

AN ALL-NEW TALE

REBEL BLUFF

BY MICHAEL KOGGE



Lando Calrissian couldn't believe his bad luck. Another round of sabacc had dealt him yet another awful hand. To win the main pot and clear his debts, he needed his cards to total a positive or negative twenty-three. Right now he had a negative five—and things weren't looking like they were about to improve any time soon. It had been ten lousy deals in a row and he was down to his last credits.

He took stock of how his competition fared around the table. Old Jho, the cantina's Ithorian proprietor, remained quiet and still, except for a vein twitching along the trunk of his neck, betraying his distress. On the other hand, the young woman seated next to him, a brunette in an expeditionary jacket and baggy trousers, didn't seem at all bothered by her

cards. She took sips from her beverage and looked absently around the cantina.

Lando wagered she came from Capital City, as her face had none of the wind-cut lines of growing up on Lothal's plains, and her hands, delicate and uncalloused, spoke of office work, probably in a data center. Her eyes revealed the most, as they always did with humans. There was a roguish glint to them, a sparkle of intelligence that belied her naïve appearance. No matter how hard she tried to affect a casual indifference, she couldn't hide from Lando that her gaze kept drifting to the cantina entrance. This woman was anticipating that someone might storm in, perhaps a crazy ex-lover or bill collector. This was a woman on the run.

The final player, a Devaronian with a broken horn, showed no hint of anxiety. Nor should he have. Cikatro Vizago was the big winner so far, having collected most of the hand pots from the individual rounds. Still, it was obvious he wanted more. His nails clicked on the table's surface, fingers encroaching on the sabacc pot that, unlike the hand pots, grew in credits with every round.

"Claws off, Vizago," Lando said, "unless you're calling sabacc."

The gangster gave Lando a sharp-toothed smile that could've made him a star in a horror holo. "I might just be," he said in his thick accent. "Ready to fold?"

"You should know I don't fold. I only win," Lando said. He might have the lousiest hand of the bunch, but he'd never show it. He'd won with less.

"Then let me make this worth your while." Vizago dumped a handful of credit chits to the sabacc pot, raising the bet by a thousand.

"I'm out," groaned Jho through the translator covering his mouths. He dropped his cards into the table's suspension field which locked their face values to a total of negative nine.

"Me too," said the woman, to Lando's surprise. She didn't seem to realize that she'd folded on a strong hand. The positive eighteen she put into the suspension field might have won if she'd continued to play.

Vizago spread his fingers out on the table, stretching them. Few would have thought anything of it, but for Lando the action exposed the gangster's bluff. The Devaronian had been rapping his nails against the table throughout the game, and this brief moment of respite demonstrated a change in his mood. Mostly likely he was relieved that the woman had folded, which meant he possessed a card total lower than the woman's eighteen.

Lando touched the chits in his pocket. He had nowhere near the thousand needed to stay in the game. What he did have was a keycard to his Ubrikkian 9000. He'd recently bought the landspeeder for scouting potential mining sites on farmland he'd purchased from Vizago—and for which he still owed a chunk of credits.

He sized up the sabacc pot, significantly fattened by Vizago's contribution. The pile would more than pay his debt. And with two players out of the game, Lando liked the odds. Years on the casino circuit had taught him when to double down. In the right situation, luck could be as reliable as a trusty blaster.

Lando tossed in his keycard. "All I got."

Vizago snarled. "Oh no. Don't try to pawn off your junker on me, Calrissian."

"An Ubrikkian 9,000? That's not junk." The woman's roving eyes fixed on the keycard. "Even as parts, it's worth more than the pot. Miners are clamoring for them."

Lando gave her an appreciative nod. "The lady knows."

"Those Ubriks are a sight for sore eyes if you ask me. More like an escape pod than a speeder," Old Jho said.

"I agree." Vizago's pupils narrowed to needlepoints. "But I'll let you slide this time, Calrissian—though I pray you'll

have something left to pay me after our fun is done."

"How about the pot?" Lando said, smirking.

The sabacc table beeped, indicating commencement of the shifting phase. This was Lando's favorite part of the game, when the table's randomizer took control of the cards and transmitted signals to the receptors embedded in each. His cards began to blur and cycle through the various suits of Staves, Coins, Flasks, and Sabres, presenting brand new totals, new ways to win—and lose. Like a cosmic tease, an Idiot's Array flashed before his eyes, only to be replaced moments later by a pair of Evil Ones. Those cards themselves vanished to become something different, then something different again, offering up a cosmos of possibilities.

Lando's heart pounded. His mind speculated. While the cards kept changing, the shifting phase could end at any moment, its duration as random as its shuffle. Not knowing was the thrill. It was why he gambled. It was why he played. This was life, lived right on the edge, where one's future and fate could be determined by nothing other than pure chance.

Everyone was watching him. They would see nothing unusual. Unlike them, he'd perfected his sabacc face. Though his heart might hammer and his mind might race, on the surface Lando remained calm and collected.

When the phase ended and the cards resolved into their final ranks, his instincts proved him right again. He put his cards into the suspension field, showing an Eleven, Three, and Nine, all positive, all of Sabres. "Sabacc," he said, smoothly, as if it was to be expected. Vizago roared, pounding the table. He chucked his cards into the field. "Cheater!"

"Nope. Just my luck."

Lando reached for the pot when a loud clunk distracted him. He turned to see an IG-RM enforcer droid stationed outside the cantina's rear doorway.

"I thought we agreed your buddies weren't permitted," Lando said.

"Inside, we did," Vizago said. "And I promise, it won't come in."

It didn't need to. One of the droid's arms had been rigged into a blaster cannon. A well-placed shot could end Lando's sabacc career for good.

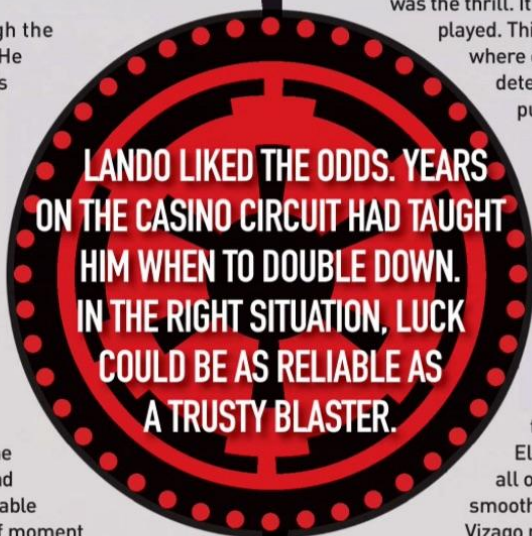
But Lando should have known not to underestimate Old Jho. "You bet it won't," the Ithorian said. Old Jho pressed a button on his belt, and a blast door whisked shut in front of the droid. "I can't stand those droids. Now get out," he told Vizago.

"Jho, come on, I just wanted to make sure everything was fair. Why don't we forget about it and keep playing, so everyone has a chance to win back their credits," Vizago said. "You'd be up for another game, wouldn't you, Calrissian?"

"Sorry, Vizago. Gotta get home. My puffer pig gets huffy if she isn't walked."

Vizago rose from the table. "How about I take *you* for a walk?"

Lando ignored him, noticing the chair next to Jho was unoccupied. "Where'd our friend go?"





ALL MERRY-MAKING AT THE BAR ENDED, AS DID CUDDLING AT THE BOOTH. VIZAGO SLUNK BACK INTO THE SHADOWS.

Jho swiveled his head. "I didn't even see her leave."

Lando scanned the cantina. A group of freighter bums made merry at the bar, while two Snivvians snuggled in a dark booth. There was no sign of the young woman.

"The sabacc pot," Vizago said. "She stole it!"

A glance at the table confirmed it was missing.

"*Karabast*," Lando swore, using a word he'd only recently learned. He should've been paying more attention. In all the commotion with Vizago, she must have grabbed the pot and slipped away.

The sudden arrival of an Imperial troop transport set those concerns aside. The gray-hulled repulsorcraft parked outside the entrance, its forward and aft gun turrets pointing menacingly at the cantina. Three stormtroopers debarked from its cab.

All merry-making at the bar ended, as did cuddling in the booth. Vizago slunk back into the shadows. The cantina became so quiet Lando could hear the clacking of the stormtroopers' armor plates as they marched inside, rifles ready.

"Can I get you all some refreshments?" Jho asked.

The squad leader, his rank indicated by the orange pauldron on his shoulder, snorted. "I should arrest you for attempting to poison an officer of the Empire. Humans don't drink alien swill."

"Sir, I've served some of the best TIE pilots on Lothal—"

"Shut your mouths, leatherneck." The squad leader gestured and the trooper behind him activated a holopad. It projected a blue hologram of the now absent young woman, except instead of the jacket and trousers she wore the garb of a government bureaucrat.

"We have reports this traitor was in the vicinity. Has she come in here?"

Old Jho hesitated, his vein bulging like a tree root. Despite the fact that the woman had robbed them, Lando knew Jho would never risk his reputation and hand someone over to the Empire.

Lando stepped forward to study the hologram. "Who is she?" All blasters immediately turned on him. "Gentlemen, please," he said, using his best placating tone. "I want to help you."

"Identify yourself," ordered the squad leader.

"Name's Lando Calrissian. Recent transplant to Lothal and loyal patriot of the Galactic Empire. You can check my record."

There was a pause as a trooper did just that. For a few seconds, all Lando heard was garbled comm traffic echoing inside the trooper's helmet. He wasn't nervous. His past might not be squeaky clean, but his datafile in the Imperial Security Bureau's computers was. Before he'd come to Lothal, he paid a slicer a princely sum to polish his ISB record to make him seem like a shining paragon of Imperial citizenry.

"He's clear, sir," said the trooper.

The blasters lowered, but only a degree or two. "Her name is Ria Clarr," the squad leader said. "Previously an analyst at the Imperial Mining Institute, until her treasonous activity."

"What'd she do? Steal some files? Embarrass a lieutenant?"

"She deleted the databases for Lothal's geological surveys."

The squad leader's blaster lifted again, and the others followed suit. "Where is she?"

"All right, all right, no need to get testy," Lando said, backing away. "Your hologram does resemble a woman I saw in here a few minutes ago. She had a quick drink, then made an exit out the way you entered."

"In what direction did she head?"

"No clue. Wasn't paying that much attention. But if I'd known she was wanted by the Empire, I would've done something. We all would've." Lando prompted Old Jho with a glance.

"Yes, yes," the Ithorian said. "I always report any treasonous activity I see."

The squad leader gave Jho a faceless stare, causing the Ithorian's vein to throb even more. Then the leader turned and walked out of the cantina, his troopers following.

"You're welcome," Lando said to the troopers. They did not respond.

Once the transport sped off, Vizago emerged from the shadows. "I hadn't realized you were so devoted to the Empire, Calrissian."

"I came to Lothal to make my fortune as a miner, not a

trouble-maker," Lando said. "But I also want my winnings. If she'd gone out the way I mentioned, she would've run smack into those stormtroopers before they got here."

Vizago glanced at the rear door, which remained shut. "Then how'd she leave?"

Lando looked to Jho for the answer. "In the kitchen, there's a door to the back lot," the Ithorian said.

Lando scowled. That was where he'd parked his Ubrikkian. And if she'd stolen the pot, she had his keycard.

He hurried through the kitchen, ignoring squeals from the Ugnaught cooks. But by the time he made it to the back lot, the spherical shape of his landspeeder was vanishing into the grasslands.

"Shouldn't have let you slide, Calrissian," Vizago said, coming up behind him.

Lando checked his chrono. It was linked to his speeder's navigation systems, allowing him to scroll through all pertinent information, from velocity to altitude to surrounding traffic and potential destinations. That final bit of data made him shudder.

"Game's not over yet. Warm up your speeder."

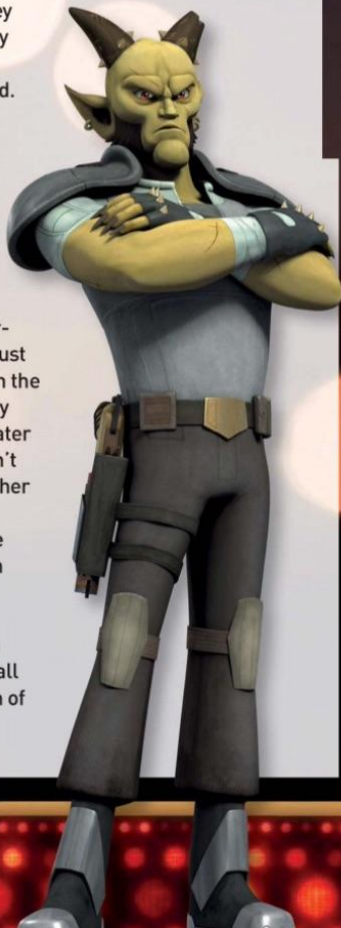
Vizago leaned over his shoulder. "You know where she's going?"

Lando looked up from his chrono. The plains dominated the horizon in all but one dark spot.

Though Tarkintown had received no official Imperial designation other than "Lothal re-settlement camp 43," everyone, even stormtroopers, identified it by its colloquial name. It had come into being when its namesake, Grand Moff Tarkin, had exercised the Empire's right of eminent domain on Lothal and ordered that all land rich in resources be seized for Imperial use. Those dispossessed of their land were forcibly resettled in a place so barren no crops could be cultivated, where even Lothal's ubiquitous grass grew sparse. This made it difficult to find a place to conceal Vizago's speeder. They had to park it a half klick away from the camp and leave the IG-RM droid behind as a guard.

Approaching Tarkintown on foot, Lando observed that it wasn't even a town, per se, but rather a collection of huts and hovels fashioned out of old shipping containers that were all huddled around the spire of a weather-beaten moisture vaporator. Rust had bored huge holes through the vaporator's shell and probably contaminated the drinking water it supplied. It also clearly didn't double as a communal refresher or pump a sanitation system. Coming to the outskirts of the camp, Lando sloshed through sludge he knew wasn't mud. He had to hold his nose—and breath—at times. Tarkintown reeked of filth and trash and all things gone to rot. The stench of extreme poverty.

"Lovely, eh?" Vizago said.



Lando said nothing. His mind was on his farm, only a few klicks away and yet a paradise compared to this. If his puffer pig ever sniffed out ore and his mining venture proved successful enough to hire a crew, he'd make sure he and his people all lived in comfort and peace. He would never be a Tarkintowner.

Lando's chrono directed them to the town's eastern edge, where they spotted the Ubrikkian hovering in standby mode behind a shanty. A man wearing a steel headband stood beside it, pressing Lando's keycard to the circular ports that ringed the capsule. When a hatch opened, the man jumped for joy and crawled inside.

"Hey—"

The noise of the Ubrikkian's micro-thrusters drowned out Lando's protests. Before he could get to the speeder, the man zoomed off into the prairie.

Vizago, meanwhile, went in the opposite direction, hurrying down an alley. Lando glanced one last time at his Ubrikkian, then followed.

In the center of the camp, Ria Clarr stood on the ledge of the moisture vaporator, besieged on all sides by refugees. Rodians, Gran, and humans alike reached and grabbed for the credit chits she doled out from her pocket like confetti.

"That infernal witch—how dare she!" Vizago drew his blaster and fired high into the air. Refugees scattered like Loth-rats, likely fearing an Imperial attack. TIE pilots were known to use the resettlement camps as target practice during patrols.

With the crowd disbanded, Vizago aimed his pistol at Clarr. "What in Malachor are you doing?"

Clarr dropped the few chits she still had and raised her hands in surrender. "Making amends."

"With my credits? I should burn a hole through your heart."

"Your memory is failing, Vizago." Lando strode forward.

"I won those credits, so I decide who gets burned and who doesn't. Put the gun down."

"Calrissian, I'm done with your tricks."

Lando walked into the path of Vizago's blaster. "Shoot me or get paid. What'll it be?"

Sneering, the Devaronian lowered his pistol. Lando then faced the woman and studied her for the second time. The strange glint in her eyes he should've recognized. He'd seen it in a number of acquaintances he'd recently made.

He bent down and picked up a credit chit. "Amends for what?"

"For Tarkintown," she said. "I'm the reason this exists."

"That's ridiculous," Vizago said. "Everyone knows Tarkin ordered this camp built."

"Based on my reports," Clarr said. "My research for the Mining Institute concluded that a rich vein of ore lay below these people's farms. I personally convinced the Grand Moff that mining would be worth the effort. At the time, I believed the Empire was a force for good, and would help lift Lothal out of poverty and obscurity."

"What changed your mind?" Lando asked.

"Discovering the lies behind Imperial propaganda. Like most, I was aware this was a poor area, but only when I flew out here for a follow-up survey did I realize how bad conditions had become. For the longest time, I agonized over what to do, knowing I had been complicit in what was happening here. But I was afraid of doing anything myself—I was afraid of what the Empire would do to *me*—until I heard the Holonet broadcast by that boy, calling everyone to stand up against Imperial tyranny. I thought, if a kid wasn't afraid of defying the Empire, I shouldn't be either."

She was referring to Ezra Bridger, the youngest of those

same acquaintances who had helped Lando acquire his puffer-pig. Not soon after, the group had hacked into the Imperial communications network and spread a message of resistance to anyone with a Holonet receiver.

It was an inspiring message, Lando had to admit. But he preferred to stay out of galactic politics. Dealing with black market gangsters like Vizago caused him enough headaches.

"So you wiped all your research and fled Capital City," Lando said. "But why stop at Old Jho's? There are better places to hide in than in a sabacc game."

"She wanted the credits!" Vizago said.

Clarr shook her head. "The sabacc pot was an opportunity I couldn't pass up. But I came to Old Jho's searching for someone like you," she said, looking at Lando.

"You need the services of a gambler?" Vizago asked.

"A rebel."

Lando chuckled and gave her the same generous smile he'd given a thousand ladies whom he'd refused for one reason or another. "I'm humbled by your request, truly. But revolution is the one game I don't play."

"That's what I once thought," Clarr said, "but if you don't get involved, it's a game you're going to lose."

Lando's chrono beeped. He glanced at his wrist. The tracker showed his Ubrikkian had turned around and was traveling toward Tarkintown at high velocity. A second icon blinked behind it in pursuit and was gaining so fast, Lando didn't need to enlarge it to know what it was.

"I recommend hiding your true colors at the moment. We're about to have company," Lando said, "of the Imperial kind."

The ping of lasers punctuated his warning. Speeding toward them from the west was Lando's Ubrikkian, with its aft section on fire. The man with the steel headband sat in the cockpit, turned upside down as the craft spun and arched right toward the camp.

Lando dove to the ground for cover.

Seconds later, the man's joyride ended in a ground-shaking crash.

A scorching wave of heat passed over Lando, singeing his clothes and his back. He held his breath until he couldn't any longer, waiting for the smoke to clear.

Finally he stood, coughing. Other than some minor burns, he'd suffered no injuries. His Ubrikkian, however, had experienced a horrible mechanical death. It lay twisted around the moisture vaporator, pieces of its fuselage strewn about. The man in the cockpit did not move.

"You again," said a familiar, filtered voice.

The stormtrooper squad leader leaned out of the hatch of the Imperial troop transport as it emerged from the smoke. He leapt down to the ground, joined by two troopers. All aimed their blaster rifles at Lando and Vizago, and were backed up by the transport's forward laser turrets.

"Why, hello," Lando said, regaining his breath.

"We should get a drink sometime, seeing we run in the same circles."

"Where is she?" the squad leader barked.

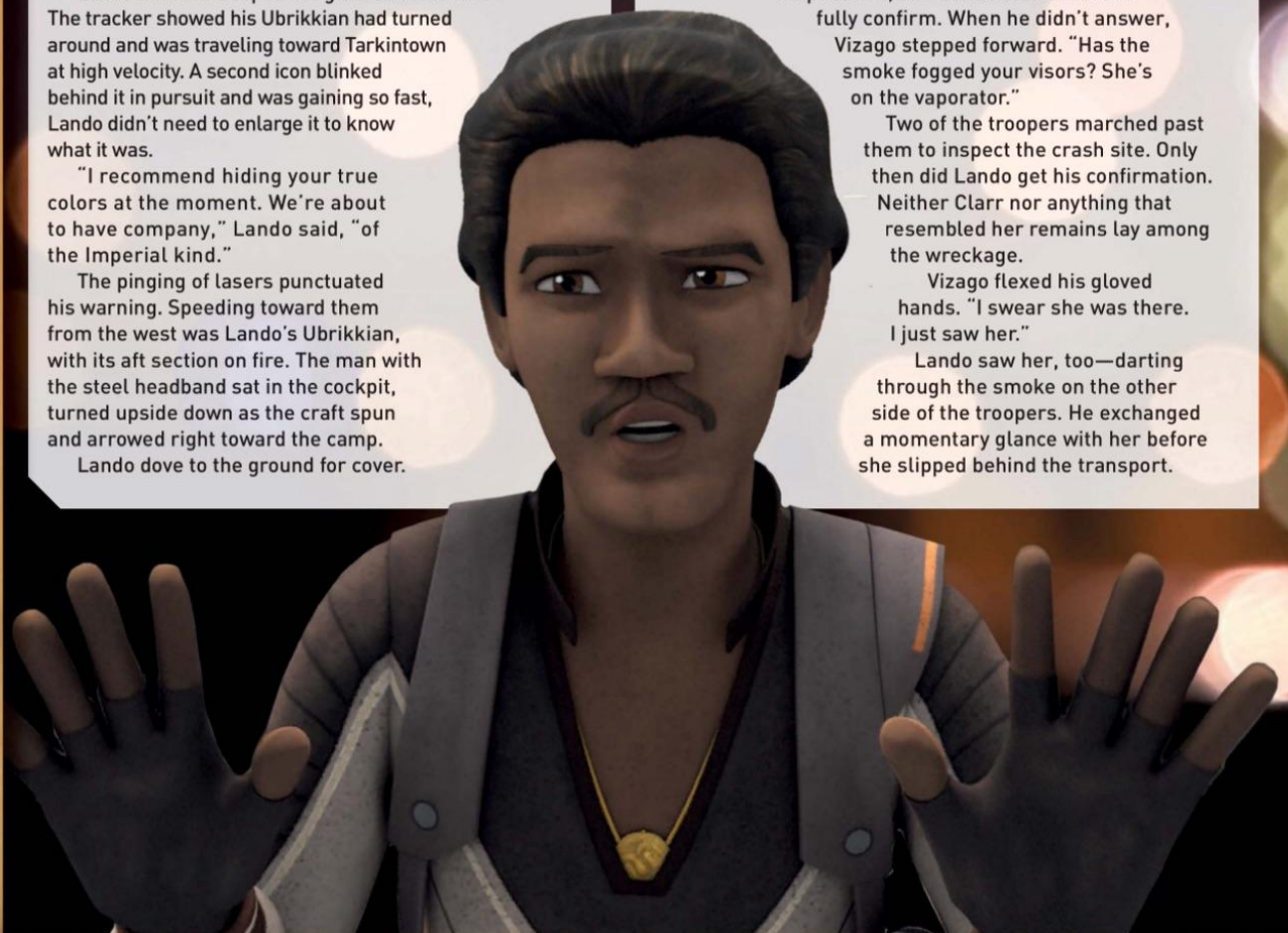
The question carried with it a certain implication, one Lando was unable to fully confirm. When he didn't answer, Vizago stepped forward. "Has the smoke fogged your visors? She's on the vaporator."

Two of the troopers marched past them to inspect the crash site. Only then did Lando get his confirmation. Neither Clarr nor anything that resembled her remains lay among the wreckage.

Vizago flexed his gloved hands. "I swear she was there. I just saw her."

Lando saw her, too—darting through the smoke on the other side of the troopers. He exchanged a momentary glance with her before she slipped behind the transport.

THE STORMTROOPER SQUAD LEADER LEANED OUT OF THE HATCH OF THE IMPERIAL TROOP TRANSPORT AS IT EMERGED FROM THE SMOKE. HE LEAPT DOWN TO THE GROUND, JOINED BY TWO TROOPERS. ALL AIMED THEIR BLASTER RIFLES AT LANDO AND VIZAGO.



The two troopers returned to their commander, pressing their rifle barrels into Vizago and Lando's sides. "If you don't tell us the truth we will tear this town apart," the squad leader said, "after we reduce you to ash."

The Devaronian hissed at Lando, as if ready to bite. "Tell him—tell him that was the truth!"

Lando stared at the squad leader, focusing on the helmet's curved lenses, which concealed the trooper's real eyes. Though Lando couldn't get a read on those eyes, he reminded himself that they were there, that beneath the white plastoid armor there was a person, regardless of how faceless and robotic he or she seemed. And people could be bluffing.

"Order your troopers to lower their rifles and I'll tell you where she is."

The squad leader leaned close to Lando. "We don't bargain with scum. This is your last chance."

Lando couldn't see Clarr, but he had to trust to luck that she knew what she was doing. All he had to do was keep the troopers' attention off the transport for a couple more moments. "That wouldn't be smart, sir. My partner and I are worth more alive than dead." He put on his most serious sabacc face. "You see, we're rebels."

Rebels. That single word proved incendiary. They ignited the squad leader's eyes under the lenses, widening their pupils, making them at last visible. Lando had never seen such hate.

"What? I'm not a rebel," Vizago said. "He's lying, I tell you, he's lying!"

"Stuncuff them," the squad leader said. "We will bring them to Agent Kallus for—"

A laser blast cut short the squad leader's order. He was pitched forward into Lando, and both smacked the ground. Lando rolled to his knees, but the squad leader remained face down, a gaping hole in his back.

The two other troopers whirled and opened fire on the transport. The body of the transport pilot dangled out the hatch, yet the transport's forward turrets continued to move. Clarr must have infiltrated the vehicle and taken control of its weaponry.

But managing two targets proved difficult for someone unskilled in military tech. Her next rounds missed. The stormtroopers didn't. They concentrated their fire through the transport's open hatch. Within seconds, its turrets stopped rotating.

The troopers re-trained their rifles on Lando and Vizago. "You'll pay for this, rebel scum," both said.

Lando waited for the inevitable blaster bolt to come. There was no way to bluff out of this one.

A rock struck one of the troopers' helmets. Surprised, the trooper and his comrade wheeled around—into a hailstorm. Refugees came out of their hovels and threw whatever objects they had at hand, from bent hydrosplanners to shattered glowrods. While most everything bounced harmlessly off the troopers' armor, the impact was enough to take them off their feet. They never got back up. The refugees descended upon the troopers, their fear replaced by a seething fury. The crackle of nerf-prods silenced the troopers' screams, but the refugees continued their attack. They would have their revenge.

Lando hastened away from the mob, heading toward the Imperial transport. He dreaded what he would find in there, but he had to go. Clarr had risked her life to save his, so he owed it to her to see if there was any chance he could save hers.

The stormtroopers' shots had turned the interior of the transport into a smoldering ruin. Cockpit consoles sizzled. Live conduits sparked. The piloting yoke hung from a rope of melted wire, while the gunnery controls were nothing but a blackened mess.

On the floor in the middle of all this lay Ria Clarr.

Lando stepped over to her and bent down to inspect her wounds. She'd been hit in the hip and abdomen, painful for sure, but not necessarily lethal. His dread edged to hope.

"Ria?"

When she opened her eyes and looked up at him, he offered her his most rakish grin. "Not bad for a geologist."

The glint in her eyes shone even brighter than before. "Not bad for a rebel," she said to him.

On the boarding ramp of the *Broken Horn*, Lando looked back one last time at Tarkintown. The place was nothing like the desolate camp of his arrival. Refugees hurried about between the hovels, arming themselves with blasters from the troop transport or fashioning crude weapons of their own. Directing all this was Ria Clarr, confined to a repulsor sled because of her injuries, but no less deterred in her fight against the Empire.

Lando sighed. He had pleaded with them—he'd *begged* Clarr—to board Vizago's freighter and leave Lothal, explaining that the Empire would be back in full force and wouldn't take prisoners. But no one would be swayed, least of all Clarr. Her act of resistance and the resulting victory over the stormtroopers had shaken these people out of their doldrums, given them a purpose, inspired them. Yes, Tarkintown might be a wretched, miserable place to live, but it was their home. And they would defend it, to the death if need be.

Clarr drove her sled near the ramp. She gave him a look and a smile. "Thank you. For everything."

"Sure," Lando said, unable to muster a smile of his own. "Good luck."

Entering the freighter, he almost felt guilty he wasn't staying behind. But the truth was, Tarkintown wasn't his home, and the Empire wasn't his enemy. Not yet, at least. And if that day did come to pass, one thing was certain: Lando Calrissian wouldn't count on his luck. Wise gamblers knew when to double-down, and when *not* to, particularly if the odds were stacked so heavily against them, as they would be with the Empire.

The *Broken Horn* took off, piloted by Vizago's enforcer droids. The plan Lando had hatched with Vizago called for them to be safely off Lothal for a couple weeks, so they wouldn't be swept up in any Imperial investigation.

"Hide my cache of transponders in the shed and remember to walk the puffer-pig," Lando told his protocol droid, W1-LE, over the comm. "I want her sniffing for ore."

He shut off his comlink and stood alone in the main cabin. In the viewport, Tarkintown diminished in size until it was just another light on Lothal's surface. Soon it wasn't even that.

Vizago came up beside him. "You still owe me for that land, Calrissian."

Lando fingered the few credits he had left in his pocket, the ones he hadn't bet. They weren't much, but perhaps they'd be enough, if he was lucky.

"Sabacc?" 🎲

MORE TO SAY

Star Wars: Battle to the End by Michael Kogge is out now. Del Rey's *A New Dawn* is now available in paperback.

HAVE YOU?