarry, the presently free creature they planned on turning into hard merchandise and a hefty addition to their credit accounts.

"A round for everyone, innkeeper!" The booming voice of Drawmas Sma'Da filled the bar like the rumble of thunder over the planet's horizon. Zuckuss looked up from his drink and saw the immense, befurred, and caparisoned form of the most notorious gambler and oddsman in five systems, spreading his arms wide. The gemstones studding Sma'Da's pink manicured fingers sparkled in a multicolored constellation of wealth and extravagance; his broad, thrown-back shoulders were swathed in the soft fur pelts of a dozen worlds' rare species. The artfully preserved heads of the animals that had died for his adornment, with black pearls for eyes, dangled over a belly of wobbling girth. "If I'm in a good mood," shouted Sma'Da, "then *all* should be so lucky!"

Luck was a preoccupation with Drawmas Sma'Da. As it was with Zuckuss and every other sentient creature in the galaxy: *If I had his luck*, thought the bounty hunter, *I'd be retired by now*. Sma'Da had been fortunate not only in the placing of his bets, but clever as well, in that he had virtually created an entirely new field of wagering. The flamboyant gambler had been the first to cover wagers on the various ups and downs of the struggle between the Empire and the Rebel Alliance. No military conflict was too small-scale, no political infighting too inconsequential, for Sma'Da to make odds, accept bets—often on either side of the outcome—then pay off and collect when the particular event was over. By now, his "Invisible Ineluctable Casino," as he called it, stretched from one end of the galaxy to the other, a shadow of the actual war going on between Emperor Palpatine and the Rebels. No matter who won, either on the battlefield or the database of wagers, Drawmas Sma'Da came out ahead: he raked off the house percentage on every bet placed, win or lose. All those profitable little bites mounted up to an impressive pile of credits, one reflected in Sma'Da's own ever-increasing girth.

Two humanoid females, with the kind of large-eyed, mysteriously smiling beauty that made the males of nearly every species weep with frustration, draped themselves on either side of Sma'Da's capacious shoulders, as though they were the ultimate ornaments of his success and wealth. They moved in synch with him, or almost seemed to float without walking, so ineffable was their grace; the tripartite organism of Sma'Da and his consorts moved into the center of the establishment, like a new sun rearranging the orbits of all the lesser planets it found itself among.

The proprietor Salla C'airam, all bowing obsequiousness and fluttering tentaclelike

appendages, hurried toward Sma'Da. "How good to see you again, Drawmas! It's always so long between visits!"

Sma'Da had been in the bar just the previous night, Zuckuss knew. The proprietor was carrying on as though he and the gambler had been cruelly separated for years.

A crowd of sycophants, flatterers, favor-seekers, gold diggers, and those who derived some deep spiritual benefit from basking in the radiance of accumulated credits, had already formed around Sma'Da. Signaling to the bar's waiters and serving staff, Salla C'airam led the way to the highly visible table that had been kept in readiness for just such distinguished personages. Sma'Da's jowly face, split by a gold-toothed smile, beamed above the crowd as he shifted, like the swell of an ocean tide, toward the other side of the bar. A banquet equal to both Sma'Da's appetite and credit accounts had already been laid out by the swiftly darting waiters; crystalline decanters, filled with exotic offworld liqueurs and roiling with low-level combustibles, towered above platters of meats spiced with cellular-suspension enhancements.

"There's enough in front of him to feed an Imperial division." Zuckuss kept the gambler and his entourage in sight from the corner of his eye. If the expensive viands had been converted back into credits, the sum would have gone to feed several divisions. He could see Sma'Da's oddly delicate hands, pudgy folds welling around the wide bands of his rings, picking at the delicacies, playfully stuffing the choicer morsels into the smiling mouths of the consorts at either side of him. "Eventually," mused Zuckuss, "he'll implode, from sheer mass and density, like a black hole."

"Unlikely," said 4-LOM. "If creatures could suffer such a fate, that's what would have happened to Jabba the Hutt. His appetite was many times greater than this person's. You save that for yourself."

"I know." Zuckuss slowly nodded. "I was just trying to *forget* about anything I might have seen at Jabba's palace." As with every other mercenary type in the galaxy, he had spent some time in the employ of the late Huttese crimelord. Jabba had been involved in so many shady dealings throughout the galaxy that it would have been hard for a bounty collector not to hook up with him at some point. Rarely, though, had any of them profited by it; a successful association with a creature like Jabba the Hutt was one that you survived intact.

"Anyway," continued 4-LOM, keeping his emotionless voice low, "don't waste time worrying about our target's state of health. He just has to live long enough for us to collect the bounty that's been posted on him."

A burst of laughter and bright, chattering voices came from the crowd at Drawmas' Sma'Da's table. All eyes and attention in the bar had been drawn to the gambler from the moment he had entered. Zuckuss felt a bit more secure because of the noise and the general diversion, as though it had made him and 4-LOM briefly invisible. With someone like Sma'Da in the room, no one would be watching them.

"It's ready." 4-LOM made the simple, quiet announcement. The droid bounty hunter leaned forward slightly, passing a small object underneath the table to Zuckuss. "Time to put our plans into action."

Time was always the crucial factor. Despite his complaints, Zuckuss knew exactly why they had had to arrive at the bar so much earlier than their target. Some preparations require precisely measured amounts of time, things readied in silence and stealth, even if right under the inquisitive eyes of a bar full of ignorant onlookers. *They don't need to know*, though.

Zuckuss with a measure of satisfaction. *But they will.*

He took the object from 4-LOM's hand, carefully minimizing his actions so that anyone glancing in this direction would have no clue of what might be happening beneath the table. The rest of the preparations were swiftly completed; there was no need for Zuckuss to watch his own hands going about their work. With this kind of equipment, so essential to a bounty hunter's trade, he could have performed the necessary operations with his large eyes completely blindfolded.

"Okay," said Zuckuss after a moment. He leaned back, chancing a quick peek under the table's surface. A tiny blinking red light indicated that his part of the preparations had been completed satisfactorily. "Looks good to me."

4-LOM gave a slight nod, a humanoid gesture that he had picked up somewhere along the way. "Then I suggest you proceed."

It's always up to me, grumbled Zuckuss to himself as he pushed back his chair and stood up. No matter who he had for a partner, somehow he always wound up doing the dirty work.

"Excuse me ..." The crowd around Drawmas Sma'Da's table had grown even larger and denser, just in the short while that Zuckuss had been getting ready. He shoved and wedged himself through the press of bodies, the din of their excited words and laughter clattering in his earholes. "Pardon me ... I've got a message for the esteemed Sma'Da ..."

The blinking dot of red light that Zuckuss had checked under the table with 4-LOM was safely hidden inside his close-fitting, equipment-studded tunic. A couple of quick, sharp blows from the points of his elbows right to a few midsections of the closely packed crowd enabled him to work his way right up to the front of Sma'Da's table. He gave a slight, formal bow as he found himself confronting the gambler over the trays of picked-over delicacies.

"A message?" Drawmas Sma'Da was well known for his alert attention to voices from the crowd. "How interesting. I wasn't expecting any such; these aren't my usual business hours." The gambler's eyes were barely visible through the rounded folds of flesh, pushed upward by his exuberant smile. "But," he continued with an expansive wave of his grease-shiny hands, *might* be interested in hearing it. If it's *important* enough."

Sma'Da's words hardly counted as a witticism, but the smiles on the faces of his escorts widened, and his flatterers in the assembled crowd broke into loud, appreciative guffaws.

"Judge its importance for yourself." Zuckuss gazed back into the gambler's fat-swaddled eyes. "The information in it comes from Sullust."

The smile on Sma'Da's own face didn't diminish, but what could be seen of his eyes grew brighter and more avarice-driven, like glints of razor-edged durasteel. "'Sullust'? That doesn't sound any chimes in my memory." He tilted his head to one side, as coyly as possible for something so massive. "Who is this Sullust you speak of?"

At Zuckuss's back, the laughter and the hubbub of voices had died away. They knew what the name meant—the bar was exactly the sort of crossroads where information about Imperial and Rebel comings and goings would be traded.

"Not *who*," replied Zuckuss, "but *where*. And I think you already know that." Sma'Da had based his entire gambling enterprise upon rumors and secrets, the tiny scraps of information that enabled him to calculate odds with such precision. "Don't you?"

"Perhaps so." Sma'Da's golden smile gleamed even more dazzlingly. "But only a fool turns down an opportunity to learn more. Dear things—" He turned to his female companions and

either side of him, one after the other. “Amuse yourselves elsewhere for a little while. I need a moment alone with this *interesting* person.” He fluttered his beringed paws at the crowd. “Make way, make way.” Pouting, the females detached themselves and floated away. The sycophants and other assorted hangers-on took the cue as well, dispersing while whispering among themselves and keeping watch on the gambler from the corners of their eyes. “There said Sma’Da as Zuckuss sat down beside him. “Much more private now, wouldn’t you say?”

“Adequate.” Zuckuss still didn’t feel entirely at ease in such public surroundings. Proper bounty hunting, he felt, was best done in remote areas or in the depths of interstellar space where it would have been just him, the target, and a high-powered weapon pointing in the target’s direction. *That’d wipe the smile from this one’s face*, Zuckuss thought. He glanced over at the table he’d left; 4-LOM was sitting as placidly as before, not even seeming to be interested at all in the action that was about to come down. Zuckuss turned back toward Sma’Da. “I was pretty sure that a creature in your line of business would be interested in news from Sullust. You’re probably already taking in bets on it.”

“Oh, I might.” The dangling animal heads bobbed as Sma’Da shrugged his broad shoulder. “It’s hard, though, to get any of my regular clientele to put down their credits, one way or another. The reports that have circulated, concerning the Imperial buildup near the moon of Endor, have made a great many creatures nervous. It’s one thing to bet on a minor battle here or there, a mere skirmish or a Rebel raid on an Imperial armaments depot, that sort of thing; quite another to place a wager on what could very likely be the end of this great game.” Sma’Da heaved an immense, fat-quivering sigh. “If that should be the case—Emperor Palpatine should indeed quash the Rebellion once and for all—how I shall miss the glorious days!” He shook his head, as though already immured in regret over a vanished past. “The Rebel Alliance has brought the radiant aspect of hope to every corner of the galaxy; and where there’s hope, there’s risk-taking. And then ...” Sma’Da’s smile reappeared, even slyer than before. “There’s wagering. And that’s always profitable, for someone like me.”

The gambler’s words gave Zuckuss a measure of cold comfort. *He’s no different than me*, he thought Zuckuss. Not that he had expected anything different; most of the galaxy’s denizens, in Zuckuss’s estimation, spent all their time looking out for Number One, namely themselves. If he had ever believed otherwise, he might have been tempted to stay with the Rebel Alliance. But he was certain that idealism was a rare trace element in the universe’s composition, whereas greed was as ubiquitous as hydrogen atoms.

“I like profits as well,” said Zuckuss. One of the waiters had brought another drink, shimmering amethyst in color, and had placed it in front of him; he didn’t touch it. “That’s why I sought you out.”

“Good for you.” Sma’Da gave an appreciative nod. “And good for me, if whatever information you’ve brought with you should turn out useful. The more one knows, the easier it is to make odds. Though mind you”—he peered closer at Zuckuss—“it’s hard to take me by surprise on these things, anymore. There’s not much I haven’t heard about what’s been going on near Endor; I have excellent sources for all kinds of gossip and rumor.”

“I’m pretty sure this is something you haven’t heard before.” Zuckuss reached into his tunic.

“Ah.” Sma’Da put the tips of his glittering fingers together. “My pulse races with anticipation.”

“How’s this, then?” Zuckuss pulled out a blaster pistol and set its cold, hard muzzle against Drawmas Sma’Da’s forehead. “You’re coming with me.”

He had the satisfaction of seeing the gambler’s eyes widen for a moment. Then they all vanished again, from the upwelling pressure of Sma’Da’s expansive grin.

“That’s very funny. How amusing!” Sma’Da drew his hands apart, enough to clap them together again in appreciation. “Everyone—please observe!” He called out loudly to the crowd in the bar; eager faces swiveled in the direction of the table. “To what lengths creatures go merely to provide me with a few fleeting moments of amusement!” His laughter boomed against the walls, as though to frighten the play of colors against their surfaces. “Bringing in and waving around a blaster, in the one place it’s sure to be useless! Not even a power source for it!”

The laughter was contagious; Zuckuss could hear it sweep through the establishment like a wave breaking over and carrying away the staff as well as the patrons. Their bright, barking noise mounted louder, approaching some critical mass of hilarity. Zuckuss glanced over at 4-LOM, in the center of the establishment’s space; the droid bounty hunter was the only one not laughing. 4-LOM sat and waited with machinelike patience, knowing what was to come.

“You poor fool.” Drawmas Sma’Da hadn’t bothered to pull away from the blaster placed against his brow; he obviously wanted all the onlookers to relish the joke to its full. “Did you think I’d be somehow frightened by a lump of dead metal? Or did you not even notice what happened when you came in here, what little piece of that weapon was taken away from you by our good innkeeper’s minions? Really—” With one pudgy hand, he dabbed away the tears that had managed to squeeze past the folds surrounding his eyes. “It’s just too good.”

“Even better than you think,” said Zuckuss. He shifted the blaster slightly away from Sma’Da’s head and squeezed the trigger. A coruscating bolt of energy shot out and blew away a section of the bar’s ceiling, charred fragments and hot sparks raining down on the upturned faces of the crowd. “This weapon’s live.”

Sma’Da had instinctively dived when the blaster bolt had scorched past the side of his head. His immense girth had toppled the table, sending a cascade of liquor and the remains of the banquet cascading across the floor. Crockery and crystal decanters shattered, the fragments gleaming like transparent teeth imbedded in the wetly gleaming disorder. A few of the bar’s patrons still looked stunned and disbelieving; some of the sharper-witted ones had rushed for the exit and were now scrabbling to get past one another and up the narrow tunnel to the surface.

“Let’s go.” Zuckuss reached down with his free hand, grabbed Sma’Da’s trembling elbow and pulled the gambler to his feet; he had to lean back to counterbalance Sma’Da’s great weight. “There’s some creatures who are ready to pay a nice pile of credits for the privilege of having a talk with you. A *long* talk.” And probably not a pleasant one, judging from the panicked look on the other’s face and the fear-induced quivering that shook this mass like a small planet’s seismic activity.

The bar’s proprietor came rushing up, pushing his way past the remaining crowd. “What’s the meaning of this?” Salla C’airam was nearly as agitated as the gambler caught in Zuckuss’s grip. “It’s an outrage? It’s impossible! It’s—”

“It’s business.” Zuckuss diverted the blaster’s aim for a moment, away from Sma’Da and toward C’airam. That was enough to stop him in his tracks. C’airam’s tentacles drew short

and wrapped themselves tightly around his body. “You’ve already got a mess here.” Zuckuss used the blaster to point to the sodden, trampled-upon—and expensive—garbage on the floor. “You can either start cleaning it up ... or you can join it. Your pick.”

C’airam’s floppy, seemingly boneless appendages settled lower, a sure sign in his species of wanting to avoid a violent confrontation. “I do not know,” he spoke with measured sulkiness, “how you managed to get a power source for your weapon into these premises. It’s strictly forbidden—”

“Sue me.”

“If any of my staff here were involved ...” The gaze of the proprietor’s gelatinous appearing eyes, nearly as large as Zuckuss’s, swept menacingly across the waiters and bartenders. “If I should discover any complicity, any treachery on their part ...”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Zuckuss. He pushed the trembling mass of Sma’Da ahead of himself. “They’re off the hook.” He didn’t feel like sharing any of the credit for this job with nonbounty hunters; the little bit of action, the deep, warm feeling of empowerment that came with drawing a live weapon on a fat, blubbing piece of merchandise, had given his spirits a considerable lift. With the gambler’s quivering bulk ahead of him, Zuckuss stopped just beside the table at which his partner 4-LOM had remained sitting throughout all the commotion that had taken place. “Speaking of your staff”—Zuckuss turned, swiveling the muzzle of the blaster back toward C’airam—“you’ve got the usual service droids in your kitchen, don’t you?”

C’airam gave a puzzled nod.

“Fine. Go have one of your other staff pull the motivator out of one of ’em. A standard FV50 unit will do nicely.” Zuckuss raised the weapon’s muzzle a little higher. “I suggest you have them hurry. I might not have the same resources of patience that you do.”

On hasty orders from C’airam, one of the bar staff scuttled back into the establishment’s kitchen and returned only seconds later with a double-cylindrical object in his hands.

“Thanks.” Zuckuss took the motivator from him, and then shooed him away with a wave of the blaster. “Don’t move,” he warned Sma’Da—needlessly. The gambler, face now shiny with sweat, looked incapable of anything beyond involuntary respiration. Keeping the blaster in one hand, Zuckuss set the motivator down on the table, then swiftly—he had practiced this step before coming to C’airam’s bar—unlatched the access panel just below the back of 4-LOM’s head unit. “This should do it ...”

“Don’t forget the red feedback-loop clip.” Even without a working motivator inside the bounty hunter droid, 4-LOM retained enough low-level auxiliary power to maintain consciousness and interactive communications. “Make sure you’ve got that in-phase before you power up the major thoracic systems.”

“I know what I’m doing,” Zuckuss replied testily. With just one hand, it took a few moments longer to get the circuits aligned properly. “You’ll be up and running in a minute.”

4-LOM’s immobilized state had been a necessary part of the plan; otherwise, the droid could have taken a more active part in rounding up Drawmas Sma’Da. The most essential item, though, had been making sure that Zuckuss had had an operative blaster pistol to work with. That had meant getting a power source past the establishment’s security—impossible—or creating one on the spot. Which was exactly what 4-LOM had figured out how to do in his preparations for this job, even before he had taken Zuckuss on as a partner. With the help of

a few highly paid technical consultants, 4-LOM had designed and installed within himself a device capable of stripping out the internal circuit of a standard motivator, the primary mechanism that enabled droid locomotion, and high-grading the resulting simple power source into one both powerful and small enough to be used in a blaster pistol. Like the alchemical wizards on certain remote worlds, who claimed to be able to convert base materials into infinitely more valuable substances, 4-LOM had given himself the ability to change a dull but useful internal component to something very valuable indeed—a blast power-source, in a locale where none was expected to be.

There were only two drawbacks to the motivator-into-power-source procedure. The first was that the resulting power source would only have enough charge for a few bolts. The second was that without a motivator, 4-LOM would be incapable of any motion, either walking toward the target's table or even lifting an arm with a weapon clutched in its hand. That second problem was the main reason that 4-LOM had decided to take on a partner. Pulling this off was obviously a two-creature job. And as far as the first problem was concerned, that new partner was well versed enough in ordinary, nonbounty hunter psychology to know that a few shots would be all that was needed.

"Got it." Zuckuss slammed the access panel cover into place. "Time to get out of here."

"Agreed." 4-LOM pushed its chair back and stood up from the table. The droid reached over and grabbed Sma'Da's elbow. "I would prefer it," 4-LOM told the gambler, "if you do not show any resistance. I have ways of enforcing my preferences."

Sma'Da stared back at the droid bounty hunter with blubbering terror.

"Good," said 4-LOM. "I'm pleased you understand." 4-LOM glanced over at Zuckuss. "You see? I told you this would be an easy job."

Zuckuss nodded. "I've had worse." *Lots worse*, he thought. So far he hadn't actually risked being killed on this one. Though that might change, if he and his partner didn't hurry.

"Both of you—" The proprietor Salla C'airam had recovered enough of his composure that he was able to screech and flap several of his appendages simultaneously. "You're barred from this establishment! Permanently! Don't ever show your faces around here again!"

"Don't worry about that." Zuckuss shoved Sma'Da toward the exit tunnel. He kept everyone in the bar covered with the blaster—there were one or two shots left in its charge at the most—as he and 4-LOM hustled Sma'Da out. "The drinks were terrible, anyway."

Not until later, when he and 4-LOM were aboard the droid bounty hunter's ship, with Sma'Da safely stowed in a cage belowdecks, did Zuckuss realize that they had stiffed C'airam. Neither he nor 4-LOM had settled their drinks tab before leaving.

Serves him right, thought Zuckuss.

"So where are we taking this merchandise?" Standing in the hatchway of the cockpit, Zuckuss gave a nod to indicate Drawmas Sma'Da below them.

"I've already notified the nearest Imperial outpost." 4-LOM reached across the controls and made slow minor navigational adjustments. "They know we'll be bringing him in. And they have the bounty ready to be paid out."

"This was a job for the Empire?" Zuckuss hadn't even bothered to ask before he had agreed to hook up with the other bounty hunter. "Why would Palpatine want him?"

"Let's just say that our merchandise, in his previous role as gambling entrepreneur, was a little too accurate about setting odds for various military encounters between Imperial forces."

and the Rebel Alliance.” 4-LOM didn’t glance back as he tweaked the ship’s controls. “There’s a limit to how many times one creature can predict things like that, using nothing but intelligence and luck. At the rate that Sma’Da was calling the shots, it began to look like he might have had access to some sources of inside information. From inside the Imperial forces, that is.”

Zuckuss mulled the other’s words over. “It’s possible,” he said after a moment, “that could’ve been just luck. Real good luck.”

“If that’s the case,” replied 4-LOM drily, “then it wasn’t good luck for our merchandise at all. It was bad luck—the worst kind, in fact, since it brought him to the attention of Emperor Palpatine. Now he’s going to have a lot of explaining to do. It won’t be a pleasant process.”

Probably not, thought Zuckuss as he left the ship’s cockpit area. Even if Drawmas Sma’Da rolled over on any informants he might have had among the Emperor’s minions, the techniques that would be used to ensure that the former gambler was telling the truth would leave him a squeezed-out rag. He wouldn’t be so fat and jolly when all that was over.

The brief excitement that Zuckuss had felt during the job, when he had pulled out the live blaster and fired it off, shutting off all the onlookers’ laughter like flipping a switch, had already faded. He sat down with his back against one of the ship’s weapons lockers and defocused his large, insectlike eyes. He couldn’t help feeling that even if his bounty hunting career was going better now that he had hooked up with 4-LOM, it somehow wasn’t quite as much ... fun, for lack of a better word. Granted, that kind of amusement had nearly gotten him killed, and on more than one occasion. Still ...

His thoughts turned to memories as he leaned his head back against the locker. He remembered two other partners in particular; one of them, Boba Fett, could be anywhere in the galaxy now. There was no stopping Fett, or apparently even slowing him down. The last glimpse of Boba Fett that Zuckuss remembered had been through the narrow hatch of an emergency escape pod, just prior to being jettisoned from another ship similar to this one.

There had been another bounty hunter in that escape pod, one that had fumed with murderous anger the whole time that the pod had been hurtling through space, toward some yet-unknown destination. That had been Bossk; both murder and anger were things that came naturally to Trandoshans. But it had made for cramped quarters inside the little durasteel sphere. Tempers had flared, both his and Bossk’s, and they had kept from killing each other only by agreeing, once the escape pod came to rest on the nearest planet, that they would go their separate ways. And so they had.

He was both glad and somehow sorry that his partnership with the cold-blooded, fierce-tempered reptilian Bossk was long over. There was no amount of fun that was worth the risk that came with an association with a creature like that.

Zuckuss shook his head. *At least I’m still alive*, he thought. *That has to count for something.* He wondered where Bossk was now ...

He didn't need to kill him ... but he did. Bossk thought it was a good idea, not just to stay in practice for the bounty hunter trade, but also to make sure that no one in the Mos Eisley spaceport knew the circumstances of his arrival.

The broken-down old transport pilot, a shambling wreck with a spine bent nearly double by too many high-g landings, had come gimping up to Bossk, obviously looking for a handout. "Wait a minute," the old man had rasped, digging a yellow-nailed paw through the grey wisps of his beard as his rheumy eyes had peered closer at the figure in front of him. "I know you —"

"You're mistaken." Bossk had taken passage aboard a number of local system freighters, all under assumed names, to reach the remote planet of Tatooine. There had been plenty of times in the past when he had flown his ship *Hound's Tooth* directly here and had made no attempt at concealing his identity. Right now, circumstances were different for him. "Get out of my way." He shoved past the beggar, heading for the perimeter of the spaceport's landing field and the low shapes of the buildings beyond. "You don't know who I am."

"I sure do!" The beggar, dragging one foot-twisted leg behind himself, tagged after Bossk. They crossed the landing field, streaked with blackened char marks from thruster engine "Bumped into ya out in the Osmani system; that was a *long* while back." He struggled to keep up with the Trandoshan's quick strides. "I was piloting a shuttle between planets—that was the cheapest gig I ever worked—and you lifted one of my passengers right off the ship." The beggar emitted a phlegm-rich, cackling laugh. "Gave me a damn good excuse for blowing my schedule, it did! I owe ya one!"

Bossk halted and turned on his clawed heel. From the corner of his eye, he spotted some of the other passengers that had disembarked with him, now glancing over in this direction and though wondering what the raised voices were all about. "You don't owe me anything," he hissed Bossk. "Except a little peace and quiet. Here—" He dug into a belt pouch and pulled out a decicredit coin, then flipped it into the dust beside the beggar's rag-shod feet. "Now you've made a profit on our little encounter. Take my advice as well," growled Bossk, "and try to keep it that way."

The beggar scooped up the coin and followed after Bossk. "But you're a bounty hunter! One of the big ones! Top of the biz—or at least you were."

That brought blood up into Bossk's slit-pupiled gaze; he could feel the muscles tightening underneath the scales of his shoulders. This time, when he stopped and turned around, he reached down and gathered up the front of the beggar's rags in his clenched fists and lifted the insolent creature up on tiptoe. He didn't care if anyone was watching. "What," he said quietly and ominously, "do you mean by that?"

"No offense." A gap-toothed smile showed on the beggar's seamed humanoid face. "It's just that everybody in the galaxy knows what happened to the Bounty Hunters Guild. It's all gone, ain't it? Maybe there aren't any big-time bounty hunters left." The smile widened, like an overripe fruit splitting open in the heat of Tatooine's double suns. "Except for one."

Bossk knew which one the beggar meant. It didn't improve his temper to be reminded

about Boba Fett. “You’re pretty free with your little comments, aren’t you?” Holding the beggar up close, he could smell the encrusted dirt and sweat on him. “Maybe you should be a little more careful.”

“I’m no freer with ’em than anybody else in this dump.” Dangling from Bossk’s double fists, the beggar nodded toward the sun-baked hovels of Mos Eisley. “Everybody around here talks their heads off, however many they’ve got of ’em. Pretty gossipy bunch, if you ask me.”

“Did I?” Bossk felt the points of his claws meeting through the beggar’s wadded rags.

“You don’t have to, pal. ’Cause I’ll tell you the way it is.” The beggar appeared completely unafraid. “Place like Mos Eisley, ain’t much else to do *except* talk. Mostly about each other’s business. Maybe *your* business, once they know you’re in town. Lots of ’em would be real interested in hearing that a certain bounty hunter named Bossk just arrived. Without a ship of his own, traveling on an ordinary freighter, and”—the beggar leaned his head back to survey Bossk with one squinting eye—“not looking like he was doing too good at the moment.”

“I’m doing fine,” said Bossk.

“Sure you are, pal.” The beggar managed a shrug. “Appearances can be deceiving, right? So maybe you got some real good reason for coming here, all incognito and all. Tricky guy like you, maybe ya got some big plan up your sleeve. So you probably want to *stay* incognito, right? Is that a good guess, or what?”

Bossk forced his anger down a few degrees. “If you’re so smart, why are you a beggar?”

“It suits me. Nice clean outdoor work. You meet lovely people, too. Besides, it’s only a part-time thing for me. It’s a good cover for my real business.”

“Which is?”

“Finding things out,” said the beggar. “In a place like Mos Eisley, somebody like me is just about invisible. It’s like being the plaster on the walls. So when creatures don’t notice you, you don’t know you’re even there, you can find out some interesting stuff. Stuff about other creatures—like you, Bossk. I didn’t just *recognize* you, like pulling something out of my own personal memory bank. I knew you were coming here to Tatooine; I got friends all throughout this system and out on the freighters. They let me know you were heading this way. We kinda keep an eye on interesting characters like you, when they show up in these parts. Let’s face it, nobody comes to a backwater world like this, unless they got a good reason. It’s not exactly the center of the universe, you know. So it figures that *you’ve* got some kind of reason for coming here.” The beggar scratched the side of his head with a dirty fingernail. “Couldn’t be any kind of job for Jabba the Hutt—he’s dead, must be a coupla weeks now. Ain’t nothing worth bothering with out in what used to be his palace. And there’s nobody around here with a bounty on his head—and believe me, I’d know if there was.” The expression on his grizzled face turned sly. “So maybe it’s just kinda your *personal* business, huh?”

Bossk glared straight into the beggar’s eyes. “I’d like to keep it that way.”

“I’m sure you would, pal. So that’s why I was thinking, soon as I recognized you, when you came off that transport. Thinking about some way you and I could do business, like. You’ve had partners before—shoot, bounty hunters are always hooking up with each other. Guess that’s so you can watch each other’s back, huh?” The beggar showed some more of the gap in his smile. “Well, maybe you and me can be partners.”

“You must be joking.” Bossk sneered at the beggar. “What use would I have for a partner

like you? My line of work is bounty hunting, not begging.”

“Like I said before, pal, this ain’t all I do. There’s lots of other things I’m good at. One you might find really valuable. And that’s keeping my mouth shut. I’m an ace at that—for the right price, of course.”

“I bet you are.” Bossk gave a slow nod, then lowered the beggar to the black-streaked surface of the spaceport’s landing area. “But what about all the others? The ones in your little network of informants that you heard about me from?”

“No problem; they can be taken care of.” The beggar brushed off the front of his rags to little visible effect. “I’ve handed ’em a line before. All they knew was that you were heading this way, here to Tatooine. They don’t need to know whether you stopped here, or for how long. I can tell ’em that you were just passing through, on your way to some other hole in the borderland regions. Communications are so bad out in these territories, they’ll figure it just stands to reason if nobody reports spotting you for a while.”

“I see.” Bossk looked down at the beggar. “And just what is the price for this ... *service* of yours?”

“Very reasonable. Even in what appears to be your rather, um, reduced state financially, I’m sure you’ll be able to afford it.”

Bossk mulled it over for a few moments. “All right,” he said at last. “You’re right about one thing. We’re both men of business.” He didn’t want to attract any more attention to himself out here in the public zone of the landing field. “Why don’t we go on into town?” Bossk nodded toward Mos Eisley itself. “So we can talk over the details of our little partnership. Like businessmen.”

“Sounds good to me.” The beggar started walking, in his hobbled, awkward manner toward the distant buildings. He glanced over his shoulder. “I’m a little thirsty, if you know what I mean.”

“Everybody’s thirsty on this planet.” With an easy stride, Bossk followed after the beggar. He already knew just what business arrangements he was going to make.

When he was done making them, in one of the first back alleys that they came to inside Mos Eisley, Bossk wiped from his clawed hands the dirt that had stained the beggar’s neck so greasily black. It didn’t take long to do so; hardly more than the few seconds that had been required to snap the scrawny bones in the first place. Killing someone, Bossk had found over the years, was always the best way to ensure their silence.

With a couple of kicks, he pushed what now looked like no more than a bundle of rags over against the wall of the alley. Bossk glanced over his shoulder to make sure that no routine security patrol had spotted what had gone down. He had come here to Tatooine, and specifically to Mos Eisley, for the purpose of lying low and making his plans without anyone being too curious about his identity—the beggar had been right about that much. About how to conduct business with a Trandoshan, the beggar had been a little off the mark. *Too bad for him*, thought Bossk as he headed for the bright-lit mouth of the alley.

As for the suddenly deceased beggar’s network of contacts off-planet—Bossk had already decided not to worry about them. *He was probably lying to me, anyway*. The beggar could have recognized Bossk and then made up that story about informants strung through the system, all keeping an eye on bounty hunters and other suspicious creatures, just to jack up the price he had been asking for his continued silence.

Which hadn't even been all that high; Bossk knew he could have easily afforded it, without dipping too far into his stash of credits. *Things are cheaper on Tatooine*, thought Bossk. *They deserve to be.* The shade of a pair of tethered dewback mounts fell across him as he made his way across Mos Eisley's central plaza and toward the cantina. Deciding to eliminate the beggar rather than pay the shakedown had been more a matter of general principles rather than economics. If a bounty hunter let himself begin paying to keep his affairs private, he would eventually wind up paying off everybody. With that kind of overhead, Bossk knew, it'd be hard to turn a profit.

He descended the rough-hewn stone steps into the cantina's familiar confines. In a hole like this, he wouldn't have to worry about anyone sticking a proboscis into his affairs. They all know what the consequences would be. Plus, most of them had their own secrets—some of which Bossk knew a little about—so silence was a mutually desired commodity.

A few glances were turned his way, but the faces remained carefully composed, devoid of even the slightest sign of curiosity. The cantina's regulars, the various lowlifes and scheming creatures with whom he'd had innumerable business dealings, here and elsewhere in the galaxy, all responded as if they had never seen him before.

That was the way he liked it.

Even the bartender said nothing, though he remembered Bossk's usual order; he poured from a chiseled stone flagon kept beneath the bar and set it down in front of the Trandoshan. Bossk didn't need to tell him to put it on his tab.

"I'm looking for a place to stay." With his massive, scaled shoulders hunching over the drink, Bossk leaned closer to the bartender. "Someplace quiet."

"So?" The scowl on the bartender's lumpish face didn't diminish; he continued wiping off an empty glass with a grease-mottled towel. "We ain't running a hotel here, you know."

This time, Bossk slid a coin across the bar. "Someplace private."

The bartender laid the towel down for a moment; when he picked it up again, the coin had vanished. "I'll ask around."

"Appreciate it." Bossk knew that those words meant the negotiations were concluded, and successfully. The Mos Eisley cantina actually did have some chambers for rent—dark, airless holes, down beneath the cellars and subcellars where the barrels of cheap booze were stored—but only a few creatures, even among the establishment's regular habitués, knew about them. The cantina's management preferred keeping them little known, and empty more often than not; it cut down on the amount of raids and general hassles from the Empire's security forces. "I'll check with you later."

"Don't bother." The bartender slapped something down. "Here's your change."

Bossk didn't even bother to look. He palmed the small object, feeling the outline of a primitive all-metal key, and slipped it into one of the pouches on his belt. He already knew the way to the chambers beneath the cantina, down one of the narrow stairs tucked behind a crumbling stone wall.

Carrying the drink with him, he slipped into one of the booths along the far wall. It wasn't too long before somebody joined him.

"Long time, Bossk." A rodent-faced Mhingxin sat himself down on the other side of the booth's table. Eobbim Figh's long-fingered hands, like collections of bones and coarse, spiky hairs, set out a multicompartmented box with an assortment of stim-enhanced snuff powder

“Good to see you.” Figh’s sharp-pointed nails dipped into the various powders, one after another, then to the elongated nostrils on the underside of his wetly shining snout. “Hear you were dead. Or something.”

“It would take a lot to kill me, Figh.” Bossk sipped at the drink. “You know that.”

“Boba Fett is a lot. Lot of trouble.” The Mhingxin shook his tapered head. “Shouldn’t take him on. Not if you’re smart.”

“I’m plenty smart enough for Fett,” said Bossk sourly. “I just haven’t been lucky.”

Figh exploded into high-pitched laughter, a squealing gale that sent clouds of acrid snuff rising from the box on the table. “Lucky! *Lucky!*” He slapped his narrow paws beside the box. “Luck is for fools. Used to tell me that. *You did.*”

“Then I’ve gotten even smarter than I was before.” Bossk could feel the expression on his muzzle turn ugly and brooding. “Now I know how important luck is. Boba Fett has luck. That’s why every time I’ve encountered him, he’s won.”

“Luck?” Figh shrugged. “Little more than that. What I think.”

The awkward Basic of the creature sitting across from Bossk irritated him. “I don’t care what you think,” he growled. “I’ve got plans of my own. Plus, I’ve got the odds on *my* side now.”

“Figure that? How so?”

“Simple.” Bossk had had a long time to brood over the matter. “Boba Fett’s run of luck has gone on way too long. It’s got to end; maybe it’s already ended. Then it’ll be my turn.” Figh nodded slowly, as though already tasting blood seeping between the fangs in his mouth. “And it’ll be payback time for Boba Fett.”

That produced another bout of snickering laughter from Figh. “Long time coming. The payback. Not the only one—you.”

Bossk knew that was true enough. The breakup of the old Bounty Hunters Guild, for which Boba Fett had been largely responsible, had left a lot of creatures throughout the galaxy with a simmering hatred for Fett. *He hit us all, right where it hurts.* Bossk nodded again, even slower, and with eyes narrowed. *In our pockets.* The old system, under the Guild, had spread the wealth out, not evenly—Bossk’s father, Cradosk, as head of the Bounty Hunters Guild, had always done better for himself than any of his followers—but well enough that no hunter went completely hungry. All that was changed now; a lot of former bounty hunters were either dead or had dropped out of the trade, getting into other lines of work that were either closer to or further from being legal. The criminal organization Black Sun had reorganized the Empire had picked up some new recruits, as had the Rebel Alliance.

“We could’ve hung together,” sulked Bossk. “If we’d been smart.” He couldn’t—and didn’t—blame himself for that much; he had tried to keep the other bounty hunters, or at least the younger and tougher ones, together after the Bounty Hunters Guild had broken up. That had been the whole point of the Guild Reform Committee that he had put together—with himself at the head, naturally—right after he had eliminated old Cradosk, in the traditional and time-honored Trandosha fashion. *The old lizard would’ve wanted it that way,* Bossk told himself. And if Cradosk hadn’t, who cared? He was still just as dead and out of the way now.

“Smart, lucky—big ifs,” said Figh. “For you. For Boba Fett, not ifs.”

“Yeah, well, we’ll see about that.” The drink’s intoxicants had fueled Bossk’s anger. “Like I said, I got plans.”

“Plans take money. You got?”

Bossk glared at the Mhingxin, wondering just how much he knew. “Enough.”

“True?” Figh gave a doubtful shrug. “Not so heard around here.”

The murder of the beggar, whose body Bossk had left in the alley at Mos Eisley perimeter, was starting to seem pointless. Or at least pointless beyond the simple pleasure of snapping another creature’s neck in his fists. It was beginning to seem that everybody in the spaceport had a line on his financial condition.

“You heard wrong, then.” Bossk decided to bluff it out. “Use that little rodent brain of yours, for a change. The old Bounty Hunters Guild had a huge treasury stashed away, before it fell apart. Who do you think wound up with all those credits?”

Figh smiled unpleasantly. “Not you.”

“Look, just because I didn’t land here with my own personal ship—that doesn’t mean anything. I got my own reasons for wanting to keep a low profile.”

The Mhingxin uttered a common, low-slang expression for bovine waste material. “Broked you, that’s the truth. What heard, more than one mouth. Smiling and laughing, too. Nearly as many enemies, you, as Boba Fett. All that killing.” Figh shook his head, rudimentary snout whiskers fluttering. “Stepping on toes. Probably why your bad luck. Nobody wish you good luck.”

Bossk felt the urge rise in him to reach across the table and do the same thing to Figh that he had done to the beggar he had left in the alley. He restrained himself; the consequences wouldn’t have been insurmountable, but he didn’t need the expense right now of paying the bartender to take care of the mess. Plus—now that Bossk thought about it—there was a certain value to having an information source like Figh around.

“So tell me something.” Bossk leaned across the table, clawed hands folded around the drink in front of him. “Since you’ve heard so much about my state of affairs. If I didn’t get the Bounty Hunters Guild treasury, then who did?”

“Everybody knows. Not even worth charging you for.” Figh’s sneer split one side of his face. “The credits gone, and so is Gleed Otondon. Figure out.”

That jibed with everything Bossk had been able to find out while he had been making his way here to Tatooine. He could still remember the annihilating fury that had boiled up inside him when he had attempted to access the mountain of credits that had been stashed away from the vanished Guild and had found the accounts completely ransacked. Whoever had been responsible, and who now had the credits that should rightfully have been in Bossk’s pockets, had not only known the crypto-security codes for the accounts, but also exactly where banking and financial-center worlds they had been located at. Obviously an inside job: some of the accounts had been emptied just a few minutes before Bossk got to them and found them bare. So it must have been somebody who had been at the top levels of the old Bounty Hunters Guild, Bossk figured, one of his father Cradosk’s most trusted advisors, a creature that would have been in a position to snoop out the access codes and the other information necessary for locating all those hidden credits. *And stealing them*, brooded Bossk. The injustice of it still rankled. If anyone was going to steal that money, it should have been him.

Whoever it had been, though, it obviously wasn’t one of the younger bounty hunters that had gone with him into the Guild Reform Committee. None of those had had access to that kind of information in the old Guild; they had all still been trying to scrabble up the ladder

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