

# STAR WARS®

**Solitaire Adventure  
Starring Luke Skywalker™!**

A Complete Adventure Game  
set in the *Star Wars* galaxy.

## Jedi's Honor



**WEST  
END  
GAMES®**

Luke Skywalker takes on a perilous mission to find a new Rebel base.  
But his mission is interrupted when the Empire takes a young  
agitator prisoner — an agitator who may be the son of a Jedi Knight!

# STAR WARS®

## Jedi's Honor

by Troy Denning



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## **I**ntroduction

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away, a small band of heroes tested their luck — and their skill, logic and courage — against the mighty Galactic Empire.

*Jedi's Honor* allows you to test yourself with them. Join Luke Skywalker and his faithful Droid companion R2-D2 as they journey across the galaxy in Luke's X-wing starfighter. Can you find a new base for the Rebel Alliance? Can you rescue the son of a Jedi knight from an Imperial prison planet?

*Jedi's Honor* is simple to play. **DO NOT READ THIS BOOK STRAIGHT THROUGH IN SEQUENCE.** Instead, start with the section numbered 1, below this introduction. At the end of the section, you will be faced with a choice: does Luke draw his blaster or does he place his hands on the table? Each tactic tells you what section to turn to next. Make your choice,

and flip to that section number. Continue reading from there.

Simple, isn't it? There are no dice to roll, no tables to consult.

How do you choose? Well, what do you think Luke would do? What do you think he *should* do? You have all the information Luke does. You have to decide — is it worth the risk? Can he succeed? Will his decision bring him closer to his final objective?

*Jedi's Honor* is an exciting, nerve-wracking, exhilarating, fast-paced, funny, death-defying adventure. It'll have you on the edge of your seat. You are faced with tough choices — tough decisions to make. And if you choose incorrectly ...

But you must not fail! The Force is with you, and the fate of the galaxy is in your hands.

## **1**

Luke Skywalker sits with his back to the wall. A man with an Imperial bounty on his head does that. It isn't a conscious decision—it's a habit of comfort, like wearing a favorite jacket or carrying a blaster.

The entrance portal wheezes open and Luke turns his attention to the newcomers. Before the pneumatic door recedes halfway into the wall, six white shapes stalk into the room. With the dim light reflecting off their polished armor, the figures look more like wraiths than stormtroopers. Holding their blaster rifles ready to fire, they stand to either side of the entrance. A thin, silver-haired man wearing the black uniform of an Imperial general follows. The general has the narrow, pinched features of a Whelorian snake-eater. As he sweeps the room with his icy-blue eyes, malice settles on it like a caustic fog. When the general's gaze stops at Luke's face, the Rebel pilot tries to keep his expressive features still as he drops his hand to the blaster pistol strapped to his hip.

With his shaggy hair, inquisitive eyes, and sun-cured complexion, Luke appears to be a naive young man—an easy mark for the smugglers, cutthroats, and Imperial agents that infest backspace watering holes. Anyone judging this youth by his face, however, will soon regret his mistake. Behind Luke's boyish appearance lies a determined and keen mind that can draw from a surprising body of experience.

He sits in a poorly-lit hospice cafe with a tasteless bowl of undisguised protein concentrates in front of him. Thirty bipeds, varying in degree from human to remotely humanoid, also sit in the dreary cafeteria. In the far corner, five Sullustans occupy a table. They have dark, sad eyes and floppy jowls that hang from their noses like saddlebags. Their expressions betray a cynicism and callousness foreign to most faces of

their race. A solitary Twi'lek studies the Sullustans with pale eyes that betray his miserly intent. The two skull tentacles hanging from his head twist and writhe behind his back, much like the constantly flicking tail of a Togorian female. Over a dozen other races, many of which Luke does not recognize, share the room. He is careful not to stare, for that might invite attention in return which he does not desire.

Most of the room's occupants are prospectors working the Sil'Lume asteroid belt. Apparently, they do not find the bland food objectionable, for they gulp it down with relish. Perhaps they like the hospice prices more than they dislike its food. A hive of beetle-like insectoids operates the hospice. The hive charges remarkably low fees, for it produces the protein concentrates itself. Luke does not want to consider how.

Like Luke, the prospectors occupy rough benches along the outer walls. One man is an exception: human, he sits at a table in the center of the room. When Luke entered the hospice, this man was the first being he noticed. He has found himself subconsciously drawn to look at the man time after time during his meal. The human, who appears to be about five years older than Luke, has a firm chin-line, prominent features, and fiery red-brown eyes that arrest the casual observer's attention. In fact, over half the beings in the room pay more than passing attention to the solitary man. And he, in turn, smiles and nods to each being as if they are old chums sharing some noble secret.

Does the man, Luke wonders, know everybody in the room? Or does everybody know him? He carries himself like one born to lead, yet he sits alone like a humble priest. Apparently, the human is the only creature unconcerned about what comes through the door, for he faces away from the entrance. Luke envies the confidence and security implicit in the carelessness; he has been a Rebel for only a few months, but it seems like years since he has not needed to cover his back.

Since destroying the Death Star at the Battle of Yavin a few months ago, Luke has been so busy with dangerous missions that he has almost forgotten what it feels like to sleep in the relative security of a Rebel base. This latest job is the most nerve-wracking of all, for General Dodonna has assigned Luke's entire wing to solitary scouting duty.

Although the Alliance won the Battle of Yavin, Dodonna knows he has only a short time before the Empire mounts another attack. If the Rebellion is to survive, the Rebels must move their base to another location. Finding that location falls upon the shoulders of Luke and his wingmates.

So far, Luke has spent more time dodging Imperial corvette patrols than he has scouting isolated worlds. The last time he inspected an "abandoned" system, he landed on an Imperial outpost. So, Luke has decided to explore the possibilities in the Sil'Lume asteroid belt. Although far from deserted, Sil'Lume has several things to recommend it. First, the heavy mining commerce might cover Rebel military traffic. Second, literally a million planetoids occupy the same orbital plane. Even if the Empire tracks a Rebel ship to the system, they will need weeks or even months to find the base. Third, the Rebels can camouflage the base as a mining operation, conceal it in a deep mine, or disguise it in one of a hundred other ways.

But Sil'Lume does have one drawback, and it has just found Luke. "Hands on the table, boy!" the general commands. His voice carries a spiteful edge. Three stormtroopers point blaster rifles at Luke, but they clearly do not expect him to resist the general's order. The other three train their weapons on the human with the fiery red-brown eyes.

The two prospectors to either side of Luke slide away, careful to keep their own appendages in sight. One miner is a burly human with a full salt-and-pepper beard, a flushed red face, and a huge round nose. The other being Luke does not recognize; two heavy horns curl away from its sloping forehead and canine muzzle.

"I'm not going to tell you again!" the general barks.

The charismatic human nods to Luke, as if saying, "Do as he says."

- If Luke draws his blaster, turn to section 10.
- If Luke places his hands on the table, turn to section 23.

**2**

The Rebel pilot's face is set with determination. "Tol Ado it is."

"We'll go to the visitor center first," Gideon says.

"Visitor center?" Luke exclaims. He has never heard of such a thing for an Imperial prison. "Are you kidding?"

"The Parnell considers his prison the artwork," Sidney explains. "He has built the suitable display case."

"Yeah. And it's a reminder of what you can expect if you get out of line. It's a great place to go for a quick reconnoiter and planning pass."

"Okay," Luke says.

"Sidney and I'll take my *Rockcan*," Gideon suggests. "You can follow us. Two ships just might come in handy."

Luke smiles mischievously. "I don't think that would be smart," he says. "My ship's an X-wing."

Both Gideon and Sidney raise an eyebrow. Most pilots know the X-wing is the Alliance's favorite starfighter. Sidney asks, "If you came in the X-wing—"

"Don't ask the boy questions he can't answer," Gideon interrupts. "But we sure as a nova can't leave that thing here. I don't doubt Parnell will be back."

Sidney offers a plan. "40,005 Milton is close, and has many deep craters and old mines. I recently stopped there to repair the repulsor actuator. Nobody has touched its surface for decades."

"It sounds fine," Luke says. "Lead the way."

When Luke returns to his starfighter, Artoo is full of warnings and questions about the Imperial general. As he prepares for launch, Luke patiently explains what happened and that he intends to rescue Erling. Artoo pops and whistles, flashing comments across the vidscreen so fast Luke can barely read them.

"You actually like the idea?" Luke lifts off. Gideon's box-shaped prospecting scow already hovers above Henryron. "Remind me to have your motivation circuits overhauled," Luke says lightly. "Besides, you're not going."

Artoo chirps and hisses angrily.

"Because I said you're not, that's why," Luke answers. "What I'm doing is bad enough. General Dodonna would flip if you got damaged."

The Droid remains silent for a long moment, then displays a short message on the vidscreen.

"That's blackmail!" Luke exclaims. "You wouldn't dare."

The message remains.

Luke sighs. "Okay, but I'm definitely having your motivation circuits overhauled. Who ever heard of a Droid with a thirst for adventure?"

A short while later, Gideon leads the way down to a rock 30 kilometers on a side and roughly square. They descend into a small black crater, no more than 20 meters across. Lights suddenly glow on the front of the *Rockcan*. The crater is actually a deep tunnel leading into the asteroid interior. Luke admires Gideon's skill and confidence. The prospector's ship has barely two meters clearance on a side.

Finally, after three tense minutes, they reach a widening in the tunnel and Gideon turns his craft around. Luke sets the X-wing down, buckles up inside his vacsuit, then helps Artoo up the *Rockcan*'s entrance ramp.

The interior of Gideon's scow is dark without being gloomy. Like most prospecting ships, Gideon's ship consists mostly of a huge, beat-up cargo bay. The repulsor engines, slow but powerful, sit directly aft of the cargo bay. The crew quarters, which Gideon maintains immaculately but without extraneous decoration, are organized for both comfort and efficiency.

"Why you bringing that along?" Gideon demands, pointing to Artoo.

"It's a long story," Luke says. "But he might come in handy. I've used this little guy in similar situations."

Gideon grunts, unimpressed. "I don't care much for Droids, myself."

Artoo whistles sharply.

"What'd he say?" Gideon demands.

Luke shrugs his shoulders. "I can't understand him unless he's plugged in." In this case, Luke is confident that he's just as happy the Droid cannot be understood.

Gideon closes the airlock and directs Luke to a seat. A few moments later, they leave 40,005 Milton and lumber toward the Tol Ado tourist center.

*Remember that Luke left his fighter on the asteroid "Milton." He may need it later.*

• Turn to section 86.

**3**

Luke slams the X-wing hard to port and accelerates. The corvette quickly follows, firing every weapon it has. Artoo informs Luke the corvette is attempting to jam their transmissions.

"As if we can call for help," Luke mutters. Although the X-wing moves much faster than the corvette, Luke runs into a dense field of walker-sized asteroids. Barely 100 meters separate some of the boulders, and 100 meters isn't much space when you're traveling at starfighter speeds. The dense field is probably the result of a massive collision sometime in the recent past. But whatever the cause, it means Luke must slow to a crawl.

The corvette pilot, who is more familiar with the cluster, closes the distance. Two shots explode harmlessly over the cockpit, then the X-wing lurches violently as a turbo-laser bolt penetrates the shields amidships. Artoo immediately trills a damage report and flashes it on the flight computer vidscreen.

"Life support!" he exclaims. "How long do I have?"

Artoo warbles pitifully.

"That long," Luke sighs. "I guess I'd better shake this clown and find a place to set down." With that, he places full power in the forward particle shields and accelerates as much as he dares. The starfighter leaps ahead, but the corvette continues to follow closely, its sensors constantly probing for a solid target lock. Luke stops thinking and lets his instincts control the X-wing. His hands react automatically to what his eyes report. The X-wing weaves its way deeper into the maze, bouncing from one hazard to the next like a holographic pinball. Man-sized boulders bounce off the shields with terrifying frequency, and Artoo transmits warnings so fast Luke cannot read them. Turbo-cannon blasts erupt to all sides of the dodging starfighter, occasionally striking so close that the phototropic canopy darkens and blinds Luke for an instant.

A few moments later, the X-wing escapes the dense asteroid field. Luke straightens out his course and opens the throttle wide. The X-wing merely continues at its current speed.

"What's wrong, Artoo?"

The Droid flashes a message across the vidscreen. "Repulsor drive command relay disabled."

"Great," Luke mutters. "Now we're really sitting ducks. Can we accelerate at all?" He resumes dodging, but the corvette continues to close the distance between the two. For a corvette, that starcraft really moves.

Artoo beeps a negative response, then Luke's target-lock alarm sounds. The corvette's targeting computer has locked onto Luke! He quickly buckles his vacsuit and moves his left thumb to the Guidenhauser ejection seat loop hanging overhead. By pulling the loop, he will throw both himself and Artoo free of the X-wing—but he doesn't know what good that will do him so far from help.

One second later, the corvette still has not fired. Luke hazards a look at his flight computer. The corvette has erupted into a thousand pieces. A slow-moving scow travels away from the explosion area.

Luke's cockpit speaker crackles to life. "I thought those pirates were going to pin your ears back, son!"

"So did I," Luke answers. "To whom do I owe my life?"

He turns the starfighter around to face his savior. A box-like scow crawls toward Luke from the expanding ball of corvette shards. Above the cockpit, the three barrels of an ancient turbo-laser battery glow dim red.

"Gideon Smith and Sidney Shortfang, of course!" comes the reply. "Saw you in the hospice—we were one table down. We've got something here that you'd better take a look at, young fellow."

"What?" Luke asks. "Never mind. I'm in big trouble. We can't accelerate, and I've only got twenty minutes of life support."

Gideon's radio remains silent for a moment. Finally, he says, "Follow us. Sidney knows a safe hideout in range—it's 40,005 Milton, in case you get lost."

"Thanks," Luke says.

On the way to Milton, Gideon explains how they came to find Luke. After Erling Tredway's arrest, he and Sidney could not restrain themselves from going to 24 Tredway. By the time they landed, Imperials had already destroyed the entire complex. They could not find a single living being. But they did find a message chip which the stormtroopers neglected to confiscate.

After playing the chip, they decided it belonged to the Rebellion, so they took it into safekeeping. They were on their way to hide it when their sensors picked up the probing of two different military craft. Reasoning that what they heard meant a fight, and a fight meant a Rebel, they followed the probe to this asteroid cluster, arriving just as Luke broke out of the dense asteroid field.

A few minutes later, Gideon's scow leads the way down to a rock 30 kilometers on a side and roughly square. They descend into a small black crater no more than 20 meters across. The scow's lights activate and Luke sees that the crater is actually a tunnel into the interior of the asteroid. Luke admires Gideon's skill and confidence as a pilot, for the scow has no more than a meter of clearance on a side.

Finally, after three tense minutes, they reach a widening in the tunnel and Gideon stops. Luke sets the X-wing down and climbs out of the cockpit, then helps Artoo up Gideon's entrance ramp. The interior of Gideon's scow is dark without being gloomy. Like most prospecting ships, it consists mostly of a beat-up cargo bay used to haul ore to a refinery. The repulsor engines, slow but powerful, sit directly aft of the cargo bay. The crew quarters, which Gideon maintains immaculately but without extraneous decoration, are organized for both comfort and efficiency.

Gideon gives Luke the message chip, then returns to his seat, apparently unconcerned with the matter any longer. Sidney, however, watches Luke intently, his large round ears following Luke's every movement like twin radar dishes, his yellow-furred muzzle wrinkled in puzzlement.

Luke inserts the message chip into Artoo. The Droid projects a hologram of a short-haired human female in her forties. She is Mon Mothma, supreme commander of the Rebel Alliance.

"Greetings, Dena. As always, I have time only for a brief message. I trust that you understand that the brevity of our communication does not reflect the magnitude of your contribution to the Rebellion.

"My spies tell me your brother Erling's resistance efforts have begun to irritate General Parnell. We normally applaud any thorn in an Imperial governor's side, but Erling's value transcends the effect of any local rebellion. You must silence your brother before he angers Sebastian Parnell further.

"It is unfortunate that we cannot tell Erling how important he is to the Alliance. However, I must defer to your judgement on this matter.

"Farewell, and may the Force protect you and your family."

"I trust you will help us rescue the Erling Tredway?" Sidney asks.

Luke nods, astonished at the fact that Mon Mothma herself considers Erling so important to the Rebellion. He has seen the legendary leader only once, but the respect with which his commanders regard her is enough to awe him. Her message puts to rest any doubts he still feels about abandoning his current mission to rescue Erling Tredway.

"Good," Gideon says. "We'll take my *Rockcan* to the Tol Ado visitor center—"

"Visitor center?" Luke asks.

"Yes," Sidney responds. "The General Parnell considers his prison impregnable. He built the observation platform to show it off. Some claim the center's purpose is to dissuade citizens from resisting the Imperial will; others believe the Parnell considers the planet the artwork worthy of display."

"Either way, it's a good place to recon from," Gideon says. "We'll stop by and see if we can't figure a way inside. But first, I reckon we ought to patch up your X-wing—you just might be in a hurry to leave the next time you need it."

Two hours later, after repairing the starfighter enough for Luke to fly it home, they leave Milton for Tol Ado.

*Remember that Luke left his starfighter at the asteroid "Milton." He may need it later.*

• Turn to section 86.

## 4

Luke opens the throttle wide and accelerates at maximum thrust. He has a lot better chance of outrunning the TIEs than Gideon does of hitting them. The three TIEs on his tail follow closely, weaving and bobbing wildly to match his evasive maneuvers.

The Tredway asteroid rapidly grows larger as Luke approaches it. The assault shuttle still appears to be little more than a pinpoint of light hovering over what

Luke can now see is a small complex of buildings. Every second or so, four energy bolts flash into the complex from the shuttle's armament. The only answer from the surface is the fiery cloud of an explosion.

A constant stream of red energy bolts zips past Luke's cockpit, fading into the vast emptiness without effect. Luke knows it is only a matter of moments before the TIE pilots find their mark. He orders Artoo to channel 70% of the shielding power to the aft.

The Imperials have Luke in a bad position, but he is too busy to be frightened. Though he cannot fire at his pursuers, Luke constantly monitors the targeting computer, hoping to get a shot at the assault shuttle. At this range, he cannot destroy it, but at least he can give it something to think about besides bombarding helpless miners. He also varies his evasive swings and dips, for falling into a subconscious pattern is the surest way to get killed by a tailing enemy.

Three seconds later, a fiery cloud opens atop the X-wing, jolting Luke so hard his teeth ache. At least one TIE has locked onto its target. A few more close shots will overload the shields. The flight computer shows all three TIEs in killing position on Luke's tail. The Rebel pilot must shake them before they pummel his fighter into hi-tech confetti. But how?

His attempt to outrun the TIEs has failed, Luke realizes. He must rely on the X-wing's superior maneuverability to escape. He can bank into a corkscrew climb, hoping the TIEs will hesitate to follow him away from the shuttle. Or he can loop straight back at his pursuers, hoping to catch one of them by surprise. This would also put him in position to seek covering fire from Gideon.

- If Luke banks into a corkscrew climb, turn to section 20.
- If Luke loops back at the TIEs, turn to section 25.

## 5

"You're probably right, Gideon," Luke says. "But let's go to the house anyway. Whatever the Imperials want is in the house, and we only have one chance to beat them to it."

Gideon nods, then leads the way over the sand-like tailings toward the enormous mill building. The mill is over a kilometer long and rises fifty meters off the surface. From a height of four meters above its base extend twelve wide chutes clogged with inert rivers of silvery sand. They dump into a huge holding trough that runs the entire length of the building. Every fifty meters, a pump feeds the sand into a lengthy hose that carries it out onto the tailings dump. At present, the chutes, pumps, and hoses stand idle, awaiting a resumption of operations that Luke doubts will ever come.

"Are all the Tredways involved in Erling's resistance efforts?" Luke asks. The Tredway mine is a valuable strategic and economic asset. He does not understand why Parnell is destroying the complex instead of confiscating it. Perhaps the general wishes to make an example of the Tredway family. Or perhaps he suspects the family of harboring strong enough Rebel loyalties to destroy the mine themselves before allowing it to fall into the Empire's hands.

Sidney raises his long-clawed paws in an alien gesture Luke does not comprehend. “No; the mother Tredway even threatened to disown him for jeopardizing the family’s contracts with Imperial purchasing agents.”

“It doesn’t sound like she shares her late husband’s convictions,” Luke observes.

“She’s a business woman,” Gideon says. “After Axton died, she decided to let the galaxy take care of itself. Can’t blame her—Axton left her with a broken-down mine and two kids to raise. She turned it into the most profitable operation in the Belt.”

“That hasn’t protected her from the Empire,” Luke comments. After what Sidney said about Imperial contracts, the destructive attack makes no sense at all. There must be something more going on here. But what?

Gideon leads the way into the holding trough and stops at the base of a tailings chute. “Let’s climb inside. Any survivors still above ground are bound to be hiding inside, and the stormtroopers won’t see us coming.”

Luke studies the steep chutes. “You can climb that?”

“Of course,” Sidney says, scrambling up the chute as if it was a powerwalk.

“Hold on!” Luke says, grasping Sidney’s ankle. “You don’t know what’s waiting on the other side.”

Sidney looks puzzled. “So?”

“Maybe I should go first.”

Sidney bares a row of jagged incisors in what Luke takes to be a grin. “Please, do not misunderstand my hesitation in joining this undertaking. I am happy to die for liberty—but Padas do not kill for any reason.”

“Keep your blaster handy anyway,” growls Gideon. “You may need to scare something.”

“Of course,” Sidney says, crawling up the chute. “I will return when I find some cable to lower for you humans.”

Luke and Gideon wait for several minutes with no sign of Sidney. Finally, Luke says, “Maybe you’d better boost me up. Something must have happened.”

“Not likely,” Gideon says. “Sidney can be quiet as a sandrat when he wants. Just the same, I’m tired of waiting.” He laces his fingers together and offers Luke a step.

Luke holsters his blaster and places a foot in Gideon’s hands. In the light gravity of the asteroid, he might be able to jump all four meters to the mouth of the chute. But jumping is a lot less accurate than climbing, and he is not anxious to bang his head or rip his vacsuit through carelessness.

The mouth opens into a brightly lit chamber. A pile of silvery tailings rises 20 meters above the chute. Sidney’s tracks run to the top of the tailings pile, then disappear. The only other things Luke sees are a dozen illumination panels mounted into the high ceiling.

Gideon’s hand disappears from beneath his foot. Luke starts falling and curses angrily, flailing his arms wildly to catch some support. But the sand-filled chute offers no hand-holds, and Luke slides back toward the holding trough.

In the asteroid’s weak gravity, he doesn’t actually fall—he drifts downward. The sluggishness of the descent does little to console him, especially when he

notices the reason he is falling. Gideon lies sprawled on the holding trough floor at the feet of two stormtroopers in heavy assault armor. One holds a blaster rifle trained on the prospector, and the other follows Luke’s descent as if shooting skeet.

Luke quickly rejects the thought of reaching for his weapons. In addition to the disadvantage of falling, his pistol would be a poor match for the suit-mounted blaster cannons of a zero-g trooper’s assault armor. Although he might fare better with his lightsaber, it is a melee weapon, and melee weapons are most effective when the user has his feet planted firmly on the ground. Luke finally strikes the tailings with much the same lack of dignity he would have displayed in a full-g environment.

“Sorry about that,” Gideon mumbles to Luke. They lie side by side, facing the stormtroopers. The chute leads into the mill building directly behind the Imperial troops.

“Are you the scum that destroyed our shuttle?” the first stormtrooper demands.

He glances over his shoulder. The X-wing sits in plain sight. Luke assumes his most innocent expression and turns his attention back to the stormtroopers. Behind them, a cable begins descending from the chute. “Have you been shooting up assault shuttles again?” Luke asks Gideon.

Gideon grasps his chin and considers the question earnestly. “Not that I remember.”

“Sorry, fellows,” Luke says loudly. “You two stormtroopers have the wrong guys.”

The cable stops descending.

“Very funny,” the trooper answers. “On your feet. General Parnell wants a word with you. Then you’ll pay for stranding us here. I’m due for leave when we get back.”

The cable rises without making a sound.

- *If Luke rises immediately, turn to section 38.*
- *If Luke reaches for his lightsaber, turn to section 15.*
- *If Luke stalls for a few moments, turn to section 41.*

**6**

Luke leads the way back to the other side of the building. The stormtroopers are not yet in sight.

“Let’s set up an ambush!” Gideon says.

“No. We can do nothing here,” Sidney says. He ignores Gideon’s dirty look and continues, “We must proceed to Tol Ado, where our effort will not be wasted.”

It is certainly dangerous to stay on 24 Tredway. But after seeing the devastation of the Imperial attack, Luke does not want to leave. He is uncertain of his motivations: perhaps he wishes to stay to help the survivors (if any still exist). Or perhaps he wants to stay for a darker, more personal reason—vengeance. Luke knows it would be wrong to stay on Tredway for the second reason, but it would be just as wrong to abandon anyone that might have survived.

- *If Luke leaves, turn to section 35.*
- *If Luke stays, turn to section 24.*

**7**

"Our orders are to avoid Imperial contact," Luke grumbles. "We can't ignore our orders whenever we feel like it."

Artoo twitters a long remark.

"You don't have to remind me about 'on-the-spot discretion,'" Luke snaps, annoyed that the Droid agrees with his gut feeling. "That directive doesn't mean we can risk losing a starfighter every time we run across a batch of TIEs. Now, set a course for the nearest asteroid cluster."

The Droid obeys without comment. Thirty minutes later, they reach the denser ring of rocks and debris that holds the first cluster. It is a large one. Over 500 asteroids, ranging in size from less than a kilometer long to more than a hundred, hover within 2000 kilometers of each other. They churn and circle around a common center of gravity like a pack of mangy rorks looking for a fight.

Luke slows to a crawl and carefully enters the maze of open space between the mammoth boulders. Every asteroid follows a crazy trail dictated for it by the gravitational influences of a hundred neighbors. Huge craters blemish the faces of the largest asteroids where they have attracted smaller ones too strongly. In other cases, smaller rocks orbit their monstrous kin like moons.

As Luke passes deeper inside, he realizes the difficulty of attempting to track a ship into the cluster. Unless the pursuer knows the space as well as his target, he has no hope of keeping up. In addition, the cluster will act as a defensive barrier against heavy line ships. No captain in his right mind would bring anything larger than a corvette into this maelstrom.

His cockpit radio suddenly crackles to life. "Wart, is that you?"

Luke checks the X-wing's sensors, but sees no signs of another ship. He turns on the probes; this is no place to be blind.

"Hey, Wart! What's the big idea? You want Parnell to find our hideout?"

In the same instant, both sets of Luke's sensors detect a corvette moving from behind an asteroid to his starboard.

"Hey, you're not Wart!" the cockpit speaker announces.

"Sorry," Luke answers. Judging from the corvette's heavy armament, it is either a Rebel raider or a pirate. Luke is confident no Rebel squadrons operate in the Sil'Lume Belt.

- If Luke flees the corvette, turn to section 3.
- If Luke attacks, turn to section 29.

**8**

A single minute later, the asteroid catalogued as 24 Tredway hangs in front of Luke's cockpit like a huge, impassable cliff. The Tredway complex sits squarely in the middle of the cliff wall. From Luke's angle, it looks as if the compound will slide into space at any moment. The site consists of 14 buildings resting on

five hectares of leveled rock. The largest building is obviously a mill of some sort, for a pile of sandy waste extends more than three kilometers away from its far side.

The three tallest buildings, arranged in a rough triangle, are obviously headframes. They cover shafts leading deep into the asteroid's interior. The largest, at the apex of the triangle, is no more than 20 meters across, but stands 100 meters tall. Next to each headframe is a squat, square hoist house. Heavy durasteel cables run from the hoist houses into the highest levels of the headframes.

The assault shuttle has pummeled the hoist houses servicing the two smaller headframes, reducing one to rubble. Deflector shields protect the largest headframe and its hoist-house, however, and the Imperials apparently could not break through to destroy these buildings.

Situated halfway between the triangle of headframes and the mill building are two massive rectangular buildings. The largest building obviously houses the equipment shop. Repulsor trucks, levitation scaffolds, and rock-movers, all destroyed by well-aimed concussion missiles, lie scattered about its perimeter. From the other building, long twisting flexi-corridors lead to the mill, shop, each headframe, and four residential buildings scattered along the perimeter of the complex.





Finally, a small, elegant structure stands in the center of a dozen freshly scarred craters. It rests atop a series of carefully hewn terraces. A great bank of transwalls faces the complex, as if the residents of the house find it necessary to observe the compound at all times. Amazingly, the residence remains intact; the only explanation can be that a heavy shield protected it from the barrage which created the craters surrounding it. Luke's sensors detect no sign of any shielding around the building now.

Two hundred meters from the residence, the assault shuttle sits with two access ramps deployed. Two dozen zero-g stormtroopers have rushed down the ramps to attack six or seven beings hiding in the craters around the house. The assault shuttle's twin blaster cannon turrets spray the craters with fire, preventing the outnumbered defenders from mounting any effective resistance against the assault troops.

Luke cannot do anything about the stormtroopers that have already left the shuttle. His weapons are so powerful that if he fires at them, he will destroy the defenders as well as the attackers. But he might have a nice surprise for the shuttle.

"Arm a proton torpedo, Artoo," he orders.

An instant later the ready signal flashes. Luke approaches the shuttle low and hard. The Imperial crew remains blissfully unaware of his approach; they do not turn a single weapon against the X-wing. Luke fires the torpedo, then banks away, zipping past the shuttle before it strikes. Will his range be good? The uncertain gravity field of the asteroid makes the shot much more difficult than the canyon scouring he used to do back home on Tatooine.

When he loops back around, Luke's heart sinks. The shuttle still sits intact. A deep crater smokes a few meters in front of its nose. Luke arms another torpedo, then angles his shields forward. As he approaches again, the shuttle's antipersonnel blaster cannons swivel to meet him. Although the shuttle carries much heavier armament, the blaster turrets are the only thing it can bring to bear while sitting on the ground. It is a desperation move; the tiny cannons stand no chance of breaking through his starfighter's shields.

An officer in a black vacsuit leads ten stormtroopers from the shuttle. Without even pausing to gauge Luke's approach, the group runs for cover. The 24 stormtroopers already safely away from the shuttle halt their assault on the outnumbered defenders long enough to watch the X-wing attack their ride home.

Artoo whistles a report.

"Intercept and jam it!" Luke orders automatically. He does not need Artoo's answering message to remind him that with their radio out, they have no chance of doing either. Even without intercepting the message, Luke knows the signal was a call for reinforcements. But how far away is help? Hours, or minutes?

Luke aligns the X-wing for its final approach, wishing he still had the targeting computer. He slows to what seems a crawl. The shuttle's blaster cannons energize. Wave after wave of pale red energy streaks at the starfighter and dissipates harmlessly on the forward shields. Luke takes a deep breath, then readies the trigger.

He fires. As the torpedo streaks toward its target, he accelerates. It would not do to be too close when the torpedo strikes.

This time, he needs no instruments to confirm the results of his shot. A great plume of blue and white energy rises from the shuttle, casting an eerie light over his shoulders into the cockpit. He loops back over the shuttle crater, allowing himself the vanity of a victory roll.

Far below, on the asteroid surface, the combatants ignore him. Like the disciplined troops they are, the stormtroopers have already turned back to the task at hand. The tiny flashes and pale streaks of ground combat continue as if nothing has changed.

Gideon arrives a few moments later. Luke leads the way to the far side of the complex, hoping to land well behind the defenders' lines. As they descend, the true magnitude of the destruction visited upon this planetoid strikes Luke. The structures he saw from above are huge; the largest could house an entire squadron of X-wings, including engineering and support personnel. Several of these buildings have been leveled, and only the main headframe has escaped without a serious rupture. If the Imperial commander had used a Star Destroyer, he could not have done a more thorough job.

Seeing no defenders to guide him to a landing zone, Luke sets down on the tailing dump on the far side of the mill. The *Rockcan* does likewise, and Gideon and Sidney soon exit the scow wearing rugged vacsuits. Gideon carries an ancient but effective looking blaster rifle, and Sidney somewhat anxiously holds a heavy blaster pistol in his clawed paws. Luke seals himself into his vacsuit, checks his own blaster and lightsaber, then climbs out of the X-wing.

"How close is the nearest Imperial base?" Luke asks over his comlink. "The shuttle sent for reinforcements."

Sidney answers. "Then we have four hours, no more."

Luke motions toward the house. "You saw the battle?"

Gideon nods. "Survivors might be caught in the house, or that might be a diversion." The prospector points to the main headframe. "If I was a Tredway, I'd be down inside this rock right now."

- If Luke goes to the house, turn to section 5.
- If Luke goes to the headframe, turn to section 16.

**9**

"Parnell will take his time with Erling," Luke says. "We have nothing to lose by warning the Tredways about Erling's arrest, and we just might learn something useful."

Sidney flattens his ears and lets a hiss escape his lips, but does not object further.

"We'll take my *Rockcan*," Gideon suggests. "You and Sidney might as well leave your ships here. Nobody'll bother them."

Luke smiles mischievously. "They will mine, especially if they're stormtroopers. I fly an X-wing."

Both Gideon and Sidney raise an eyebrow. Most pilots know the X-wing is the Alliance's favorite starfighter. Sidney cannot stop himself from asking, "If you have the X-wing—"

"Don't ask the boy questions he can't answer," Gideon interrupts. "We sure as nova can't leave it here, but we'd be even bigger fools to take it to Tol Ado."

"If the Tredways are trustworthy—"

"As space is black," Gideon promises.

"Good," Luke finishes. "We'll ask them to watch it."

When Luke returns to his starfighter, Artoo is full of warnings and questions about Parnell and his stormtroopers. Luke patiently explains what happened and that he is going to rescue Erling. Artoo pops and whistles excitedly, flashing comments across the vidscreen so fast Luke can barely read them.

"You like the idea?" Luke lifts off. Gideon's box-shaped prospecting scow already hovers above Henryson. An ancient turbo-laser battery protrudes over the cockpit; Luke guesses that the battery sees more action hammering asteroids than ships. "Remind me to have your motivation circuits overhauled," he continues. "Besides, you're not going."

Artoo chirps and hisses angrily.

"Because I said you're not, that's why," Luke answers. "What I'm doing is bad enough. General Dodonna will flip if you get damaged."

The Droid remains silent for a long moment, then displays a short message on the vidscreen.

"That's blackmail!" Luke exclaims. "You wouldn't dare."

The message remains.

Luke sighs. "Okay, but I'm definitely having your motivation circuits purged. Who ever heard of a Droid with a thirst for adventure?"

A short time later, Gideon's *Rockcan* slows to a crawl. Luke's cockpit speaker crackles. "We've got trouble ahead," Gideon says. "Look's like Parnell beat us here."

Luke pulls abreast of Gideon. Ahead, an egg-shaped asteroid slowly spins around an axis located in its large end. The rock is roughly 10 kilometers long and six in width. Five firepoints buzz over its surface like hungry insects. One of the lightpoints occasionally dives toward a disc of flickering light near the center of the asteroid.

Luke activates his flight computer's active search mode. The probe alerts the enemy to his presence, but it also reveals the nature of the ships harassing 24 Tredway. "It looks like four TIE fighters escorting an assault shuttle," Luke reports. "Are you sure this is the Tredway asteroid?"

Gideon grunts an affirmative response. "Who else do you think it might be? Let's have at 'em!"

Sidney interrupts, "Perhaps it would be wiser to avoid this conflict and travel straight to Tol Ado?"

Luke hesitates. He probably can't count on much help from Gideon's *Rockcan*, and the odds are stacked against him. On the other hand, he is the only thing that stands between the Imperials and 24 Tredway's complete annihilation.

- If Luke attacks the TIE fighters, turn to section 17.
- If Luke goes straight to Tol Ado, turn to section 21.

**10**

Luke nods as if he will obey the general's orders, then slips his blaster from its holster. Although the general may be interested only in the charismatic human, Luke is unwilling to take that chance. Once he places his empty hands in sight, he will be at the general's mercy—and Imperials have no mercy.

Luke's entire family has perished at the hands of the Empire. The Dark Lord Vader killed his father when Luke was an infant, and he never knew his mother. His adoptive parents, Owen and Beru Lars, died when stormtroopers raided their moisture farm back on Tatooine. They were simple people, desiring nothing more than to scratch a living from Tatooine's desert soil. Certainly, neither his uncle nor his aunt had any interest in the Rebellion. Yet the stormtroopers killed both of them—because Owen had the misfortune to buy a pair of Droids that once belonged to an Alliance commander.

He has no intention of becoming the final member of his family to die at Imperial whim. If he falls, he will fall resisting the Empire.

Without raising his blaster where the troopers can see it, Luke fires. The shot flashes from beneath the table, narrowly missing the general. For a moment, an anxious silence seizes the room. The patrons freeze, awaiting the stunned stormtroopers' reply. Nobody expected Luke to attack—not even the general.

Luke has no intention of allowing an Imperial reply. He kicks his table over and stands, firing again. This time, his blue bolt finds its mark. A breastplate shatters, and one trooper drops.

The wall behind Luke erupts into a series of thuds and crumps as the stormtroopers finally return fire. They are too slow; he has already dived and rolled to cover beneath another table. He aims at the general again. Just as Luke squeezes the trigger, a stormtrooper steps in front of his commander. The man stumbles backward, drops his weapon, then slumps to the floor. The general drops prone behind his saviour's motionless form and snatches the blaster rifle.

Luke's table erupts into a red, blue, and green shower of splinters. Finding himself without cover, Luke squeezes off a few wild shots to suppress his opponents' fire. His tactic proves little help, for he has run out of places to hide. Several tables lie tipped on their sides, but frightened prospectors huddle behind each one. Seeking cover behind any table will get a bystander killed.

The charismatic man with the fiery eyes suddenly stands, shielding Luke from the Imperials. "Stop this!" he bellows. "Stop this carnage at once!"

Amazingly, the stormtroopers hold their fire—at least temporarily. Luke does not fire either, for the man's voice carries such authority that he finds himself obeying automatically.

"My freedom is not worth these deaths," the man says to Luke. "But you have my gratitude." He turns to face the Imperials. "I surrender, Governor Parnell."

The four stormtroopers, careful to avoid Luke's line of fire, move toward the young Rebel pilot. Luke fingers his blaster. If he fires, he could hit the speaker. In such close quarters, his lightsaber is a much more efficient weapon. If he tries to honor the unknown man's request and fade away, he's sure as vacuum going to end up with the general's boys—Imperials aren't the type who ignore dead stormtroopers.

- If Luke fires his blaster, turn to section 13.
- If Luke draws his lightsaber, turn to section 19.

**11**

Luke reluctantly turns toward the exit. "I'm sorry," he says. "I have business more important to attend to."

"What business is more important than the liberty?" demands the yellow-furred biped, grabbing Luke's shoulder with a dull-clawed paw. Although Luke wants to explain that he is an Alliance pilot, he knows better. Such admissions have killed more than one Rebel, and he sees no necessity to reveal his true identity to these prospectors.

Gideon gently removes the yellow paw from Luke's shoulder. "Sidney, if you want Erling Tredway rescued so bad, you do it. The first thing you ought to learn about liberty is that you got to fight for it yourself."

Sidney studies Gideon with a mixed expression of puzzlement and anger. After a long pause, he says, "The Pada cannot fight—it is wrong."

Gideon shakes his head impatiently. "What's the difference whether he fights or you fight? Fightin's fighting."

Sidney's huge round ears flop forward, betraying his disappointment. "Yes, fightin's fighting. Of course." He addresses Luke, "Please forgive me—I had no right to ask that of you."

Luke smiles and nods. "It's already forgotten. Good luck, whatever you decide to do."

"Same to you, son," Gideon replies.

Luke follows a winding flexi-corridor to the airlock. After donning his vacsuit, he pauses at the airlock portal to study the asteroid upon which the hospice sits.

The hospice itself is a collection of white plasfoam bubbles connected by long, twisting flexi-corridors. Sturdy metal cables anchor each bubble and flexi-corridor to a bedrock outcropping protruding through the dusty, crater-riddled surface. The cables are needed because the tiny planetoid's gravitational attraction is so weak a child can throw a rock into space. Asteroid hoppers and prospecting scows rest in a disarrayed radius around the hospice, tethered to the plasfoam bubbles, handy rocks, or each other.

Formally known as 400,324 Henryson, the planetoid is little more than a kilometer in length, and half that in width and thickness. The designation number preceding the name indicates Henryson was the 400,324th planetoid in Sil'Lume Belt catalogued as a sentient being's property. The name refers to the original owner. Artoo has reported that the catalogue numbers run as high as 895,256, but nobody knows how many asteroids have never been claimed.

Henryson rotates so quickly that Luke grows dizzy when he looks away from the ground. The stars fly across the horizon like meteors. To make matters worse, the sun never sets on the asteroid. Its grape-sized disc flashes across the sky as if shot out of an ancient rifle. As the most prominent reference point in the heavens, it serves as a constant reminder that Luke stands on nothing more than a giant merry-go-round.

When he is certain no unwanted observers lurk outside, Luke opens the airlock and trudges through knee-deep dust to his hidden X-wing. Artoo opens the fighter's canopy and transmits an urgent message

over Luke's comlink as soon as he begins descending the crater wall. Although most beings cannot understand the beep and whistle language of R2 units, Luke needs no translation to know something has alarmed the little Droid.

He quickly climbs into the cockpit and activates a translator. Artoo displays a message on the vidscreen.

Luke smiles. "I know, Artoo. I saw the general and his stormtroopers."

Artoo whistles a query.

"They arrested a local resistance leader and took him to the sector prison."

The Droid remains quiet for moment, then issues a short series of beeps.

"Rescue him?" Luke snorts. "That's a prison planet—a whole planet! What do you think I am, a magician?"

The little Droid does not answer.

"Besides, we have our mission to consider," Luke adds defensively. "I don't think General Dodonna would appreciate it if we just decided to rescue some stranger instead of searching for a new base."

Luke activates the X-wing's repulsor drives. A moment later the fighter lifts into space.

• Turn to section 18.

**12**

Luke activates his comlink and instructs Artoo to fire the X-wing's laser cannons into the tailings pile. The Droid acknowledges with a single beep. Luke draws his blaster pistol and explains the plan to his companions. They must move quickly and efficiently if they wish to succeed. Gideon chortles with delight at the idea of attacking the Imperials from an unmanned fighter, but Sidney appears less enthusiastic—in fact, he looks frightened.

"Stick close to me," Luke says. "Whatever you do, don't freeze on us."

Sidney flattens his ears and his eyes flash anger. "It is true that I am afraid," he says, "but not for myself. Some things are more important than the one's life."

They have no more time to discuss the subject. The X-wing's laser cannons belch and four bolts strike a scarce five meters behind the stormtroopers. Shockwaves rumble through the tailings pile, shaking the troopers so violently their bodies tremble.

The Imperials instinctively turn to face the attack. Where the laser cannons struck, four geysers spout tailings 20 meters high. The resulting sandstorm is so thick the Imperials cannot see what attacked. They rush forward just as Artoo fires again. The salvo lights the sand wall blood red. Another four geysers sprout, completely obscuring the X-wing from sight. The troopers drop and fire blindly into the settling sand cloud.

Luke leads the charge. They cross the 50 meters of tailings in less than ten seconds. Artoo continues firing the X-wing lasers, keeping the four guards pinned and looking the wrong way. Luke and Gideon stop three meters away from their targets and take aim.

Both men fire at the same time. The bolts strike the Imperials' energy packs. An instant later, two craters smoke where the stormtroopers previously lay. The

trooper on the right turns to see what caused the flash. He finds Luke's blaster bolt streaking straight at him. The bolt hits him square in the chest.

After making sure that Gideon's second target met the same fate, Luke tells Artoo to stop firing. Thirty seconds later, he activates the X-wing's repulsor engines and launches. Gideon's scow lumbers off the asteroid behind him.

"We'd better dump that starfighter of yours," Gideon radios. "It might look suspicious at the Tol Ado visitor center. Sidney knows just the spot—an abandoned mine on 40,005 Milton."

The idea of a visitor center at an Imperial prison planet sounds strange to Luke. "I'm having second thoughts about this visitor center," Luke says. "Why would the Imperials build such a thing?"

"Sidney says that Parnell thinks his prison's an artwork and ought to be displayed," Gideon says. "Besides, it lets the folks know what's in store for 'em if they get out of line. I can't think of a better place to look Tol Ado over from."

"Okay," Luke says.

Gideon leads the way to 40,005 Milton. It is a cube-shaped asteroid roughly 30 kilometers on a side. They descend into a black crater no more than 20 meters across. Floodlights on the bow of Gideon's scow suddenly illuminate the walls. The crater is actually a tunnel leading into the interior of the asteroid. Luke admires Gideon's skill and confidence. The *Rockcan* has no more than two meters clearance on a side.

Finally, after three tense minutes, they reach a wide spot in the tunnel. While Gideon turns around, Luke sets the X-wing down, buckles up his vacsuit, and unloads Artoo.

Gideon's belly airlock opens and a ramp descends. Luke helps Artoo up the steep slope. A moment later, they stand inside the bulky ship. The interior of the scow is dark without being gloomy. Like most prospecting ships, it consists mostly of a huge cargo bay for hauling ore to a mill. The repulsor engines, slow but powerful, sit directly aft of the cargo bay. The crew quarters, which Gideon maintains immaculately but without decoration, are organized for comfort and efficiency.

"Why you bringing that along?" Gideon demands, pointing at Artoo-Detoo.

"It's a long story, but he might come in handy. I've used this little guy in similar situations."

Gideon grunts, unimpressed. "Don't care for Droids, myself."

Artoo whistles sharply.

"What'd he say?" Gideon demands.

Luke shrugs his shoulders. "I can't understand him unless he's plugged in." In this case, Luke is confident it is just as well the Droid cannot be understood.

Gideon raises the airlock ramp, then directs Luke to a seat. A few minutes later, they leave 40,005 Milton and lumber toward Tol Ado.

*Remember that Luke left his starfighter at the asteroid "Milton." He may need it later.*

• Turn to section 86.



13

Luke aims over the stranger's shoulder and fires. As the streak sizzles past the speaker's head, the fiery-eyed human involuntarily ducks, leaving Luke exposed to his enemies. The beam crumps into the cafeteria ceiling, showering frightened patrons with smoking plasfoam debris. The stormtroopers react immediately to Luke's sudden vulnerability and pour energy shots at him.

As Luke adjusts his own aim, a blaster bolt strikes his right shoulder. The impact spins him around and his arm falls limp. His blaster pistol skitters away across the floor. Darkness begins to descend on his vision.

"Can't go under—" he mutters, his shoulder flaming with pain. "Help me." The darkness continues descending, and now his ears ring. Two ghostly shapes approach cautiously, blaster rifles held ready to fire. Luke sees their white armor only as a lighter shade of gray.

"Ben, help me!" he mumbles.

Someone places something cold and metallic against his throat, then says something in that dry, electronic

voice peculiar to stormtroopers. Luke cannot understand the trooper's words, and he can no longer see. Is this the end?

"No—" he gasps. "I will survive!" An almost imperceptible feeling tickles the inside of his head, and the gauze in Luke's head begins to clear.

A moment later, he sees the general standing overhead. "Perhaps you are correct, trooper. He may live. Bring him along for interrogation."

*Luke will survive, but for now he is badly hurt and an Imperial prisoner. This adventure has ended for him. Return to section one and try again.*

**14**

Luke pulls up hard and loops straight back at the TIEs. The Imperials scatter as if surprised by the boldness of the maneuver, but not before Luke locks his targeting computer onto the center fighter. He triggers his laser cannons and four blue streaks converge on the Imperial. The fighter erupts into a dirty yellow fireball.

The remaining TIEs jump back into the X-wing's tail zone, though they leave a larger reaction cushion than their missing comrade had. They resume firing, too, their shots streaking past alarmingly close to the canopy. Luke can only hope that turning back into Gideon's cover was wise. If the prospector misses again, the Imperials might just pummel his fighter into space litter.

Gideon's box-shaped scow appears ahead, little larger than a thumbnail from this distance. Luke orders Artoo to divert 75% of the shield power to the aft. He might have to weather a beating before he reaches Gideon's range.

The Rebel pilot positions his X-wing between the TIEs and Gideon's scow. With luck, he can block their view of the lumbering ship. If the Imperial pilots are so intent on hammering his tail that they don't monitor their flight computers, Gideon just might surprise them.

Two fireclouds burst open above the canopy, jolting the ship so hard that Luke's ears pop. Artoo immediately issues a damage report. The on-board systems ionization reactor suffered a crack in its thermal shielding; the Droid has dampened its power output to 60%.

"Then you'd better shut off the subspace radio, the entire sensor system, and—" Luke hesitates, knowing this is a desperate maneuver, "the targeting computer."

The Droid lets an alarmed warble escape.

"Don't worry," Luke says with more confidence than he feels. "I can handle weapons targeting."

Artoo proceeds without further comment, but Luke knows he must be straining his logic circuits to obey. Two more fiery clouds shake the X-wing as TIE laser cannons continue pounding his shields.

Gideon's scow is now the size of a fist. Luke estimates he has reached the prospector's maximum range. He wishes he could call Gideon on the radio, but that would mean shutting down some other system. And, at the moment, he needs every one of them. He must trust Gideon to guess his plan.

Four TIE shots explode directly ahead. As the X-wing passes through the fading salvo, concussion waves bounce it around like a bubble-raft on a stormy sea. The vidscreen blinks several times, then falls blank.

"We've got a short-circuit on the interface," Luke says. "See what you can do with it."

Artoo beeps once in response.

Gideon's *Rockcan* is the size of a man's head. Luke pushes the X-wing into a twisting dive aimed beneath the scow. The scow's turbo-laser battery glows red as it energizes. Without his vidscreen, Luke cannot see the TIEs' reactions, but he can imagine the pilots' faces when they notice those shining cannon rods. If Gideon can only hit something!

The X-wing shoots beneath the *Rockcan* like a frightened Bantha kid running for the security of its mother's belly mane. Luke swings the fighter around just in time to see a line of fireballs erupt before the TIEs.

The scow's salvo eclipses the stars, 24 Tredway, even Sil'Lume itself for a full three seconds. By the time the glare dies away, nothing remains of the TIE fighters except two expanding balls of red-hot shards.

Luke brings his X-wing even with Gideon's cockpit. Behind the controls, Gideon sits with a great smile stretched across his beard from one ear to the other. Sidney slumps in the co-pilot's seat, his ears flattened against his head and his muzzle a mask of horror and guilt. He cannot seem to bring himself to meet Luke's gaze.

Gideon raises his hand in a thumbs-up sign, then points at the Tredway asteroid. At first, Luke cannot find the assault shuttle. Finally, he notices a firepoint setting down close to the glowing disc at the boulder's center. Luke nods, then accelerates toward the asteroid.

• Turn to section 8.

**15**

Luke starts to rise, moving his hand to his lightsaber. As he grasps it, the first stormtrooper raises his blaster rifle and steps forward. "What have you got there?"

Before Luke responds, or unclips the lightsaber, the trooper smashes the rifle butt into his head. Luke's vision immediately blackens and his knees buckle, then he feels himself falling again—this time into a world of darkness and silence.

• Turn to section 73.

**16**

"Let's hope their diversion works for awhile," Luke says. "I don't like the idea of running into a squad of zero-g assault troopers out here."

Gideon nods, then leads the way through the sandy tailings toward the left end of the mill. The mill is over a kilometer long and rises 50 meters off the surface. From a height of four meters above its base extend twelve wide chutes clogged with inert rivers of silver sand. The chutes dump into a huge holding trough that runs the entire length of the building. Then, every 50 meters, pumps feed the sand into lengthy hoses that

carry the waste out onto the tailings pile. At present, the chutes, pumps, and hoses stand idle, awaiting a resumption of operations Luke doubts will ever occur.

"Why did they do this?" Luke asks. The Tredway mine is a valuable strategic and economic asset. He does not understand why Parnell is destroying the complex instead of confiscating it.

Sidney turns his ears away from the center of his head in an expression of despair. "Because they are the Imperials. Do they need another reason?"

"Imperials or not, this doesn't make sense," Gideon says. "This mine pays enough tribute every year to outfit a corvette squadron, and the ol' lady's kind of chummy with the Governor. Parnell didn't destroy it just to make an example of the Tredways, I'll tell you that for sure. Something else is going on here."

Gideon pauses at the edge of the mill, then motions the others to follow him around the corner. The building extends a quarter kilometer ahead. Two white-armored figures are just stepping out of sight around the other side of the mill. The Rebels cannot see any of the buildings in the center of the compound. But to the left, two residential buildings mark the outer perimeter of the complex. Two kilometers away, the main house sits atop its carefully sculpted terraces. Even from this distance, Luke sees half a dozen breaches in its walls. The assault troopers have wasted no time penetrating the pitiful Tredway defenses.

Luke leads the way to the next corner and pokes his head around it. The two stormtroopers are walking toward the far end of the mill. From here, the Rebel pilot can see the rest of the compound.

The complex lies in ruins. The equipment shop roof lies collapsed, burying the building's contents under two meters of rubble. A walker-sized gap adorns the "dry," the locker building where the miners dress for work. The flexi-corridors have holes and tears in them every 20 meters.

Luke expected survivors. Instead, corpses of all sizes and shapes litter the complex, dragged unsuited and unprepared from the shelter of the buildings. About 100 disfigured, charred objects that might or might not have once been alive lie scattered between the buildings.

The only things that move, besides the stormtroopers, are badly damaged and confused Droids. Two maintenance Droids, one missing an arm and the other a leg, labor to repair the gap in the locker building. A medical Droid with a smashed head scurries from one charred figure to the other, performing diagnostic tests which no patient will pass.

Luke pulls back, trying to shut out visions of a similar scene back on Tatooine. But no matter how tightly he closes his eyelids and clenches his teeth, memories flood his mind: black, oily smoke boiling out of the entrance to a subterranean house; the scorching heat that denied him entrance to the small volcano that had once been his home; two shapes, smoking and unrecognizable as his aunt and uncle, crumpled on the sand they had farmed so long and at such cost. Realizing he cannot win a fight with his own mind, Luke allows the rage and sorrow he felt at the time to wash over him again. The two emotions have grown no weaker with time.

Mercifully, Gideon interrupts his meditation.

"What is it?"

"Two stormtroopers going around the other end of the building," the prospector reports, forcing Luke's attention back to the present situation.

"They'll see the ships!"

The devastation is more thorough and complete than Luke had imagined possible. He landed on the far side of the mill expecting to find 50 or 100 miners holed up in the complex, badly outclassed and outweaponed, but holding some sort of line nevertheless. It had never occurred to him that the Imperials could have caught the Tredway complex so totally by surprise.

Gideon frowns, then shrugs. "Nothing we can do about it now. If they try to get inside the *Rockcan*, they'll be in for a surprise."

"Artoo will keep the X-wing locked down," Luke says. "But that doesn't comfort me much." He fights the rising bile in his throat, trying to keep a soldier's perspective, to focus on the objective at hand.

"Nor me," Sidney says. "We should return to the ships."

• *If Luke goes back, turn to section 6.*

• *If Luke continues to the headframe, turn to section 43.*

## 17

"Buckle up, Artoo," Luke says. "This might get rough." Although some might consider disrupting the attack on Tredway meddling, the Rebel pilot cannot ignore it. When the Empire attacks innocent people, he always considers it his business.

The Droid whistles and beeps almost cheerfully while he locks down the S-foils in attack position. The TIEs spread into a diamond and approach slowly, their tiny firepoints growing brighter every second. Luke has no difficulty now distinguishing them from stars. Although the TIEs clearly have a numerical advantage, their primary mission is to prevent Luke from attacking the assault shuttle. Therefore, the Imperial pilots are employing a net formation designed to prevent Luke from slipping past.

"We're right behind you," Gideon announces.

"Great," Luke mutters, his throat mike deactivated. "Now I can't loop back." Despite the fact that Luke expects little help from Gideon's lumbering scow, its presence might provide enough rear cover to allow a concentrated attack on one corner of the TIE diamond. Because of Gideon, the target's wingmates might hesitate before jumping on Luke's tail.

On the other hand, Luke could crash through the net by flying straight for the center of the diamond. This would not allow him a good shot at any TIE, but it might take the Imperial pilots by surprise.

• *If Luke concentrates his attack on one corner, turn to section 22.*

• *If Luke crashes through the formation, turn to section 32.*

## 18

Artoo selects a poorly mapped and sparsely cataloged quadrant of the Sil'Lume Belt to investigate. Luke turns the starfighter toward the coordinates Artoo indicates, then accelerates to a quarter the X-wing's maximum velocity. Although he can safely fly much faster by using the X-wing's active search sensors, Luke prefers to trust his own instincts. The active search sensors would broadcast his presence to all military ships in the vicinity, and his recent experiences suggest the only nearby military craft are Imperial.

Like many other asteroid belts, most of the Sil'Lume Belt is not so thick that it is dangerous to fly. In fact, without navigational instruments, a pilot might not realize he had entered an asteroid field. Though the belt contains more than a million hunks of rock, it is spread over several tens of millions of kilometers. Inside the thin parts of the belt, a pilot can seldom see more than one asteroid at a time. The greatest navigational hazard lies in unexpected gravitational influences. As long as he moves slowly, Luke's passive sensors will provide enough warning to avoid any asteroid's weak gravitational field.

Occasionally, the belt thickens into denser rings as asteroids bunch up. Luke hopes to find just such a cluster for the Rebel base. Cluster asteroids occasionally collide, and their overlapping gravity wells are tricky to negotiate. The risks will keep nosy prospectors at bay, but pose no great threat to a combat-equipped Rebel base and its crack pilots. The cluster would also serve as a defensive barrier against heavy Imperial starships, which cannot maneuver quickly enough to enter its crowded confines.

Artoo interrupts Luke's reverie with a frantic whistle. Luke drops his eyes to the instruments. "What is it?"

A distress signal crosses the vidscreen. "24 Tredway in dire need of assistance. Approach with caution."

Artoo beeps a query.

"I don't know," Luke replies, trying to weigh his response. "This is bound to mean trouble, and we have our orders."

The Droid chirps insistently.

- If Luke answers the distress signal, turn to section 34.
- If Luke ignores the distress signal, turn to section 30.

## 19

Luke holsters his blaster pistol and grabs his lightsaber. Compared to a lightsaber, blasters are clumsy, imprecise weapons in close quarters. In skilled hands, a lightsaber is twice as efficient and many times faster than any traditional weapon.

With a howl of determination, Luke activates the blade and leaps forward. Upon hearing Luke's vicious yell, the charismatic human dives for cover—at Governor Parnell's feet. Parnell draws his blaster pistol and presses it against the man's body. Luke now stands face to face with the four surviving stormtroopers, his lightsaber humming impatiently. The troopers hold their weapons ready to fire, but await instructions from the general.

"Please," the human insists quietly. "Let there be no more bloodshed on my account."

Luke shifts to a defensive stance, tracing a shielding pattern with his energy blade. "Who are you?" he asks, not turning his gaze from the stormtroopers. "Why do these scum want you?"

"He is Erling Tredway," hisses the general. "And the Empire's business with him is no concern of yours, child."

"It concerns me now, Parnell. Let him go," Luke threatens, hoping his voice carries more menace than the situation warrants.

"You are in no position to make demands," the general snaps.

"He is if he can handle that lightsaber," growls a gruff voice behind Luke. "And I'll back him up."

The general turns his gaze on the speaker. Luke does not dare turn around to see his new-found ally.

"What will it be, Governor?" Luke demands.

Parnell looks from the gruff voice to Luke, then to his stormtroopers. Without hesitating a moment, he says, "Kill them!"

The first stormtrooper braces to fire and Luke springs into action. He moves with a combination of thought and instinct, sidestepping the trooper's aim and bringing his lightsaber down in the same fluid motion. The blaster flashes and explodes as the saber cuts it in two, knocking the trooper back into his companion. Black smudges and gouges scar his armor. The armor appears to have absorbed the worst of the damage, but the victim's knees buckle as if he has fallen unconscious.

A red blaster bolt flashes in front of Luke, striking a stormtrooper dead-center in the breastplate. The impact hurls him against the wall, where he hangs for just a moment. Luke cannot look to see who fired the shot, for stormtrooper number three has turned to face him.

The trooper fires, but the bolt strikes Luke's lightsaber and ricochets away. Whether he instinctively moved the blade to protect himself or was just lucky, Luke will never know. He notices a slight tickling deep within his brain, then steps forward and slashes his saber blade across the trooper's abdomen. The man falls immediately, his scream no less unsettling for coming through an electronic transmitter.

Luke turns to face the last survivor, just pushing past the trooper whose blaster exploded. The survivor holds his blaster rifle in one hand with no hope of bringing it bear. Luke thrusts his lightsaber toward the stormtrooper so he can easily strike the blaster or the man.

"Drop your weapon," he demands. "I don't want to kill you."

The stormtrooper hesitates. Luke almost sees the fear etched on the white helmet. A harsh oath crackles from the electronic transmitter. "Death before surrender!"

The trooper swings the weapon toward Luke. The young Rebel must respond; he flicks the saber and opens the armor like a crustacean's shell.

Luke turns his attention from the dying trooper. General Parnell has escaped with Erling Tredway during the battle. The only sign that remains of them is the jammed lock on the pneumatic door.

"You're not bad with that thing, youngster," says the gruff voice that pledged support earlier. "But I've seen better."

Luke deactivates the blade and turns to face the speaker. "You have? Where?" Could this man know a Jedi?

The speaker is the bearded human that was sitting next to Luke when Parnell entered the hospice. His eyes sparkle with curiosity and friendliness. "Right here," he answers, "in the Belt. Young Tredway's father had a 'saber. He called himself some sort of knight. That what you are?"

"I'm afraid not. Erling's father, is he still alive?"

The prospector spits on the floor. "Nope. The Empire tracked him down years ago. It's a darn shame, too."

Luke shakes his head in disappointment, then attaches the lightsaber to his utility belt. It seems he will never find a Jedi Knight to instruct him in the ways of the Force. Ben Kenobi must have been the last Master. Forcing himself to turn his thoughts to the here and now, Luke asks, "If Tredway's father is dead, what does Governor Parnell want with the son?" Luke has developed a certain feeling of kinship for the fiery-eyed human. Erling's Jedi father, like Luke's, probably died at Darth Vader's hands.

A crowd has gathered around Luke and the prospector, anxious for a look at the men who defied the Imperial Governor. A yellow-furred biped with slitted eyes answers Luke's question, "The Tredway is the great resistance leader."

The mention of resistance grabs Luke's attention. Although his present orders are to search for locations for a new Rebel base, space-faring personnel have standing instructions to investigate local resistance movements when possible.

"That boy don't amount to the shine on his daddy's boots," the prospector interrupts. "He fancies himself some sort of preacher; I say he's just a coward."

"The coward's way is bloodshed," the biped retorts casually. "The Tredway rises above such folly."

"He'll learn the error of his ways in Tol Ado," the prospector replies. "The Governor sure as vac believes in bloodshed—and a lot worse, too."

"Tol Ado?" Luke asks.

"The sector prison planet," the yellow furred biped says, his short muzzle wrinkling in disgust. "He who enters never returns."

A beetle-proprietor slips through the crowd and rubs its antennae together vigorously, creating a series of high-pitched squeals. The prospector listens for a moment, then bursts out, "Now hold on, birdsnack! You just send your bill to Sebastian Parnell. Gideon Smith ain't paying a half credit to cover Imperial damages."

The beetle whistles its antennae again, then Gideon replies, "I ain't coming back anyway!" He nudges Luke, then says, "We'd better skedaddle if we don't want to join Tredway in Tol Ado."

Luke pauses for a moment. "Maybe we do."

The crowd utters a collective gasp and Gideon studies Luke as if he has just removed the safety switch from a thermal detonator. "Why would you want to do that?"

"To rescue the Tredway!" proclaims the yellow-furred biped.

Luke nods.

"One of those stormtroopers knocked something loose in that head of yours!" Gideon exclaims. "We can get in easy enough, but we ain't coming back out. We'd best just get on about our business and forget that no-account."

Luke does not reply immediately. Gideon is right: attempting to rescue Erling is foolish. Imperial prison planets are notoriously secure. Although his orders leave latitude to investigate local resistance movements, even their most liberal interpretation would not permit penetrating such an installation.

Of course, Rebel officers can always use their own initiative to abandon a mission to pursue an unexpected opportunity, as long as the opportunity is more important. But no matter how Luke looks at the situation, he cannot say Erling Tredway is more important than a new Rebel base. He knows little about the man except that he has an unusually commanding presence and is urging the local life forms to passively resist the Empire. Only the probability that Erling's father, like Luke's, was a Jedi Knight prevents him from rejecting the rescue attempt automatically. It hardly seems appropriate to abandon his mission in order to pursue what is ultimately a very personal task.

- *If Luke forgets about Erling, turn to section 11.*
- *If Luke attempts to rescue Erling, turn to section 31.*

**20**

Luke pulls up into a wild, spinning bank away from the TIE fighters. They do not even hesitate to follow; apparently, they consider the assault shuttle more than a match for Gideon's prospecting scow. This could mean trouble.

"Give me more power, Artoo."

Artoo whistles, displaying a message on the vidscreen. The repulsor drives are already at 121% capacity.

"Don't bother me with engine stress," Luke snaps. "If we don't move faster, we won't have anything left to stress!"

The Droid obeys without comment. Luke silently berates himself for letting his frustration show. Artoo is programmed to object when he pushes too far; getting angry won't change that.

Three fiery clouds burst open beneath the X-wing, bouncing it into a steeper trajectory. Luke's lower back objects to the abuse, but he ignores the pain. He has suffered bone-shock before.

A damage report flashes across the cockpit vidscreen. The hits fused all four laser power lines. The X-wing is now completely defenseless, unless he counts his proton torpedoes—which have about as much chance of hitting a TIE fighter as a Wookiee has of passing for a Twi'lek.

Luke now has no choice—he must escape, and whether he makes it or not has come down to a speed contest between his X-wing and the TIE fighters.

The TIEs continue pounding his shields, but Luke notices they score fewer hits as the seconds pass. A check of the flight computer reveals the distance between them is growing at an ever-increasing rate—and the repulsor drives have reached 135% capacity.



Thirty seconds later, the TIEs break off and Luke plots a course for home.

*Luke managed to get out alive, but that does not help the folks on 24 Tredway. Return to section one and try again.*

**21**

The TIEs open their formation into a wide diamond and approach slowly. Their firepoints are now bright enough that Luke can easily distinguish them from background stars. The Imperials appear more interested in keeping intruders away from the assault than in attacking a lone X-wing and a prospecting scow. Unfortunately, with the TIEs' numerical advantage, Luke doubts he can fight his way past them to the shuttle.

"We'd better not tangle with these guys," Luke says. "We're not going to help anyone by getting ourselves killed."

"You're the man with the starfighter," Gideon replies. "Whatever you think."

Luke swings his X-wing around and accelerates away from the assault. Gideon follows, his scow moving surprisingly fast for such a bulky craft. The TIE lightpoints quickly fade to nothingness.

"We'd better ditch that starfighter of yours before we go to the Tol Ado visitor center, son," Gideon says. "Sidney knows just the place. Follow us."

A prison planet visitor center sounds suspicious to Luke. "I don't know about going to that center," he says. "Why would anyone build a thing like that?"

"Sidney says Parnell think's his prison is an artwork," Gideon says. "He just wants to display it. It also reminds folks what'll happen to 'em if they get out of line. We might as well take advantage of it—can't think of a better place to make our plans from."

"Okay," Luke says.

Gideon leads the way to an asteroid catalogued as 40,005 Milton. At first, the asteroid looks like a dust particle suspended in a dark room. Within a few minutes, however, it more closely resembles a gray sugar-cube floating in a vat of black sludge.

They descend into a small dark crater, no more than 20 meters across. Floodlights on Gideon's bow illuminate the crater walls to daylight brightness as the ship heads into the maw. The crater is actually a tunnel leading deep into the asteroid. Luke admires Gideon's skill and confidence as a pilot, for his ship has no more than a meter of clearance on a side.

Finally, after three tense minutes, they reach a wide spot in the tunnel. Gideon turns the scow around and lowers a ramp from the belly airlock. Luke lands the X-wing, buckles up in his vacsuit, then unloads Artoo and helps him up the ramp.

The interior of Gideon's *Rockcan* is dark without being gloomy. Like most prospecting junks, Gideon's ship consists mostly of a battered cargo bay used to carry ore to a refinery. The repulsor engines, slow but powerful, sit directly aft of the cargo bay. The crew quarters, which Gideon maintains immaculately but without extraneous decoration, are organized for both comfort and efficiency.

"Why you bringing that along?" Gideon demands, pointing at Artoo Detoo.

"It's a long story," Luke says. "But he might come in handy. I've used this little guy in similar situations."

Gideon grunts, unimpressed. "I don't much care for Droids, myself."

Artoo whistles sharply.

"What'd he say?" Gideon demands.

Luke shrugs. "I can't understand him unless he's plugged in." In this case, Luke feels confident it is just as well the Droid cannot be understood.

Gideon raises the airlock ramp, then directs Luke to a seat. A few minutes later, they leave 40,005 Milton and lumber toward the Tol Ado visitor center.

*Remember Luke left his starfighter at the asteroid "Milton." He may need it later.*

• Turn to section 86.

**22**

Luke activates his throat mike. "Gideon, cover my port flank. I'll break for the starboard TIE when we close to medium range. Have you got that?"

"Yep. Don't worry about nothing, son."

Luke deactivates his throat mike and turns his attention to his targeting computer. Despite Gideon's reassurances, Luke's stomach churns uneasily. Even with his X-wing's superiority over the TIE fighters, the odds are stacked against him. He must quickly destroy at least two Imperials, or the TIE force will soon wear him down.

Four energy bolts flash from the TIEs, dying well ahead of the X-wing. Luke grins; the Imperial pilots are being careless. At this range, they should be targeting, not firing. He continues to hold his own fire, occasionally confirming his targeting coordinates visually. The TIEs now appear to be tiny, double-winged balls with burning tails. They remind Luke of the firebees back on Yavin's jungle-moon—the ones that harassed Wedge the time they sneaked out. . .

The TIEs fire again. This time, Luke can clearly identify two shots coming from each fighter's double laser cannon. The bolts explode on all sides of the X-wing, knocking it around like a raft at sea. The Imperial fighters have reached his medium range!

Luke banks the X-wing hard to starboard, accelerating at maximum output. His target panics and begins firing blindly; Luke calmly increases the power to his forward deflector shields. The other TIEs hesitate before responding to his maneuver, uncertain as to the extent of the threat posed by the scow protecting Luke's flank.

Despite the urge to fire, Luke keeps his finger off the trigger. He believes in concentration, not raw firepower. When his computer locks onto the target, he will unleash his weapons, and not a moment earlier. The TIE, on the other hand, shows only enough discipline to hold formation. The pilot continues firing blindly, churning the emptiness in front of Luke into a storm of fiery clouds. Although the tempest batters Luke's shields, no shot is well-enough aimed to do him any damage.

At last, Luke locks onto his target. He presses the trigger and four bolts flash from his fire-linked laser cannons. The energy streaks meet just to the TIE's port, erupting into a magnificent red billow. The TIE lurches wildly, then drops into a wild corkscrew dive, no longer concerned with formation. Luke groans at the near-miss, then follows with his laser cannons blazing.

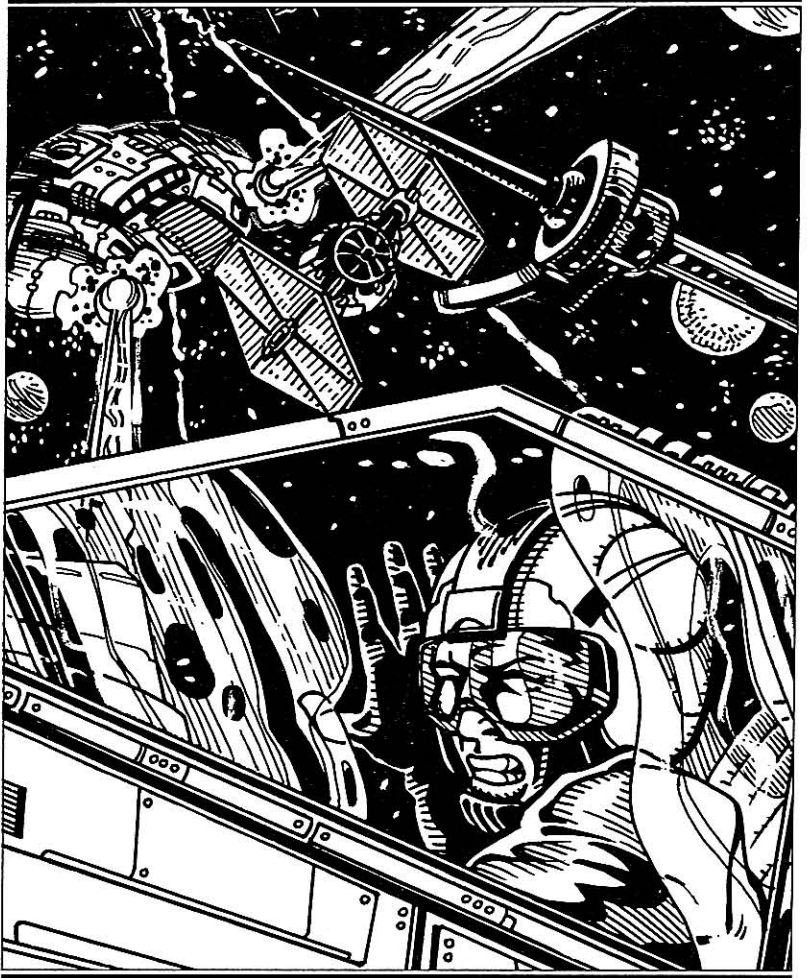
Meanwhile, the other TIEs finally decide to support their wingmate. By the time they turn, Luke is already pursuing his target in a wild dive. As the TIEs cross Gideon's path, the scow's unimpressive-looking batteries unleash a surprisingly vicious salvo. A line of fiery clouds erupts along a hundred-meter-long pattern at the bottom of the TIE diamond.

When the hurricane fades, all three TIEs still pursue Luke. His suddenly precarious position does not escape his notice. "You call that covering fire!" the Rebel pilot exclaims. The first energy bolts from his pursuers flash past the cockpit. He fires his own weapons again. This time, the target flares brightly for an instant, then dissolves into a million glittering shards.

"Sorry, I'm a mite rusty," Gideon answers. "They're pushing you out of my range. Double back!"

Luke considers his situation. If he turns back, he must face all three enemy fighters head-on. On the other hand, if he continues in his present direction, he might or might not be able to outrun his pursuers, but at least he won't be facing them at full strength. Of course, running will put him out of Gideon's range and beyond any hope of help. The question is, how much help can he expect from an old man in a beat-up prospecting scow?

- If Luke runs, turn to section 4.
- If Luke doubles back, turn to section 14.



23

Luke moves his hand away from his blaster, though he does so reluctantly. He knows better than to trust Imperials. Back on Tatooine, stormtroopers raided the moisture farm of his adoptive parents. Although Luke had long entertained dreams of fighting for the Alliance, his Aunt Beru and Uncle Owen were simple people with no Rebel sympathies. That did not stop the stormtroopers from burning their home and murdering them.

After the raid, Luke turned his dreams into reality. Vowing to topple the Empire's might, Luke joined the Rebellion and dedicated his life to opposing tyranny.

This particular moment, however, is not a wise one to exercise that opposition. The stormtroopers outnumber him six-to-one, and Luke is prudent enough to realize that he can count on no help from strangers. In addition, it appears the Imperials find the charismatic human more interesting than him. Even given the bad odds, Luke would aid the stranger, but it appears he does not wish to resist his arrest.

After Luke places both his hands on the table, the man stands and turns to face the Imperial general. "Take me, Sebastian," he says. "You know I will not resist."

"My title is Governor-General, traitor," the Imperial says. "And before I am finished, you will beg the favor of death."

"Perhaps so, Sebastian. But for every drop of blood you spill, a million sentients will rise in rebellion."

"Then I will spill a million buckets of blood."

After a brief hesitation, the charismatic human faces the prospectors. "Spread the news of my arrest to your fellows, and resist the evil Empire! They cannot rule without your cooperation—"

A stormtrooper calmly steps forward and smashes his rifle butt against the orator's head. Two other troopers catch the man as he slumps, and they drag him toward the door.

The Governor-General studies the room with a sinister glare. After a long pause, he says, "If the Empire cannot rule without your cooperation, then it will crush you. Spread that news to your fellows."

The general turns on his heel and leaves, followed by his stormtroopers. The patrons ignore each other, anxious not to discuss what they have seen.

To his side, the miner Luke remembers edging away when the Imperials first appeared shakes his head sadly.

"Wha—" Outrage and confusion loosen Luke's tongue, and he has to stop himself from protesting out loud. Will he ever learn to think before he speaks?

But the sound has caught the prospector's ear. He has the red complexion and bulbous nose of a man who enjoys liquid intoxicants perhaps more often than he should, but he also has a steady, honest gaze.

- *If Luke asks the man about what he has just seen, turn to section 28.*
- *If Luke simply finishes his meal and leaves, turn to section 33.*

**24**

"We can't leave without searching for survivors," Luke says.

Sidney flattens his ears and gnashes his teeth, but does not object.

"We'll bury ourselves in the holding trough—"

"Too late," Gideon says. "They're here."

Two white forms stand at the opposite end of the mill. Even though the troopers appear little larger than his finger, now that Luke has an opportunity to study them, he recognizes the bulky shapes of assault armor. As the young Rebel watches, one trooper points at the ships.

"What do we do now?" Sidney asks.

"Those are assault troopers," Luke says. "They have miniature proton torpedo hurlers mounted on their suits. We won't do the survivors any favors by getting ourselves torpedoed." His words belie his own desire to fight back, but the odds of the three of them doing any damage to the stormtroopers are lower than he is willing to accept. "I have a better idea."

- *Turn to section 43.*

**25**

"Shield power forward!" Luke orders, dropping into a tight outside loop. He ends the maneuver facing three TIEs. He is targeting on the Imperial pilots before they can realize what he has done.

As the Imperials split, Luke fires. The X-wing's first shots fall behind the TIE he is targeting, dissipating harmlessly into space. Luke increases his speed and pulls the nose up, then fires again. By the time the energy bolts leap from his laser cannons, he has closed to 100 meters. He can see the Imperial pilot jerking his controls to port to avoid colliding with the X-wing.

Then the TIE dissolves into a ball of flame and glittering shards. The pilot simply ceases to exist.

Two shots streak across the X-wing's nose from opposite directions, reminding Luke he can meet a similar fate just as quickly. One of the remaining TIEs approaches on each flank, catching Luke's X-wing in a deadly crossfire. He responds immediately, climbing into a high, spiraling loop toward the TIE on the starboard side.

For a brief moment, the Imperials hang over his cockpit, upside down and far apart. They both fire, sending streaks of energy toward Luke's canopy. The phototropic transparisteel darkens, shielding his eyes from the effects of two shield hits directly overhead.

Luke utters a silent thank-you to the inventor of the phototropic canopy; without it, the brilliant flashes would have blinded him—perhaps permanently.

The starfighter lurches as if a meteor struck it. The canopy becomes transparent an instant later, revealing the fading clouds of the shield hits not ten meters overhead. Artoo chirps and Luke drops his attention to his instruments. The hits vaporized the radio antenna, but they suffered no other damage.

However, the starboard TIE now has a secure lock on his tail, mercifully at long range. Even if he hits again, the shot will have little impact on Luke's shields. Luke has the other TIE almost directly in his sights. He fires without targeting, sending a stream of energy bolts just to the front and starboard of the worried Imperial.

The TIE pilot rolls to port, bringing him into Luke's targeting cone. Luke activates the computer and immediately locks onto the TIE. For nearly a second, he follows the Imperial to secure the lock. Finally, he triggers his weapons. All four laser cannons touch the TIE with blue streaks. It dissolves into a blackish-orange smear.

A long series of bolts streaks past the canopy, giving Luke no time to gloat. While Luke finished off his target, his pursuer closed the distance separating their two fighters. He is now positioned securely at medium range in Luke's vulnerable tail-cone.

Fortunately for Luke, Gideon has finally caught up with the battle. His squarish-craft approaches from Luke's starboard. The scow appears no larger than his thumbnail, but Luke can quickly drag the dogfight into Gideon's range.

He banks toward the scow, careful to keep his X-wing between Gideon and the TIE. With luck, the TIE pilot is concentrating so intently upon hammering Luke's tail that he isn't watching his flight computer. If Luke can just block the TIE's view of the *Rockcan*, the Imperial pilot might find a big surprise awaiting him at the end of this run.

For two seconds, Luke makes short, quick dodges designed to hide Gideon's presence. The TIE hits Luke's shields time after time, prompting Artoo to flash a series of disturbing warnings across the vidscreen. Luke ignores the warnings and flies a fairly straight pattern, drawing the Imperial pilot ever closer to Gideon. He can only hope Gideon has guessed his plan—and will not miss this time.

A fireball erupts atop the cockpit and the X-wing lurches. A shudder rumbles up from the drives and Luke decelerates. Every instrument on the panel falls blank and even the life support system fails.

"Artoo?" Luke calls.

No answer comes. Another firecloud opens, thankfully too far ahead to affect anything. The X-wing's sudden deceleration took the TIE by surprise. The next shot will not miss.

"Artoo-Detoo!" Luke yells, his voice betraying his desperation.

Artoo warbles pitifully. Life slowly returns to the cockpit instruments, and an apologetic note appears on the vidscreen.

"Forget it," Luke says. "Everybody gets shaken up once in a while. Just get those repulsor drives fired up again."

By the time Luke finishes his request, the X-wing's tail is already aflame with energy. Luke pushes the control stick forward and dives for cover beneath Gideon's scow.

As the X-wing drops, the scow's turbo-laser battery energizes, the cannon tips glowing red with impending destruction. Though he cannot see the Imperial's face, Luke can imagine his surprise at finding himself face-to-face with a set of asteroid blasters.

The scow fires and the emptiness behind Luke erupts into a hurricane of blazing clouds. The storm is still expanding when Luke brings his fighter around. Did the blast catch the TIE?

For a full second, he waits for the explosion to die away. Nothing comes out. But the Imperial pilot might be waiting on the other side of the tempest, prepared to spring forward and assault Luke again.

When the fireballs dissipate, Luke sees no sign of the TIE. Luke brings his X-wing abreast of the scow's cockpit. Behind the controls, Gideon sits with a broad grin splitting his beard from ear to ear. Sidney slumps in the co-pilot's seat, his ears pressed flat against his head and his muzzle crumpled into a mask of horror and guilt. He cannot seem to bring himself to meet Luke's gaze.

Gideon lifts his hand in a thumbs-up sign, then points to the Tredway asteroid. At first, Luke cannot see the assault shuttle. He finally notices a firepoint settling next to the disc of lights near the asteroid's center. He nods, then accelerates toward the shuttle.

• *Turn to section 8.*

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26

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Luke finds the controls as if they were a part of his body. He feels strangely calm, despite the desperation of his situation. His grip on the control stick is sure and even, and his whole body feels as if it is linked to the X-wing's computer control. It almost seems he is part of the machine, and the machine is part of the cosmos.

Without conscious thought, Luke allows his hand to move of its own accord. It guides the starfighter into a wide, banking turn. The cockpit trembles; a TIE scores a near hit. Luke does not allow the enemy fire to disturb his meditation. He continues letting his hand guide the ship.

The turn seems to take hours. Luke cannot guess how far he has come around, or what the Imperial pilots think of his maneuver. He simply concentrates on how the turn feels and on the grace of the motion.

At last, the turn feels complete. He allows his mind to reassert itself enough to start a series of evasive maneuvers. He jerks left three times, then right twice, up four, then down once. Anything to keep the TIE targeting computers from locking onto him for a few seconds more.

He has no idea where the TIEs are, whether Gideon has already destroyed them, or even if he is flying toward Gideon's scow. He only senses that safety lies directly ahead. It has something to do with the peaceful tingling at the base of his brainstem. Beyond that, he cannot explain how he knows the way back to safety.

The X-wing lurches, then trembles, shattering Luke's serene confidence. The TIEs are still on his tail, and their targeting computers have locked onto the X-wing's silhouette. Luke breaks left, then drops into a corkscrew dive.

A tremendous concussion smashes Luke down into his seat. Then everything is quiet. He flies straight ahead. Are the TIEs gone?

Fifteen seconds later, he sees spots before his eyes. His vision is beginning to return. The brilliant burst of an energy bolt lets Luke know something else has returned. He grasps the controls and turns tight, arming his laser cannons.

Through his spotty vision, he sees a single double-winged ball dead ahead. Gideon's box-shaped scow chases the TIE in vain; it is so distant Luke can barely distinguish it from a dim star. On the other hand, the TIE is so close Luke can see the Imperial pilot pushing his targeting computer out of the way. Luke smiles; this is where he excels.

He adjusts his course so that he bears directly down on the Imperial, then fires. Four blue streaks flash beneath the TIE and converge a full 500 meters behind it.

The TIE returns fire, its double laser cannon churning the 50 meters of nothingness between the two craft into a sea of energy sprays. Luke eases the X-wing's nose up and fires. Two bolts sheer the TIE's left support pylon away. The solar panel flutters away from the sparking cockpit.

Luke pulls up hard to avoid the crippled TIE, then looks back just as it erupts into a puff of orange flame.

"That was too close, Ben," Luke mutters. His only answer is the fading tingle deep within his brain.

A few seconds later, he pulls abreast of the prospecting scow's cockpit. Behind the pilot's controls, Gideon sits with a broad grin splitting his beard from ear to ear. Sidney perches in the co-pilot's seat, his ears pressed flat to his head and his muzzle crumpled into a mask of horror and guilt. He cannot seem to bring himself to meet Luke's eyes.

Gideon raises his hand in a thumbs-up sign, then points toward the Tredway asteroid. At first, Luke cannot see the assault shuttle. He finally sees a lightpoint setting down by the glowing disc near the asteroid's center. He nods, then accelerates toward the shuttle.

• *Turn to section 8.*

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27

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"Let's continue."

Luke leads the way around the left end of the mill, expecting to meet a squad of assault troopers at any moment, but he finds none. The structure extends a quarter of a kilometer ahead. To the left, two residential buildings mark the perimeter of the complex. Two kilometers ahead, the main house sits atop its carefully sculpted terraces. Even from this distance, Luke sees a half-dozen breaches in its walls.

As they advance along the edge of the mill, Luke glimpses a squad of stormtroopers rushing toward the largest headframe. He stops long enough for the squad to pass out of sight, then continues to the next corner.

The center of the complex lies in ruins. The shop roof has collapsed, burying tons of vehicles and equipment under two meters of rubble. Beyond that, a walker-sized gap defaces a corner of the “dry,” the building where the miners dress for work. The flexi-corridors leading from structure to structure have holes and tears every 20 meters.

Luke originally expected survivors. Instead, he finds corpses of all sizes and shapes littering the compound. The Imperial attack caught the inhabitants by surprise. There is no sign of resistance. About a hundred disfigured, charred objects that might or might not have once been alive lie scattered across the complex.

A pair of badly damaged and confused maintenance Droids, one missing an arm and the other a leg, labor to repair the gap in the dry. A medical Droid with a hole through its logic center scurries from one charred figure to another, administering painkillers and healing balms to creatures beyond remedy.

Luke stops moving in mid-stride, struggling to shut out memories of a similar scene: smoke pouring from the entrance to his aunt and uncle’s subterranean house; the intense heat that beats him back as he tries to enter the inferno he once called home; two smoking and unrecognizable shapes crumpled on the sand they farmed so long—were they trying to escape? Despite his efforts, the rage and sorrow of that time returns in full force. He finally allows the emotions to wash over him once more; he cannot win a fight with his own heart.

“You still feel bad about killing that murderer?” Gideon asks Sidney, mercifully pulling Luke out of his meditation.

“Yes,” Sidney says. “I am sick in the heart.”

Luke feels no sorrow over the stormtroopers’ deaths, but he will not allow himself to feel any joy, either. If he learned one thing from Ben Kenobi, it is that vengeance leads to evil. “Me too,” Luke says.

They patiently work their way to the main house. The Imperials have methodically gutted it, destroying everything that might be of value. All that remains are shot-up pieces of furniture, smashed holopics, and burned art treasures.

The party splits up to search the house more quickly. A few minutes later, Luke hears Sidney sobbing over the comlink. He seems to be trying to call for his companions, but cannot form the words. Luke quickly tracks him to a bedroom in the back of the house.

A neat stack of twenty dead beings lies in the center of the room. Sidney stands in the doorway, oblivious to anything else.

Luke closes his eyes in pain at the sight, unable to voice a comforting thought.

Gideon rushes up to the doorway. When he sees the bodies, he pushes into the room. He studies several corpses, then says, “Looks like the old lady and her staff.”

“Let’s get out of here,” Sidney says. “We must go to the Tol Ado.”

Gideon shrugs. “We could search the rest of the house. But I don’t see the point.”

- *If Luke returns to his ship to leave for Tol Ado, turn to section 37.*
- *If Luke continues the search, turn to section 59.*

Luke studies the robust prospector for a moment. His careful gaze misses little in the room, yet he does not appear overly interested in the affairs of others. Luke knows well that you cannot judge a man by his appearance, but he senses no inherent hostility or evil in this being.

“That general promises a rough journey,” Luke says. He keeps his eyes trained on his meal.

The prospector stops eating and openly studies Luke for several moments. At last, he nods. “He’ll deliver—make no mistake. It was smart to mind your own peace; might have gotten the whole lot of us killed.”

Luke returns the man’s frank appraisal. “Was it? Somebody should resist the Empire’s oppression.”

The prospector looks back to his meal and Luke fears that he spoke too openly. A moment later, however, the bearded man says, “That’d be the truth, son. But that fellow’s a coward.”

A yellow-furred biped with slit pupils sits next to Luke. “The Gideon distorts the fact,” the biped whispers through his short muzzle. “The Tredway leads the resistance movement.”

Luke listens more carefully. Like all spacecraft pilots, he has standing instructions to investigate any local resistance movements he encounters. “Tell me more.”

“He teaches that bloodshed, even against the foul oppressor, is in itself evil.”

“He’ll learn the error of his ways in Tol Ado,” Gideon whispers. “Sebastian Parnell believes in bloodshed—and a whole lot more.”

“Tol Ado?” Luke asks.

“The sector prison planet,” the biped answers. “Once one enters, he dies to the galaxy. We will never hear from the Tredway again.”

Gideon spits on the floor. “Just as well. What fool will ‘rise up’ just to get killed? Give me somebody who can handle a ‘saber—” Gideon drops his gaze to Luke’s utility belt, “and I’ll follow him into the Emperor’s black heart itself.”

Almost involuntarily, Luke glances at the inactivated lightsaber hanging from his belt. He has the uncomfortable feeling that Gideon wants—no, expects—something from him. “Have you seen someone fight with a lightsaber, then?” Luke cautiously asks.

“Sure,” Gideon replies. “Axton Tredway, Erling’s father. He called himself some sort of Knight. That what you are?”

“No, not yet,” Luke answers absently. Erling’s father was a Jedi! “What happened to Axton Tredway?”

“The Empire tracked him down, then some Dark Lord killed him. And a shame it was, too.”

Luke’s heart sinks, but he suddenly feels a mysterious kinship with Erling. Not only had their fathers both been Jedi, but they had probably died at the hands of the same man.

“If you are not yet the Knight,” the furry biped says, “then you study the ways of the Jedi.”

Luke does not respond to the biped’s deduction.

“If the legends speak true,” the biped continues. “You can save Erling.”

"Don't put any fool notions into this youngster's head!" Gideon snaps. "You'll get him killed, Sidney." Sidney ignores Gideon. "Will you try?"

"Don't do it, son," Gideon warns. "It's easy enough to get into Tol Ado, but you'll never get out. You'd best go about your business and forget Erling Tredway."

Luke does not reply immediately. Gideon is correct: attempting to rescue Erling is foolish. Imperial prison planets are notoriously secure. Although his orders leave latitude to investigate local resistance movements, even the most liberal interpretations would not permit penetrating such an installation.

Of course, Rebel officers can always use their own initiative to abandon a mission in order to pursue an unexpected opportunity, as long as that opportunity is more important. But no matter how Luke looks at the situation, he cannot say that Erling Tredway is more important than searching for a new base. He knows little about the man except that he has an unusually commanding presence and is urging the local life forms to passively resist the Empire. Only the probability that Erling's father, like Luke's, was a Jedi Knight prevents him from rejecting the rescue attempt automatically. On the other hand, it hardly seems appropriate to abandon his mission in order to pursue what is ultimately a very personal task.

- If Luke forgets about Erling, turn to section 11.
- If Luke attempts to rescue Erling, turn to section 31.

"No use running," Luke mutters. "They know this maze better than I do." He can't help the little rush of excitement he feels at pitting his ship and his skills against an enemy pilot. It still galls a little to have walked away from the hospice. Turning the X-wing toward the corvette, Luke energizes the forward deflector shields. His maneuver seems to take the pirate by surprise.

Luke fires first, and his shots hit the corvette head-on. The nose of the pirate ship explodes just as its aft weapons open fire. The captain had not even raised his shields; he must have been as surprised to see Luke as the Rebel was to see him.

The corvette's last bolts stray far wide of Luke's fighter, and the battle ends almost before Luke realizes it has begun. "This just might be the place," Luke tells Artoo. "Set a course for home."

\* \* \* \*

The mood at Rebel Command is apprehensive and glum. Not one of Luke's wingmates has found a suitable base site, and they have lost two fighters to Imperial patrols. Unfortunately, General Dodonna cannot use Luke's suggestion, either.

"I like your idea, Luke. An asteroid belt would provide both camouflage and defensive terrain," Dodonna says. "But Mon Mothma absolutely refuses to entertain the idea. As soon as I said Sil'Lume, she said no. If you ask me, she's got something else going in that system—but don't ask me. Nice try; maybe somebody else will come up with something."

*Although Luke followed his orders exactly, he failed on this mission. Return to section one and try again.*

Luke ignores Artoo's incessant plea to answer the distress call. "Our orders are to find a new base site," he says. "That is our most important duty right now."

Artoo falls silent. Droids should not be capable of emotion, but Luke swears Artoo is sulking. His little friend's adventures have certainly taken their toll on his motivation circuits.

Thirty minutes later, they reach the denser ring of rock and ice that contains the first asteroid cluster. It is a large one. Over 500 asteroids, ranging in size from less than a kilometer in length to more than a hundred, hover within sight of each other. They churn and circle around a common center of gravity like a pack of wary Rorks looking for a fight.

Luke slows to a crawl and eases into the maze of open space between the mammoth boulders. Every asteroid drifts along a crazy track created by the gravitational influences of a hundred neighbors. Where the largest asteroids have attracted smaller neighbors too strongly, huge impact craters blemish their faces. In other cases, smaller rocks orbit their monstrous kin like moons.

As Luke passes deeper inside, he appreciates even more the difficulty of following a ship into the cluster. Unless the pursuer knows the maze as well as the target, he has no hope of keeping up. And, as Luke hoped, heavy line-ships cannot threaten anything hiding within the swirling knot of rock. No captain in his right mind would bring anything larger than a corvette into this cluster.

His cockpit radio suddenly crackles to life. "Wart, is that you?"

Luke checks the X-wing's sensors, but sees no signs of another ship. He quickly activates the probes; this is no place to be blind.

"Hey, Wart! What's the big idea? You want Parnell to find our hideout?"

In the same instant, both sets of sensors detect a corvette to Luke's starboard side. It has just advanced from behind a mid-sized asteroid.

"Hey, you're not Wart!" the cockpit speaker announces.

"Sorry," Luke answers. Judging from the corvette's heavy armament, it is either a makeshift Rebel raider or a pirate. Luke is confident no Rebel squadrons operate in the Sil'Lume Belt.

- If Luke flees the corvette, turn to section 3.
- If Luke attacks, turn to section 29.

"Where is Tol Ado?" Luke asks.

"Then you will rescue the Erling Tredway?"

Luke nods in response. "I shouldn't, but I will." General Dodonna will no doubt disapprove of the decision, and Luke will be hard-pressed to argue its merits rationally. But an undefinable and mysterious feeling buried deep within his breast urges him to rescue the stranger. Perhaps the feeling is no more than the vague kinship he feels for another son of a Jedi, or perhaps it is something much stronger and



more important. Whatever the reason, it does not matter. Luke only knows he must rescue Erling Tredway.

"We'd best get along, then," Gideon says, tugging a confused, yellow-furred biped toward the exit.

"We?" Luke asks.

"Yeah, 'we,'" Gideon answers. "If you're a big enough fool to break into an Imperial prison planet and think you can get out, then you're a big enough fool to get yourself killed. I ain't about to let that happen—it's been too many years since I fought alongside a 'saber carrier.'" The prospector's decisive stride carries him toward a definite destination.

"But I cannot!" objects the short-muzzled biped, trying to shake free of Gideon's hand.

"Sure you can, Sidney," answers Gideon cheerfully, tightening his grip.

"But there may be killing! The Pada cannot kill—it is wrong!"

"So?" Gideon demands. "What's the difference whether this young fellow and I do it, or whether you lend a paw? Killin's killing."

Sidney's round ears flop forward in frustration. "But if someone dies—"

"Too late," Gideon presses. "Young Erling's your hero, Sidney. You can't ask somebody to fight for your freedom, your cause, if you won't."

Sidney cannot argue. "Very well. Let us go." He shakes free of Gideon's grip and starts toward the exit.

Luke hesitates to follow. Although Gideon and Sidney seem trustworthy enough, he knows nothing about their combat skills. They could easily be more of a hindrance than a help. "Maybe I should go alone," Luke says. "I have a one-man ship."

Gideon smiles broadly at Luke. "You're afraid we can't fight, ain't you?" Gideon waits a moment, but Luke does not know how to state his reservations politely. "Maybe we can't and maybe we can. It don't matter—this is our sector, and it would be wrong to keep us out of the fight. If somebody wins our freedom for us, it ain't really ours."

Luke nods. He feels a certain respect for the prospector. He follows the miners into a winding flexi-corridor leading to the airlock. As they don their vacsuits, Luke stands near the massive airlock transwall and studies the asteroid upon which the hospice sits.

The hospice itself is a collection of white plasfoam bubbles connected by long, twisting flexi-corridors. Sturdy durasteel cables anchor the bubbles and flexi-corridors to outcroppings of bedrock protruding from the dusty, crater-riddled surface. The cables are needed because the tiny planetoid's gravitational field is so weak a child can throw a rock into space. Asteroid hoppers and prospecting scows rest in a disarrayed radius around the hospice, tethered to hospice buildings, handy rocks, or each other.

Formally known as 400,324 Henryson, the planetoid is little more than a kilometer in length, and half that in width and thickness. The designation number preceding the name indicates Henryson was the 400,324th planetoid in the Sil'Lume Belt catalogued as a sentient being's property. The name refers to the original owner. When Luke was investigating the sector records, Artoo reported that the catalogue numbers run as high as 895,256, but nobody knows how many asteroids have never been claimed.

Henryson rotates so quickly that Luke grows dizzy when he looks away from the ground. The stars actually fly across the horizon like meteors. To make matters worse, the sun never sets on Henryson. Its grape-sized disc flashes across the sky as if fired from a slingshot. As the most prominent reference point in the heavens, it serves as a constant reminder that Luke stands on nothing more than a giant merry-go-round.

"Tol Ado is planet three in this system," Gideon says, fastening the last seal on his vacsuit.

"Great," Luke says. "Let's get going."

Gideon hesitates. "Not so fast, young fellow. It might be worth our time to visit 24 Tredway first. Tol Ado's mighty big; Erling's family might have some ideas about how to find him. Besides, they ought to be warned; Parnell might not be satisfied with just arresting Erling."

Sidney's muzzle wrinkles into a yellow wad, and his ears twitch impatiently. "The Parnell may destroy the Erling at any moment," he insists. "We dare not waste the minute."

- If Luke goes directly to Tol Ado, turn to section 2.
- If Luke goes to 24 Tredway first, turn to section 9.

Luke activates his throat mike. "I'm going straight through the formation center; maybe I can knock that shuttle out before it lands."

"That's risky, young fellow," Gideon says. "I can't cover your tail."

"I know," Luke says. "But if this works, you won't need to."

The old prospector sighs. "You're the fellow with the X-wing. Whatever you say."

Luke deactivates his throat mike, then orders Artoo to bring the shields to maximum power all the way around. He does not want to insult Gideon by saying it, but he doubts the beat-up scow's batteries can even track a TIE fighter.

Keeping one eye on the TIEs, Luke points the X-wing straight at the Imperial diamond's center and accelerates. The TIEs grow from tiny firepricks to double-winged balls with burning tails. They react to the maneuver an instant later, closing the formation as if it were a noose. Luke holds his course steady, despite the realization that he has failed to surprise them. It is too late for second thoughts now!

An energy bolt streaks from each TIE. Each dissipates far short of the X-wing. Luke briefly considers targeting one of the Imperials, but quickly rejects the plan. To fire, he would have to change his heading. His only hope now is to streak past the TIEs before they shower him with too many hits.

The TIEs fire again. This time, Luke can clearly see the bolts flash from their double laser cannons. His X-wing shakes with the concussion of the near misses and bounces through the shockwave. Luke readjusts his course and continues on.

"Pull up!" Gideon calls. "They've got your number!"

By the time Gideon finishes his warning, the TIEs are so close Luke can actually see into the enemy cockpits and watch the Imperial pilots adjusting their targeting computers. They are between him and the shuttle; he must blast his way past the TIE formation.

He activates his own targeting computer. Before he gets a chance to use it, the X-wing lurches as if it has struck a wall. Luke sees nothing but white light. Artoo whistles a stream of warnings, but Luke cannot see the vidscreen to interpret them.

"Are we in trouble?" Luke asks, trying to keep the panic out of his voice.

Artoo chirps urgently.

"I'm flash blind," Luke snaps. "Just be quiet." Luke knows that his condition will persist only a few minutes. The canopy is made of phototropic transparisteel; it automatically darkens to protect the pilot's eyes when it senses a light burst. Luke must have been looking directly at the flash, and it must have been very close by, for the blast to have affected him at all. Although flight instructors warn new pilots about the dangers of flash blindness, this is the first time Luke—or anyone he knows of—has ever suffered it. The thought does little to comfort him, for he has no doubt that Imperial pilots are still firing at him. It can only be a matter of a second before he suffers another hit.

"I'm not going to die," Luke mutters, forcing himself to remain calm and proceed rationally.

"You're still alive?" exclaims Gideon. "When you flew into those fireballs—"

Luke has activated his throat mike without realizing it—or Artoo has done it for him. "Never mind," he snaps. He is not interested in an instant replay. "Where are the TIEs?"

"On your tail, where else?" Gideon demands. "What's wrong with you. . ." He pauses in midsentence. "Oh. Don't worry about a thing. I'm coming, just—"

The X-wing rattles and jerks as if it has hit an asteroid. The cockpit speaker falls dead. "Just what?" Luke screams.

No answer comes, and Luke's heart sinks. He just might die. "Artoo? How bad is it?"

The Droid whistles excitedly. Luke does not need a translation interface to know the situation is bad. He aches to do something, but what? Artoo has probably taken the fighter's controls—if it has any controls left. The Droid might not be much of a combat pilot, but at least he can see.

While Luke helplessly waits for his vision to return, Artoo chirps and hums to himself, probably attempting to repair damaged functions while simultaneously flying the craft. This thought does not instill Luke with a great deal of hope. Every two or three seconds, Luke's body slams against its harness as the fighter shifts direction.

Doing nothing has always been the hardest thing for Luke. But now he can only sit and wait for his vision to return, for Artoo to repair the radio, for Gideon to rescue him, or for the TIEs to finish him off.

Time crawls along, all the more slowly because Luke has no objective way to measure it. How long has he been blind? Five seconds? Maybe ten? It will take at least sixty for his vision to return, and perhaps longer for Artoo to repair the radio. It will take nowhere near as long for the TIEs to find their mark one last time. In sixty seconds, he will be dead.

The X-wing shudders, then lurches and slams to the left. Another near-miss.

Luke's scalp itches and tickles, as if someone were massaging it from the inside. His whole body feels energized and electric. The time has come to do something.

But what? He can hold steady and accelerate straight ahead, trusting in his ship's ability to outrun the TIEs. Or he can take the controls and allow his instincts to guide him, sweeping back toward Gideon (he hopes).

- If Luke outruns the TIEs, turn to section 40.
- If Luke turns back, turn to section 26.

Luke finishes his bland meal and leaves the cafeteria. He does not pause to pay his check, for the beetle-proprietors demanded payment in advance. They use the excuse that belt pirates often leave without paying, but Luke recognizes simple avarice when he sees it. At the end of a barren flexi-corridor, he enters the airlock and dons his vacsuit. His X-wing lies hidden in a deep crater 600 meters away.

Before exiting the airlock, the Rebel pilot takes a moment to study the asteroid upon which the hospice sits. The hospice itself is a collection of white plasfoam



bubbles connected by long, twisting flexi-corridors. Each bubble, and each flexi-corridor as well, is anchored to an outcropping of bedrock protruding through the dusty, crater-riddled surface. This is because the tiny planetoid's gravitational attraction is so weak that a child can throw a rock into space. Asteroid hoppers and prospecting scows rest in a disarrayed radius around the complex, tethered to hospice buildings, handy rocks, or each other.

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When he is certain no unwanted observers lurk outside, Luke opens the airlock and trudges through the knee-deep dust to his hidden X-wing. Artoo opens the fighter's canopy and transmits an urgent message over Luke's comlink as he slides down the crater. Although he cannot easily understand the beep and whistle language of the R2 unit, Luke needs no translation to realize something has alarmed the little Droid.

He quickly climbs into the cockpit and activates a translator. Artoo displays his message on a vidscreen.

Luke smiles. "I know, Artoo. An Imperial general and six stormtroopers arrested somebody while I was eating."

Artoo whistles a query.

"No, I don't know why. And I didn't think it wise to ask."

Artoo remains quiet for a moment, then issues a short series of beeps.

"Help him?" Luke asks. "There were six stormtroopers—what do you think I am, a magician?"

The Droid does not answer.

"Besides, we have our mission to consider," Luke continues testily. "Let's go find a new base." He activates the X-wing's repulsor drives and they lift into space.

• *Turn to section 18.*

**34**

"Set a course for 24 Tredway," Luke says. "Someone's obviously in trouble!" No matter what his orders, Luke cannot turn off his emotions, and the S.O.S. tugs at his deepest need to help others.

A few minutes later, Luke's sensors flash a warning. A military ship is probing his X-wing. Luke immediately probes back; he sees no sense in trying to hide now—the enemy already knows he is here.

Even without his fighter's sensors, Luke can see that the situation is not good. Ahead, an egg-shaped asteroid spins around an axis located in its large end. The floating rock is perhaps 10 kilometers long and six wide. Five points of fire hover over its surface like hungry insects. One of the firepoints occasionally dives toward a disc of flickering light near the center of the asteroid.

Artoo reports the results of the active sensor probe on the vidscreen. Four of the attackers are TIE fighters. The fifth is an assault shuttle. To Luke's left, a large craft lies motionless, observing the battle; it is probably a prospector's scow. The TIEs turn to face Luke.

The cockpit speaker crackles to life. "We'll cover your tail, but don't get too blasted far ahead."

"Who's that?" Luke demands.

"Asteroid prospectors Gideon Smith and Sidney Shortfang, who else?" responds the voice. "Saw you in the hospice—we were one table down. We came to warn Dena about her brother's arrest, but I guess we weren't fast enough."

"What makes you think I'm jumping into the middle of that?" Luke demands.

"A young fellow like you would never abandon a lady in need."

Luke deactivates his throat-mike. "This isn't our fight," he says to Artoo. "And I doubt that stopping it is more important than finding a location for the new base." He pauses, torn between his orders and his desire to foul the Imperial attack. "Besides," he continues, "if I tear something up, General Dodonna will put me on report for a year."

Artoo twitters reassuringly.

"I might," Luke says. "The odds are four to one, after all."

Artoo toots again.

"I don't care what Han Solo says about odds," Luke says. "He's a smuggler; I'm an Alliance pilot."

The Droid remains silent; Luke has the feeling his little friend is unimpressed. The young Rebel knows he should turn away; although searching for a new base site is boring, it is too important to put aside lightly. Despite his orders, however, something inside Luke burns to stay and fight.

• *If Luke fights the TIEs, turn to section 17.*

• *If Luke leaves, turn to section 7.*

**35**

"Let's go to Tol Ado," Luke says. "There's nothing we can do here except fight."

"Sounds like a good enough reason to stay to me," Gideon says. "But you're the one with the lightsaber. We'd better dump that X-wing, though—it'll attract too much attention near Tol Ado."

Sidney suggests hiding it at 40,005 Milton—an abandoned asteroid he once landed on for emergency repairs—and Gideon leads the way. A short time later, they descend into a deep crater on Milton's surface. Much to Luke's surprise, the crater turns out to be an old mine tunnel. He lands the X-wing behind Gideon's scow, unloads Artoo, then climbs up the belly ramp into the *Rockcan*.

The interior of the ship is dark without being gloomy. Like most prospecting craft, it consists mostly of a beat-up cargo bay for hauling ore to the refinery. The repulsor engines, slow but powerful, sit directly aft of the cargo bay. The crew quarters are organized for both comfort and efficiency.

A few minutes later, they leave Milton and lumber toward Tol Ado.

*Remember that Luke left his starfighter at the asteroid "Milton." He may need it later.*

- Turn to section 86.

**36**

"Don't shoot back!" Luke orders. "That can't be Imperial fire—there isn't enough of it." He recovers his headlamp, then cautiously works his way along the edge of the tunnel. He soon finds a motionless Droid guarding the entrance to a side-drift. It holds a blaster pistol in its manipulatory appendage.

Someone must have ordered the Droid to attack the first pursuers to come down the tunnel. Fortunately for Luke and his friends, most Droids will self-destruct rather than deliberately injure a sentient being, thanks to a safety feature introduced after the assassin-Droid crisis of the late Republic.

"Whoever we're chasing must be down there," Gideon says.

"And whoever is chasing us isn't far behind," Sidney says.

Luke looks back up the main tunnel. Four assault troopers approach, using their self-contained propulsion packs to fly at speeds far exceeding the boss-buggy's.

"We can't go down this drift," Luke says. "We'd just be leading them right after whoever we're trying to save."

"Then we must flee down the main tunnel," Sidney says.

"Or take them out right here," Gideon says. "If we run, we'll never catch whoever that Droid was guarding."

"But how will fighting help us?" Sidney objects.

- If Luke stays, turn to section 71.
- If Luke flees, turn to section 44.

**37**

"The ships are our best chance."

When Luke reaches the edge of the mill building, he stops. Four assault-troopers stand between the party and their ships. Although the guards are not deployed for battle, they remain alert and hold their weapons ready. Once again, Luke must admire his enemy's discipline—and find a way to counter it.

As the grape-sized sun passes behind Gideon's box-shaped scow, Luke studies the situation with an eye for tactical features. His X-wing sits ten meters to port of Gideon's ship. Fifty meters of flat, silvery sand separate their position and the ships. The terrain is completely without cover. No matter what they do, the Imperials can see them coming.

Both ships remain locked tight. It seems safe to assume no Imperials lurk inside, but it will take at least 15 seconds to open the ships. Therefore, before attempting to open either vehicle, they must eliminate their opposition—and do it quickly. If the battle takes too long, the guards can call for reinforcements.

A frontal assault might work precisely because of its foolhardiness. But by charging, Luke places himself and his friends at the mercy of the stormtroopers' superior weapons. His other option is to have Artoo activate the X-wing's weapons. While the Droid stands little chance of hitting anything, he will distract the guards for a few precious moments—and alert every Imperial on the asteroid to their escape attempt.

- If Luke charges the guards, turn to section 45.
- If Luke tells Artoo to activate the X-wing weapons, turn to section 12.

**38**

Luke and Gideon slowly stand. While one stormtrooper covers them, the other takes first Luke's blaster, then Gideon's. He leaves the odd-looking handle hanging on Luke's utility belt; apparently, he has never seen a lightsaber. The troopers then march them back toward the main house.

As they pass through the compound, the severity of the destruction astonishes Luke. The complex lies in ruins. The equipment shop roof has collapsed inward, burying the building's contents under two meters of rubble. The "dry," the huge building where the miners dress for work, has a walker-sized gap in its center. The flexi-corridors sport holes and tears every 20 meters.

Luke had expected survivors. Instead, he finds corpses of all sizes and shapes littering the ground, dragged unsuited and unprepared for vacuum from destroyed buildings. About 100 disfigured, charred objects that might or might not have once been alive lie scattered about the compound.

The only things that move, besides the stormtroopers and themselves, are badly damaged and confused Droids. Two maintenance Droids, one missing an arm and the other a leg, labor to repair the gap in the locker building. A medical Droid with a smashed head scurries from one charred figure to another, performing diagnostic tests which no patient has a hope of passing.

Luke stops in his tracks, memories of a similar scene flooding his mind: black smoke pouring from the entrance to a subterranean home; the scorching heat that forced him back from the entrance to the man-made volcano that was once his home; two shapes, smoking and unrecognizable, crumpled on the sand they had farmed so long and at such cost. The emotions he felt then wash over him, no weaker for the time that has passed. He does not resist his feelings, knowing he cannot win a fight with his own mind.

"Was all this necessary?" he demands of their guards. "What did these people do to the Empire?"

The first stormtrooper shrugs. "Who knows? Now move on." He shoves Luke menacingly, but not before Luke spies Sidney scurrying from the shelter of one building to another. He vows Parnell will pay for this.

A few minutes later, the guards push Luke and Gideon into the main house. The interior was once decorated tastefully in pre-Imperial style. Now, the holographs that once adorned the halls serve as door-mats for assault boots. The expensive furniture—some of it true wood—is smashed and blaster-riddled. Barely a piece remains intact.

Their escorts stop in front of a heavy bulkhead door. It was once disguised as a series of sliding panels. Two stormtroopers stand guard outside.

"These prisoners are responsible for destroying the assault shuttle," reports Luke's captor.

One guard nods, then enters the bulkhead. A moment later, he returns. "General Parnell wishes to see them immediately."

Their captors push Luke and Gideon through the bulkhead door. After pausing in a small airlock, they enter a magnificent office. Parnell sits behind a wood desk, his black vacsuit unfastened and his helmet propped on his knee. When he sees Luke, Parnell's icy eyes narrow and he utters one word: "You!"

A moment later, he addresses the stormtroopers. "I have already placed a commendation in your files. You may stay for the interrogation."

Luke removes his helmet. "How do you justify this massacre?" He demands angrily.

Parnell regards Luke with distaste for several minutes, his eyes never straying from the young man's heated glare. At length, he answers, "Passive resistance is a particularly foolish form of rebellion, don't you agree? Of all the things a sentient being can do to confound a tyrant, it is the least damaging and the easiest to deal with.

"If, may the stars forbid, I were ever the subject of a despot, I would opt for your form of protest. That assault shuttle cost me over 200,000 credits. If a warlord has a weakness, it is his pocket-book—strike there often enough, and you may just overthrow him."

"You haven't answered the lad's question, General," Gideon says.

Parnell turns his pinched face toward the old prospector. "But I have—at least that's the only answer he will ever get." Parnell pauses. "My subordinates want to kill you two immediately. But I think not—you will join Erling Tredway in Tol Ado." He chuckles menacingly. "In the block reserved for my special guests."

"I'll make you pay for this slaughter, Parnell," Luke says. "Even if you put me at the bottom of the darkest hole in the galaxy!"

"That is precisely where I shall put you, boy." Parnell turns his attention back to the stormtroopers. "Secure them in preparation for transport."

The stormtroopers reseal Luke and Gideon's vacsuits, then push them back to the airlock. When it opens, the guards point them upstairs. As Luke starts up the stairs, he glimpses Sidney through a window at the top of the stairwell. The Pada is climbing up the outside of the house. He grasps his pistol in one paw and shrugs.

- If Luke shakes his head negatively, turn to section 48.
- If Luke nods, turn to section 51.

**39**

"Letting Parnell take us to Tol Ado is the surest way I know to find Erling Tredway," Luke says.

Gideon sighs. "I hope you know what you're doing." "Me too," Luke answers. "Can Sidney escape on his own?"

Gideon grunts an affirmative response. "I showed him how to handle the *Rockcan*, just in case."

Luke relaxes. Artoo will take his X-wing to the nearest Rebel base when it becomes apparent Luke is not returning. All he has to do is wait.

Several hours later, the stormtroopers open the closet. Luke and Gideon stumble out, stiff and sore from their awkward confinement. The guards escort them to the relief shuttle without speaking. As they climb inside, Parnell greets them with an Emdee Five medical Droid.

"We weren't expecting guests," the general says. "So how about something to help you relax until we reach Tol Ado?"

Before Luke can object, the Droid extends an air-hypo and injects him with a powerful sedative. He falls into a deep slumber even before he finds a seat.

- Turn to section 73.

**40**

Luke finds the controls as if they were part of his own body. A lump of desperation in the pit of his stomach, he opens the throttle. His body sinks into the seat as the fighter accelerates. Even with no idea of what lies ahead, he feels good about doing something.

Three seconds later, the starfighter lurches violently. Artoo twitters an alarmed report, then the X-wing spins out of control. He's been hit!

Fighting desperately to hold his composure, Luke jerks the controls right, then left. The fighter does not respond. He reports the situation to Artoo.

Artoo whistles.

Luke crashes from one side of the cockpit to the other, unable to brace against the X-wing's unpredictable gyrations. The control loss might be caused by a damaged stabilizer or a malfunctioning flight computer, both of which Artoo can repair. But until Luke knows the condition of the rest of the ship, he does not dare give Artoo any instructions. The Droid is programmed to attend to the most urgent problem first. If Luke overrides that programming without knowing the nature of the problem, the results could be immediately disastrous.

Once again Luke must wait, this time lurching from one seat restraint to another. His only compensation is that the TIEs cannot possibly lock onto such a wildly gyrating target.

Luke continues bouncing for what seems like hours. His shoulders and hips ache from slamming against the restraints time after time. Both his arms and legs are bruised and tender from banging into cockpit equipment. Eventually, however, his white veil of blindness fades away. As soon as he can read the cockpit instruments, he orders, "Damage report."

Artoo displays the X-wing's problems in order of importance. First, the life support system barely functions. Artoo is physically holding a loose oxygen hose in place. Second, the primary stabilizer hangs by a single bolt. Artoo cannot repair it without releasing the oxygen hose. Third, a near miss jammed the power converter open. The list continues for 27 items. The only good news is that the TIEs are nowhere in sight. They probably broke off shortly after the X-wing spun out of control.

"That's it," Luke says, zipping into his vacsuit. "Forget the life support and fix the stabilizer. Then I'll find someplace to set down for repairs."

*He eventually returns to base, but Luke isn't much help to the people trapped on 24 Tredway. This adventure is over for him. Return to section one and try again.*

41

Luke does not obey immediately. Instead, he says, "Come on; leave can't be such a big deal in a system like this. Where were you going? Some miner's flophouse on 100,000?"

"Anything's better than the barracks," the trooper responds. "And you'll soon think a flophouse is heaven. Now stand up before I burn a hole in you right here."

"What's the big hurry?" Luke says. "Nobody's going anywhere until the relief shuttle comes. And I hope somebody blows it up, too."

"That does it," the trooper says, fingering his trigger. "I don't care if I go on report for a month."

Sidney drops out of the chute, his blaster pistol gripped tightly in both hands. The stormtroopers do not notice him.

Luke stands. "I'm coming. By the way, you're surrounded."

"Shut up and move," the trooper says.

"He's serious, boys," Gideon says. "Take a look."

The first stormtrooper glances over his shoulder, then utters a curse and turns to fire. A green flash streaks from Sidney's weapon. The trooper topples over, his astonished curse crackling over his comlink.

Luke snaps the lightsaber off his utility belt.

The other trooper watches his partner fall. Then, realizing he is sure to follow, he raises his weapon to return Sidney's fire.

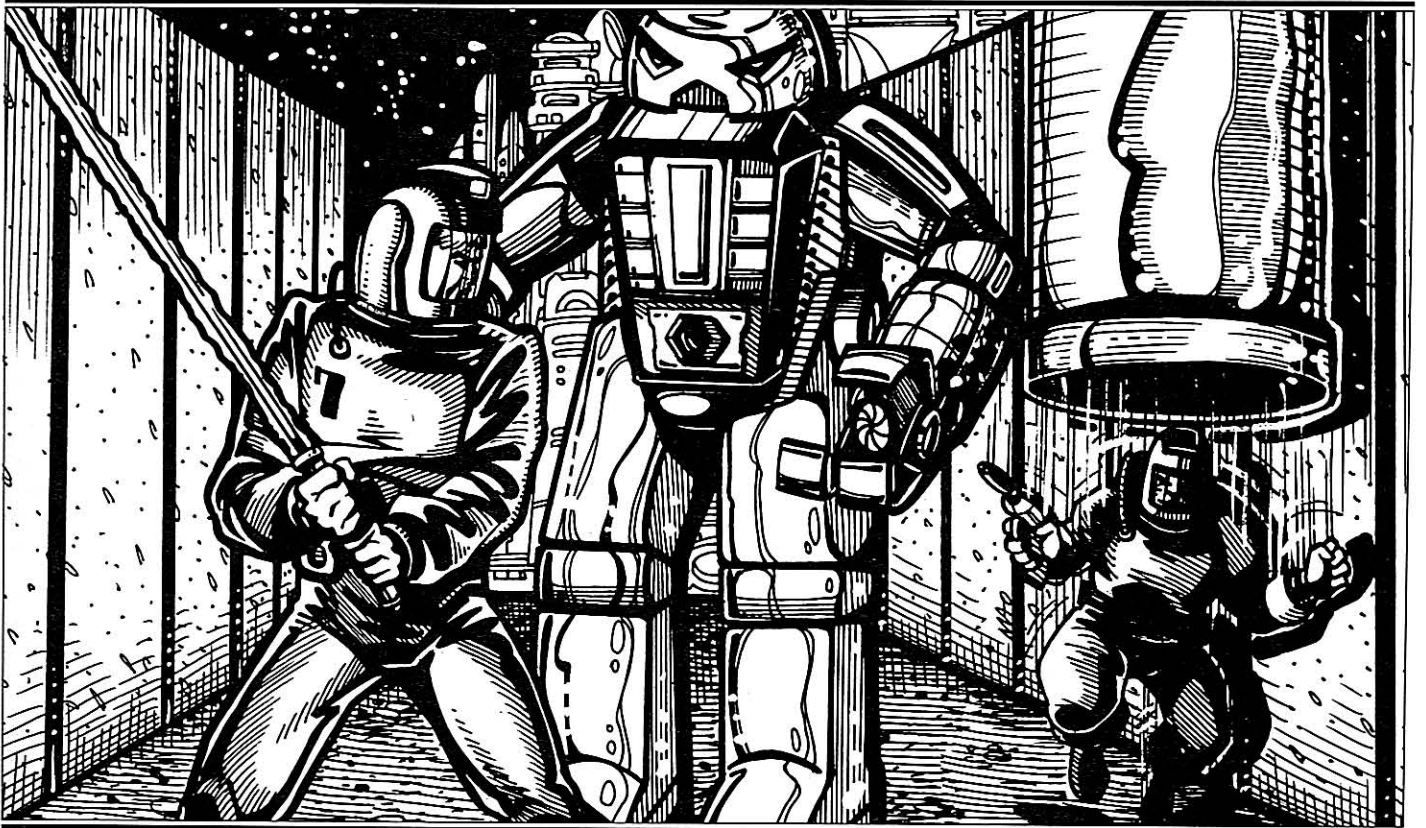
Luke activates his saber. The blue-white blade catches the trooper's attention just enough to make him hesitate.

An instant is all Luke needs. He steps forward and draws the blade across his victim's abdomen. The man folds over the wound as if it is a hinge. Luke deactivates the saber before the corpse hits the ground.

"Nice work," Gideon chortles. "You stalled like a rockloader stretching a five-minute break into an hour."

Luke glances at the two dead Imperials. Although he feels no joy in their deaths, he does not mourn their passing. Any being that contemplates a weekend pass after killing thousands of sentient beings elicits no sympathy from him.

"I killed!" Sidney gasps, staring at his blaster as if it will turn on him next. He drops to the ground and puts his paws over the gory hole in the trooper's armor.



"He's dead." His muzzle sags in a crescent-shaped frown, and he holds his ears folded forward at a stiff angle.

"You had no choice," Luke says. "He would have burned a hole in you the size of your paw."

Sidney shakes his head. "The Pada always has the choice."

"And you made a good one," Gideon says. "Let's move it before more plasti-coated soldiers show up."

Luke urges the Pada to his feet. "I'm not saying it will get easier," he says. "But we set out to accomplish something, and we can't let it end here."

Sidney stands. "No—this death must mean something."

"That's the spirit," Gideon says. "Do we continue to the house, or should we see if anybody made it into the mine?"

- If Luke goes to the house, turn to section 27.
- If Luke goes to the mine, turn to section 55.

The darkness presses in, and the Rebel pilot can feel Gideon's astonishment.

"No, you're right," Luke says. "Artoo can return the X-wing to base, but I don't think Sidney can escape without our help."

"Now you're talkin'," Gideon says.

Luke tries to reach his weapon, but Gideon has him wedged too tightly against the wall. "Can you unsnap my lightsaber?" Luke asks.

"You bet," Gideon responds. "I can't wait to see those plasti-coated 'bots when you step out with that man-prod in your hand." Gideon's fingers grasp at Luke's belt.

"You're too far to the left," Luke says.

"Then turn to your right!" the prospector orders. "What do you think I am, a Twi'lek?"

Luke obediently turns, dislodging something heavy from a shelf. He catches it between his body and the wall. The young Rebel stops, not wanting to let whatever it is drop and alert the guards.

"A little further," Gideon requests.

"I can't!" Luke answers. "I'm holding something against the wall."

"Well, I can't reach the blasted thing from here, and my fingers are about cut off by these blasted cuffs!" Gideon's voice betrays his impatience.

Luke turns the rest of the way, allowing the heavy object to fall. As he feared, he feels it strike the floor between his boots. Gideon latches onto the saber, then detaches it from the utility belt. "Got it!" he mutters.

The closet door opens. "Keep it down in here!" the guard demands. His gaze immediately drops to the lightsaber in Gideon's hand. "What's that? Some sort of detonator?"

He smashes the butt of his blaster rifle first into Gideon's head, then into Luke's. Luke's buckling knees are the last thing he feels.

*Luke isn't dead, but when Governor-General Parnell finishes with him, he'll wish he was. Luke's adventures are over until he escapes—but that's another story. Turn to section one and try again.*

"We'll continue to the headframe," Luke says. Sidney does not look pleased.

Luke leads the way into a flexi-corridor. They follow it through the corpse-crowded dry and into a series of branches leading to the headframes. Holographic system maps are posted at every junction to help novices find their way. A short time later, they reach the main headframe. Fortunately, it is no longer shielded.

When Luke tries the bulkhead door, he gets a hollow feeling in his stomach. "It's sealed from the other side," he reports. He is certain his lightsaber cannot penetrate the massive bulkhead quickly.

"I can open the door from the other side?" Sidney asks.

Luke nods. "A lot of good that does us."

Sidney bares a row of jagged incisors, then says, "Wait here; the door will open in five minutes." Without waiting for an objection, he retraces their path to the last bend in the flexi-corridor and steps outside. Luke and Gideon obediently stand in front of the door.

In a few minutes, the headframe begins to vibrate with the impact of a blaster bolt. Several more shots follow. Luke and Gideon rush to the hole through which Sidney left and see a dozen stormtroopers firing at something about midway up.

"What's going on?" Luke asks.

"Sidney must be on the headframe," Gideon says. "Padas climb like spiders."

"He what? That's crazy!"

"No—just trying to prove he's no coward," Gideon replies.

Luke unholsters his blaster pistol. He itches to rush to the corner of the headframe and provide covering fire. But that would only alert the Imperials to their presence without helping Sidney. Instead, he grits his teeth in anticipation and waits for the moment when the Pada's body tumbles to the ground.

That moment never comes. All at once, the steady rain of energy bolts pounding the headframe ceases. A moment later, Luke spots a squad of stormtroopers walking toward the headframe.

"Where is that varmint?" Gideon demands, aiming his blaster rifle at the lead trooper. "You'd think he could climb down faster than he climbed up."

Luke does not respond, but his thoughts run along similar lines. If Sidney does not open the bulkhead soon, they will be trapped. When the squad reaches 25 meters, Luke nudges Gideon. "Let's give them something to worry about," he says. Even though they face an entire squad of assault troops, any one of whom outguns both Luke and Gideon, their only hope is to attack and stall the squad's progress until Sidney opens the door.

A blue streak flashes from Gideon's rifle. The lead trooper flies off his feet, a smoking hole in the center of his breastplate. Luke fires and another trooper drops.

The Imperials dive for cover and fire simultaneously. The flexi-corridor dissolves in moments as proton torpedoes, blaster bolts, and concussion weapons rip through it. Luke feels like he is standing naked at the wrong end of a practice range.

He drops to his belly and fires wildly, hoping to keep just one Imperial pinned down. Gideon rolls toward the bulkhead, squeezing off shots and yelling curses.

The door suddenly flies open and Gideon crawls inside. Luke scrambles to the dark entrance on his hands and knees.

Inside, Sidney gasps with exertion. "I'm sorry," he says. "This place is bigger than I thought."

"You're here now," Luke says, pulling the door closed and burning the lock. It won't stop a proton torpedo, but it might gain them some time if the stormtroopers are interested in maintaining a functioning headframe.

Gideon leads the way to the shaft, then opens the door to a small cage. Inside is a small box-like room. "This here's a repulsor-driven manlift," he explains. "Works just like a speeder—except it only goes vertical." He presses two red buttons, then a warning horn sounds. The cage drops into darkness. "The big cage—with the hoist cables—is for ore. It's cheaper to haul that much weight with old fashioned fission power."

Two dark minutes later, the manlift stops and Gideon opens the cage. Luke steps into a large, man-made cavern. The shaft sleeve—a circular durasteel wall protecting the confines of the mine shaft itself—dominates the center of the cavern from ceiling to floor. It is about 15 meters in diameter. A single tunnel, about two meters high and seven wide, leads out of the cavern. A roar rumbles up the tunnel, and a distant set of lights bounces down the corridor. Luke, unfamiliar with underground settings, cannot even guess the distance of the lights—but it is a long way.

Gideon's eyes narrow as if he is figuring calculations in his head. "Just one buggy," he mutters to himself.

A tremendous growl erupts from the shaft as the ore-lift activates. "The Imperials follow us," Sidney says. "We must leave quickly."

"Not so fast," Gideon counters. "We won't get a chance like this again. We can catch them leeches when they unload. If we don't kill 'em dead here, they'll spread out through this mine like wood eaters in a museum."

"Are you mad?" Sidney's neck fur stands on end. "We are outnumbered four-to-one! Besides, how will we ever find the survivors if we don't follow that vehicle?"

- If Luke follows the light, turn to section 69.
- If Luke ambushes the stormtroopers, turn to section 53.

**44**

"Those four are just the advance party," Luke says. "We'd better run."

"If you say so," Gideon growls. "Climb aboard."

As soon as Luke and Sidney climb onto their seats, Gideon races off. The repulsor whine rumbles off the walls, shaking everything inside the tunnel with an unnerving vibrato.

The clamor does not escape the assault troopers. Their light beams immediately focus on the vacant depths between themselves and the fleeing trio. The beams dissipate a few meters short, but Luke has no doubt the troopers see the buggy lights reflecting off the tunnel walls. Gideon opens the throttle further and they rocket ahead at speeds frightening even above ground.

Luke nervously turns forward and looks over Gideon's shoulder. The buggy's heavy lamps illuminate the walls, ceiling, and floor of the tunnel 15 meters ahead. Drab colored rock flashes past so fast it is nothing more than a blur. For now, the tunnel runs straight as a laser beam. How long can that continue?

When Luke turns back around, he stops worrying about the tunnel. The stormtroopers have closed the distance by at least ten meters. Their lamp beams now illuminate the rear of the boss-buggy. With only their lights to judge the troopers' apparent size, Luke cannot tell how far away they are. The bright circles are no larger than the end of his pinky. Does that mean they are 25 meters away? Or 50?

Luke knows only one way find out. He draws his blaster pistol and takes careful aim at the largest light. At 25 meters, he has a good chance of hitting his target. At 50 meters, he will almost certainly miss. He squeezes the trigger and a blaster bolt streaks down the tunnel. It takes forever to reach its target.

The bolt disappears into the black depths between the lights with no impact explosion. The pursuers are out of pistol range. A moment later, they answer Luke's shot with a volley of their own. Four bolts flash up the tunnel, exploding in the walls and floor on all sides of the buggy. Unfortunately, the Imperials are within range of their blaster rifles.

Luke grabs Gideon's rifle. Four more bolts streak past, crumping into the walls ahead of the tractor. Luke takes careful aim at the lead trooper, then squeezes the trigger. A green bolt zips straight at him, then flares orange. The lamp twists away and drops to the floor. It fades entirely out of view as the battle moves away.

The remaining assault troopers fire again. This time, two bolts dart past Luke's head and explode into the buggy. The vehicle immediately swerves, throwing Sidney off the bench. Luke yells, but before he forms any true words, the tractor smashes into the left tunnel rib.

The impact launches Luke over the tractor. He vaguely realizes he has lost his headlamp, for he sees nothing but dark. An instant later, his head crashes against a rock surface. Whether it is the ceiling, wall, or floor he has no way of knowing—and suddenly he does not care. His eyes close and he begins a long fall into a pit deep inside his own mind.

*Luke has suffered a concussion, but he'll get over it—in Governor-General Parnell's prison hospital! This adventure is over for him. Return to section one and try again.*

**45**

Luke draws his blaster and Gideon readies his rifle. Even Sidney unholsters his pistol, though he looks like he might use it on himself rather than the enemy.

Luke smiles at Gideon, who smiles back and says, "Let's kill us some Imperials." Although Luke nods his head, he does not approach the battle with the same relish as the prospector. For him, killing sentients who serve evil is a grim duty. The old man apparently enjoys killing Imperials a great deal. It almost seems he is avenging some trespass.

Without warning, Gideon rumbles toward the ships. Luke and Sidney follow. The first guard sees them after 10 meters. He turns his head to his companions. Gideon stops running long enough to fire, but 40 meters is far from an easy shot even with a blaster rifle. His bolt hits 10 meters from the guard, spouting a knee-high geyser of tailings. Luke and Sidney's blaster pistols are barely in range, so they simply continue to run.

The four Imperials face Gideon. A volley of multi-colored flashes streak from their suit-mounted blaster cannons. The tailings at Gideon's feet erupt into a dozen three-meter spouts. The prospector disappears inside a silver sandstorm.

Luke and Sidney close to 30 meters. Luke squeezes off a series of wild shots, but his bolts fall far short. The guards answer with white, pea-sized fireballs. One of the miniature proton torpedoes strikes Sidney square in the torso, launching him back at the mill in a slow arc. Another explodes at Luke's feet, spraying silver sand overhead in a five-meter plume. The shockwave hurls him away from the impact like a refuse canister from a Star Destroyer.

He rolls and skips along the tailings pile for 10 meters. When he finally comes to a rest, his hand is empty and he doesn't know where to look for the enemy. He closes his eyes for several seconds, attempting to regain his bearings. His head throbs and he just wants to be sick. When he opens his eyes again, a pair of white-armored feet stand a meter away. He reaches for his lightsaber.

A hollow thump echoes through his skull. His head snaps forward and pain floods his head. Then he senses nothing.

• *Turn to section 73.*

## 46

Gideon drives through a maze of winding drifts and intersections. Without any stars or terrain features to use as landmarks, Luke finds himself totally lost. At length, Gideon reaches a short tunnel and slows down. Four lights illuminate a widened area 50 meters ahead. A durasteel wall with a single bulkhead door blocks the end of the passage.

A single boss-buggy sits in front of the passage. Gideon stops behind the other vehicle. As they dismount, a fine-featured Droid steps from behind the boss-buggy and blocks the bulkhead. He raises a set of manipulator-appendages. "Medical Station One is closed," the Droid says.

"Who are you?" Gideon demands.

"Deeforthreefive, equipment operator series geone."

"We've come to help Dena Tredway," Luke says. "Stand aside."

Deeforthreefive does not budge. "I've got orders."

Gideon grabs his blaster rifle and levels it at the Droid's chest. "Get!" he says.

The Droid does not move. "Don't do that," he pleads. "At this range, I would be completely destroyed."

"You're leaving us no choice," Luke says. "Is there any way you can let us pass?"

"No," the Droid responds.

"Great," Luke mumbles. Deeforthreefive stands so close to the door that they cannot squeeze past. And physically moving him is out of the question; although the Droid's programming prevents him from actively harming a sentient being, he can take non-lethal steps to ensure the execution of his orders. "I'm with the Alliance," Luke says. "We've come to rescue Dena Tredway."

"What is the 'Alliance?'" the Droid asks.

Luke shakes his head in disgust. He should have realized—mining Droids were never children who dreamed of being Rebel heroes. Machines are always so literal. Of course, if he can use that literalness...but how?

• *If Luke blasts the Droid, turn to section 52.*

• *If Luke tricks the Droid, turn to section 68.*

## 47

"I don't think they're expecting trouble," Luke says. "So let's give it to them!"

Gideon opens the throttle wide and the boss-buggy streaks down the corridor. Fifty meters later, the assault troopers realize it isn't friendly. A salvo of blaster bolts streaks down the dark corridor; for an instant, Luke imagines this is what an Altorian fire-snake's intestine looks like from the inside. The bolts explode harmlessly in the rock on all sides of the tractor.

Luke snatches Gideon's blaster rifle. The distance has closed to 35 meters. He fires a single blue flash to answer the Imperial volley. An assault trooper falls.

The Imperials fire again. This time, four streaks hit the buggy hood, sending showers of flame and sparks as high as the ceiling. Gideon hollers in alarm, then the tractor swerves and smashes into a wall.

The impact launches Luke toward the enemy. He flies through the air for what seems an impossibly long time, then finally hits the floor. The landing knocks the air from his lungs and jars the rifle from his hands. He rolls another 15 meters, then comes to a rest, dizzy and gasping for breath.

When his eyes finally focus again, Luke is looking into the barrels of three Imperial blaster rifles.

"Don't even think of moving," cautions a stormtrooper.

*Luke will reach Tol Ado—under heavy guard! Some day, he will escape, but this adventure is over for him. Return to section one and try again.*

## 48

Luke shakes his head almost imperceptibly. Sidney nods, then disappears from view. The troopers escort Luke and Gideon upstairs, then bind their hands with durasteel limb cuffs and lock them inside a closet.

The closet is pitch-black and small. Gideon stands pressed against Luke. Luke is wedged against the wall and can barely move. The troopers locked the limb cuffs so tight that the metal bites into the bone, sending a constant ache of pain up his forearms. The only good news is that his lightsaber still dangles at his side.

"Well, at least we found a way into Tol Ado," Gideon says.

"You might have an idea," Luke says. "Didn't Parnell say we were going to the same cellblock as Erling?"

"Hold on there, son! I was only joking. We're fools if we don't try to escape."

"I'm not sure I agree with you."

- If Luke allows himself to be taken to Tol Ado, turn to section 39.
- If Luke tries to escape, turn to section 42.

**49**

"Whoever left that door open doesn't belong down here," Luke says. "And if they don't belong down here, I don't want to meet them. Let's go to the stopes, whatever stopes are."

The drift spirals to the right and up at a fifteen degree angle. Although Dena's litter is firmly attached to the bench, Luke keeps a careful eye on it to make sure it does not shift. After ten minutes of climbing, he gives up trying to estimate how many circles they have made. The drift ends in front of a closed fire door. Gideon places the tractor in hover and climbs down from the driver's seat.

"These used to be automatic," he says, "but tinhorn miners kept hitting each other at fire doors. The engineers thought it'd be safer to make folks get off their buggies and see what was on the other side."

After activating the door opener, Gideon climbs back into the driver's seat and inches forward. The drift immediately levels and branches. The tunnel to the right is straight and wide. At the end, perhaps a kilometer or more away, it opens into a wide cavern lit by overhead lamps.

The drift to the left curves away into darkness. It does not appear as well-traveled as the straight, wide drift.

- If Luke follows the drift on the right, turn to section 65.
- If Luke follows the drift on the left, turn to section 77.

**50**

"Let's go left," Luke says. "I don't like the sound of whatever is to the right."

"Makes sense to me," Gideon says.

A minute later, they pass the first distinctive feature Luke has seen in a long time. A durasteel wall completely blocks the entrance to another tunnel. The designation code R-34 decorates it. When Sidney notes Luke's interest, he explains, "It is a reservoir. They sometimes find ice inside asteroids. When that happens, they store it. Mining uses a lot of water, and this is cheaper than making it."

Their path turns into a maze again. With alarming regularity, drifts break away from either side, or the tunnel branches into smaller drifts. The maze does not intimidate Gideon. He continues deeper into the mine, choosing branches or turns with the confidence of one navigating his own home.

After an hour of driving, they pass R-34 again. Luke taps Gideon's shoulder. "Hey! We passed that reservoir an hour ago."

Gideon nods without stopping. "I know. For a while, I thought I was lost."

"Oh dear!" Sidney says. "We've been driving in the circle?"

Gideon stops the vehicle, then sheepishly nods his head. "I've been lost for 20 minutes."

"How could you let that happen?" Sidney angrily demands.

"It's dark down here," Gideon says. "A fellow can't always pick good landmarks."

"Can you get us back to shaft one?" Luke asks.

"I think so," Gideon says.

"Then let's try that. The replacement shuttle should be here by now. Maybe the Imperials are gone."

"No doubt," Sidney says angrily.

Gideon turns the boss-buggy around and speeds off into the dark. After what seems like an eternity, they finally reach the fire doors and go back to the main level. From there, Gideon manages to return to the main shaft without incident.

Fortunately, the Imperials have gone. Luke checks his chronometer, then shakes his head in frustration. He recovered Dena over four hours ago. They don't have a hope of intercepting Ire Eleazari's asteroid.

"I'm sorry, Sidney," Luke says. "We must take Dena to help before rescuing Erling."

Sidney nods. "Of course. Let us hope the Parnell moves slowly with the Erling."

\* \* \* \*

Luke reaches the Rebel Base 96 hours later. As it turns out, Mon Mothma herself knows both Tredways. She reluctantly passes along orders telling Luke to stay away from Tol Ado. According to her sources, it is already too late to rescue Erling.

*This mission is not a success for Luke. Return to section one and try again.*

**51**

Luke nods. Sidney points the blaster at the window and pulls the trigger. A green bolt melts a hole the size of the Pada's head in the transparent plastic compound. Knowing the stormtroopers cannot miss the flash of Sidney's weapon, Luke stops abruptly in order to disrupt their return attack.

As he expected, the stormtroopers are concentrating on Sidney. They both stumble, then roughly push him aside as they raise their weapons to fire. The maneuver bought some time for Sidney, but Luke knows it will not be enough to save the inexperienced Pada.

He snaps his lightsaber loose. By the time he activates it, the stormtroopers have raised their rifles. Two energy bolts flare, opening Sidney's hole to the size of a full grown man. Holding onto the upper sill with one paw and foot, Sidney swings through the hole and fires.

His bolt strikes the lead stormtrooper, sending him crashing into Gideon. Luke steps forward and slices his lightsaber across the other guard's back. The Imperial's knees buckle and he drops his weapon as he falls.



Gideon takes his blaster rifle and Luke's pistol from the fallen guards. Luke steps over their bodies, searching for unexpected reinforcements.

"Let's make tracks," Gideon says, pointing toward the window. "Good shooting, Sidney," he adds cheerfully.

The Pada looks anything but cheerful. "I killed," he gasps, dropping his blaster pistol. "The being is dead."

"Deader than a red dwarf," Gideon responds merrily. "Now you're blooded."

Sidney's face betrays his horror. His muzzle hangs slack-jawed and frowning. His ears are cocked forward, and his yellow eyes slouch open like two hanging stockings.

"You had no choice," Luke says, pushing past Gideon. "He would have burned a hole in you the size of a your paw."

Sidney looks past Luke at the dead trooper. "The Pada kills not."

"This one did," Gideon says, clapping Sidney on the shoulder. "And I'm mighty grateful. But we'd better skedaddle, or there'll be a whole lot more dying."

Luke picks Sidney's pistol up, then climbs out the melted window. "We set out to accomplish something, and we can't let it end here."

Sidney stands, accepting the pistol. "Yes—you're right. We must continue. These deaths must mean something."

"That's the spirit," Gideon urges. "Now, do we go down into the mine, or beat it back to our ships?"

- If Luke goes to the mine, turn to section 55.
- If Luke goes back to the ships, turn to section 37.

**52**

Luke draws his blaster pistol. "Last chance." The Droid stands firm. "Wanton murder of family property is grounds for termination."

"It's not murder, it's a program override," Luke says wearily. "There just isn't time to argue." He fires.

The bolt strikes the Droid squarely in the chest plate. It collapses in front of the door. Despite the Droid's small size, all three of them must work together to drag it out of the way.

As Luke deactivates the pneumatic lock, Gideon says, "I'll keep a look-out."

- Turn to section 61.

**53**

"We'd better attack here," Luke says. "We'll be better off if we bottle them up."

Gideon slaps his hands together. "I like your thinkin', son. I'll set us up with a get-away cart." He climbs aboard a repulsor-driven tractor and begins fiddling with the controls. Although the tractor has only one seat facing forward, a bench runs the width of its rear.

Sidney pulls his blaster pistol from its holster. "I can't use this," he says.

Luke studies the Pada, uncertain of what to do with a pacifist rebel. Finally, he says, "Sidney, people will die here. It will stain all our souls, and you can't change that. What you can do is help determine who dies—us, or the soldiers of evil."

Sidney remains unconvinced. "If we are killers too, what is the difference?"

"They're fighting for greed and power-lust," Luke says. "We're fighting for freedom and our lives. That isn't wrong!"

Gideon starts the tractor. "Hey Sidney! Do something useful and find a few spare lamps."

The Pada averts his huge yellow eyes and goes to obey Gideon. As the prospector moves the vehicle into the tunnel, Luke looks for cover to attack from. Although nooks and crannies abound around the shaft-sleeve, a wide expanse separates them from the mouth of the escape tunnel. The party will have to rely upon irregularities in the tunnel mouth for cover.

A fuzzy electronic voice interrupts Luke's thoughts. "Hey bub! Can you use a few good hands?"

Luke turns around. Six dented and tarnished Droids have gathered in front of the shaft. Four stand as tall as a Wookiee and look powerful enough to carry Gideon's tractor. The other two are about 1.5 meters tall and have the delicate appendages of techs. Although bearing a basic resemblance to humanoids, all six are designed for reliability and function rather than aesthetics. "Who are you?"

It is the wrong thing to ask.

"Beewunfor, digger series sixwunthree."

"Beesevenoh, digger series sixwunthree."

"Peethreenine, driller series Aynine—"

"That's enough," Luke interrupts. "I understand. What do you want? We're expecting trouble any minute."

"We know," says Beewunfor. "We wired topside when third shift didn't show."

"You mean nobody was down when they hit?" Gideon interrupts.

"Yeah, that's the story," answers Beewunfor. "The..." he searches his memory banks for a suitable expletive, but finds none, "they attacked during crew change. The masters were topside for second shift blast. At first, we thought it was a hot charge."

"Has anybody come down since?" Luke asks. The Droid appears uncertain as to whether it should answer. "We're here to help," Luke continues, "and we don't have much time."

"Okay, Mac. I don't know if I should tell you this, but Miss Tredway came down a few minutes before you. Deeforthreefive took her to Medical Station One in a boss-buggy." He gestures toward Gideon's tractor to indicate what he means. "She was in bad shape."

Luke looks to Gideon.

"I can find it," the prospector says. "I've collected a few credits from this outfit over the years."

"We want to even the score, but programming is a problem," Beewunfor says.

Luke considers the situation. The Droids are obviously loyal to the Tredways. But they are undoubtedly hardwired to self-destruct rather than kill a sentient being. After the assassin-Droid crisis of the late Republic, most manufacturers started installing such safety

devices to avoid regulatory investigations. Another six bodies would give them a reasonable chance of surviving the battle, but it just might backfire when the Droids' primary programming activates.

- *If Luke accepts Beewunfor's offer, turn to section 60.*
- *If Luke politely refuses Beewunfor's offer, turn to section 66.*

**54**

Luke rolls to the side of the tunnel and fires. His bolts flash 20 meters ahead, then explode against the right-hand tunnel wall. Even though nobody answers his fire, he sees nothing but spots before his eyes. Because of the absolute darkness in the tunnel, his own shots have temporarily blinded him.

"I wish you hadn't done that," Gideon answers. "We'll never find her now."

"Who?" Luke asks, waiting for his vision to return.

"Dena Tredway, that's who," Gideon says testily. "I saw her, but your dang shot blinded me. Who knows where she got off to?"

"How was I to know?" Luke asks defensively. Even as he asks the question, he realizes Imperial troops would have fired more than two shots.

They search the mine for two hours, but find no sign of Dena. Finally, Gideon says, "I give up. She was raised down here, and I only work here every now and again. We'd better get out of here before that other shuttle-full of stormtroopers shows up."

The party glumly works its way back to the surface.

"What are you going to try now?"

- *Turn to section 37.*

**55**

"Let's try the mine."

Luke leads the way through the ruins toward the largest headframe. Although he expects to meet a squad of stormtroopers at any moment, the confrontation never comes. Instead, they pass corpse after corpse and laser-crater after laser-crater. With each step, Luke asks himself what Parnell wants that justifies the carnage.

The bulkhead door leading into the headframe has been blasted open. Inside, the headframe is well lit, if somewhat drab. A circular durasteel wall rises from the floor into the dark heights of the tower.

"That's the shaft," Gideon explains. He leads the way to a door in the wall and opens it. Inside is a dark, box-shaped cage. "This is a repulsor-driven manlift; it operates the same way a speeder does—kind of." Gideon motions Luke into the cage, then he and Sidney follow. The prospector somehow finds a set of controls, then a warning horn sounds and the box drops into the shaft. "There's a 100-ton ore lift next to us," Gideon says. "That's what the hoist-cables are for. It's cheaper to use good ol' fission power for moving that kind of mass."

Two dark minutes later, the manlift stops and Gideon opens the cage. Luke steps into a circular, white-washed cavern. He nearly loses his head to a blaster

bolt. He reacts instantly, drawing his pistol and diving for cover. A single stormtrooper stands at the mouth of a dark tunnel.

Luke fires once and the Imperial drops, a smoking hole in the center of his stomach. Gideon rushes out ready to fire, but no more troopers lurk nearby.

"Must not have been expecting us," Gideon comments.

Two dozen repulsor-lift vehicles surround the durasteel shaft sleeve. Six of them have crashed into the door of the ore lift, apparently killing two stormtroopers as they unloaded from the massive bucket. In the driver's seat of each vehicle sits a motionless Droid.

Gideon climbs onto a small repulsor-lift tractor and begins fiddling with its control box. While he waits, Luke inspects the Droids. As he suspected, each Droid shows evidence of self-destruction. Somebody must have ordered the Droids to attack the assault-troopers as they left the lift. Luke is surprised that the Droids actually managed to take out two stormtroopers; since the assassin Droid crisis of the late Republic, all manufacturers have equipped their products with self-destruct mechanisms that activate if the Droid attacks a sentient being.

Gideon starts the tractor. He drives it to the tunnel mouth leading out of the shaft area. The tunnel is three meters high and seven meters wide. Luke has no idea how long it is, for a pall of impenetrable blackness hides its depths. Sidney gives Luke a flat lamp attached to a tangle of synthoweb, then puts a similar device on his own head. The lamp activates. Luke fits the synthoweb over his head and his own lamp casts a drab beam of light wherever he turns his gaze.

After donning a headlamp, Gideon motions Luke and Sidney to a padded bench running the width of the tractor's rear. "We'll catch up pretty darn fast in a boss-buggy," he says.

Luke takes his seat, but he is not sure he wants to catch a squad of stormtroopers, especially down here in the dark. Regardless of Luke's reservations, the boss-buggy zips down the tunnel.

The repulsor-drive whine echoes off the tunnel walls, creating an incredible din. Luke's world shrinks to the circle of light cast by his headlamp. With the tremendous clamor of the boss-buggy, he can sense only what he sees. That is not much—drab gray rock rushing through a yellow circle two meters in diameter; perhaps the tail of the buggy or Sidney's knee occasionally bouncing into view. His peripheral vision senses only darkness, and what is dark seems nonexistent down here.

If Luke concentrates on holding his chin up and his head steady, he can watch the shaft diminish. Distance and proportion seem exaggerated underground. The end of the tunnel frames the shaft area in an ever-contracting sleeve. Perhaps it is because of the darkness, and perhaps it is because of the tunnel perspective, but whatever the cause, the shaft lights fade with unsettling rapidity.

As he reflects on their isolation in this noisy hole, it suddenly occurs to Luke that there must be an atmosphere down here. Otherwise, the tunnel would not be so noisy and dusty. He does not get the chance to ask Gideon about his realization. When he turns to face forward, four red flashes nearly blind him. They ap-

pear out of the pitch darkness Luke assumed was tunnel wall. For all he knows, an army might be lurking alongside the tunnel; he did not catch the bursts' source in the small circle his headlamp illuminates.

Gideon cackles gleefully. "We've got 'em now, young fellow—I'll run them suckers over!"

Luke immediately realizes Gideon's plan is effective, but risky. They have a big advantage in the vehicle. But who knows what lurks in the direction of the bolts? He did count four flashes, so they are gambling that one moving boss-buggy outweighs at least four assault troopers in full armor.

- *If Luke agrees to charge the unseen enemy, turn to section 64.*
- *If Luke tells Gideon to stop, turn to section 70.*

## 56

Luke lands on the left side of the litter and scurries into the hallway. He activates the opener on the first door he reaches, then steps into a small room filled with lockers. A black uniform lies neatly folded on a bench in the center of the room. Anti-contamination suits hang from a rack in the back of the room. A vidsign above the suits reads: "Seal suit before entering disposal area."

As he hoped, the bag on Luke's litter contained his personal effects—including his lightsaber. Luke tries the uniform on; it sags in the shoulders and bunches at the waist, but should pass a cursory inspection. He attaches his lightsaber to the belt, then leaves the room.

He follows the hallway away from the disposal center, then follows a cross-corridor into a busier passageway. Repulsor carts carrying stormtroopers and officers travel it with some regularity. Luke turns left.

"Lieutenant!" An Imperial officer stops his cart three meters in front of Luke. An Ithorian rides in the passenger seat. It holds its long, flat neck curled diffidently away from the officer. The two eyes on its hammer-shaped head regard Luke with contempt.

- *If Luke ignores the officer, turn to section 83.*
- *If Luke responds, turn to section 89.*

## 57

After a moment, the roar dies completely and the breeze fades away. Luke climbs back aboard the boss-buggy and Gideon continues down the drift. A few minutes later, the drift ends in a steel-lined box.

"This is it!" Gideon says. "Unload the girl."

Luke and Sidney unload Dena's litter, then follow Gideon into the box. The prospector opens a door in the back, then leads the way into a small manlift. They must stand Dena's litter on end in order to fit her inside. Gideon activates the lift and they reach the headframe a few minutes later.

On the surface, Luke takes point while Gideon and Sidney carry the litter. Surprisingly, he finds no guards near their ships. He pauses at the edge of the mill building to study the situation.

"What do you think?" he asks. "They must have discovered our ships."

Gideon ponders the situation for a moment, then says, "We're used to Imperials having all the men they want. But that ain't the case here, especially since you blew up their shuttle. I'll bet they've got every man available underground, figuring we're trapped down there."

Luke nods. "Just the same, I'll go first. You two bring Dena once I'm inside the X-wing."

"Good idea," Gideon says.

Luke runs out to his fighter, expecting stormtroopers to spring out of the sand at any moment. Much to his relief, Gideon seems to have been correct. He and Sidney cross the tailings pile too slowly for Luke's taste, but they reach the prospecting scow nevertheless. A few minutes later, both ships lift off.

"I'll lead the way to Ire Eleazari's," Luke says. "I sure hope I remembered those coordinates correctly."

*Three hours have passed since Luke recovered Dena Tredway.*

- *Turn to section 99.*

## 58

Luke tells Gideon to turn back toward shafts two and three. He has no doubt that the main shaft is too well guarded to use.

The old prospector turns the boss-buggy deeper into the mine. He follows the main tunnel for several minutes, then turns off into a twisting, narrow drift. Every 20 meters, the drift branches or intersects another. Luke loses his way after the fifth turn, but Gideon continues through the maze for what seems like forever.

Finally, he stops. The tunnel branches yet again, but this time two huge doors guard each path. The door on the right hangs open, and the door on the left remains closed.

"Why are we stopping?" Luke asks.

"This is as deep as I've been," Gideon announces. "Never been in either of these two drifts."

"What's the difference?" Luke asks. "Just pick one."

"That would be foolish in the extreme," Sidney says. "Underground, the miner must use his wits—or die. If we are going to escape, we must think before we move."

Gideon opens his vacsuit.

"What are you doing?" Luke asks.

"A mine's a closed system," Gideon says. "The main shaft pumps air in. Shafts two and three pump it out and filter it. When we get close to one of 'em, we ought to feel a breeze."

Luke opens his suit. He feels nothing. "What now?"

Gideon shakes his head. "Who knows? The left-hand drift probably goes up to the stopes; the right-hand drift drops down to the chutes."

Luke shrugs, not recognizing either mining term. If one were of benefit, Gideon would probably explain. The Rebel doesn't have time to be curious. "Any ideas, Sidney?"

The Pada studies the two doors carefully. Finally, he says, "No. But the fire doors should be shut."

Gideon nods. "A fellow can lose his job for leaving one open. No miner forgot to close that one."

*One hour has passed since Luke recovered Dena.*

- If Luke chooses the door on the right, turn to section 76.
- If Luke chooses the door on the left, turn to section 49.

**59**

"There must be something here that explains the Imperial attack," Luke says. "Let's search the house. Sidney, you take the upper floors. Gideon, try to account for the domestic staff; maybe somebody survived. I'll search for an office."

Sidney obediently leaves the room, relieved he no longer must look at the corpses. Luke also leaves. He finds the office sealed behind an airlock. The stormtroopers have ransacked it. Two shattered computers litter the far corner. Memory and data chips lie scattered over the entire room. The safe stands in one corner, split open like a nutshell. The single piece of functioning equipment is the desk top datavid. It shows a schematic diagram of the mine.

"I've got something," Gideon reports.

Luke leaves the office and returns to Gideon's room. "What did you find?" he asks.

"You'll be more interested in what I didn't find," Gideon says. "Dena Tredway, Erling's sister. She's the only body missing."

"And I think I know where to look," Luke says. He tells Gideon about the schematic he found on the datavid. "That's where I'd go if I needed to hide."

- Turn to section 55.

**60**

"Would your programming allow you to drive repulsor vehicles into the shaft?" Luke asks.

Beewunfor hesitates. "Sure, as long as we don't hit anybody. If we thought that might happen, we'd fuse our circuits."

"I see."

"But probably not in time to stop," the Droid adds. "And I'll take fused circuits over the Imperial scrap-pile."

Luke admires the Droid's bravery. "I wish I could help you," Luke says. "But I can't. There's a platoon of assault troopers on the surface, and more on the way. We'd never get you out in time."

"It's okay." Beewunfor shrugs. "We're Droids."

Luke cannot help smiling at the digger's selflessness. "Then I want you six Droids to scrap yourselves by driving repulsor vehicles into the shaft on my order. This will prevent Imperials from capturing you."

Beewunfor tilts his head to one side. "If that's what you want, I don't see anyone else giving orders."

The Droids select the six heaviest repulsor vehicles, then position them outside the orelift door. A moment later, the massive door begins to grind open.

"Now!" Luke calls.

The six Droids gun their engines and the repulsor vehicles lunge forward. By the time the door opens fully, the Droids are traveling too fast to stop. The arriving stormtroopers yell their alarm and astonishment, then begin firing blindly at the heavy machinery.

The first puff of smoke rises from a Droid's motivational center. Luke calls, "Well done, Beewunfor!"

The whole tunnel shakes as the vehicles crash into the orelift, each other, and the shaft sleeve. Luke and Gideon fire into the confusion. A trooper falls.

Stormtrooper discipline is too strong for the pile-up to delay the unit more than a few seconds. Six stormtroopers weave their way out of the vehicle tangle and return their ambushers' fire. Luke and Gideon each drop another trooper, then the Imperials cut loose with miniature proton torpedoes. A white ball of fire strikes the outer edge of the tunnel and explodes with a brilliant flash. A tremendous blow knocks Luke to the ground.

An instant later, a stormtrooper stands over him, blaster rifle ready to fire. "What happened?" Luke asks, trying to shake the cobwebs from his head.

The boss-buggy suddenly slams into reverse and hits the Imperial. He sails across the cavern and hits the shaft sleeve. The concussion knocks chunks of armor askew as he slumps to the ground.

Sidney looks down from the driver's seat. "Get in!" he orders.

Luke numbly climbs onto the rear bench where the bearded miner is already stationed. Gideon appears as stunned and confused as Luke. After redirecting the thrust louvers, Sidney speeds off down the tunnel.

The repulsor-drive whine echoes off the tunnel walls, creating an incredible din. Luke's world shrinks to the circle of light cast by his headlamp. With the tremendous clamor of the boss-buggy, he can sense only what he sees. That is not much—drab gray rock rushing through the yellow circle of light cast by his headlamp; perhaps the tail of the buggy or Gideon's knee occasionally bouncing into view. His peripheral vision detects only darkness, and what is dark underground seems non-existent.

If Luke concentrates on holding his chin up and his head steady, he can watch the shaft diminish. Distance and proportion seem exaggerated underground. The end of the tunnel frames the shaft area in an ever-contracting sleeve. Perhaps it is because of the darkness, and perhaps it is because of the tunnel perspective, but whatever the cause, the light fades with unsettling rapidity.

As he reflects on their underground isolation, it occurs to Luke there must be an atmosphere down here. Otherwise, the tunnel would not be so noisy and dusty.

He does not get the chance to question Gideon about his realization. The boss-buggy suddenly changes direction and slips down a side-drift. Sidney stops the vehicle and sits motionless in the driver's seat.

"I killed!" he gasps, turning around to face his passengers. "The being I hit is dead!" The Pada's face betrays his self-loathing. On one side of his muzzle, his lip curls up in an ugly sneer. On the other side, he frowns pathetically. He holds his ears flat against his pumpkin-shaped skull, and his yellow eyes alternately flash with anger and sag with despair.

"You had no choice," Luke says. "He would have burned a hole in me the size of my fist."

Sidney shakes his head. "The Pada kills for no reason. I have stained my soul."

"That you have," Gideon says. "But it was a good trade."

"We've got to move on," Luke says. "We didn't get them all, and I'm sure the survivors want to even the score."

Gideon nods, then steps off the bench. "Let me drive, Sidney. You don't look too good."

Sidney obediently steps down, his face still a mask of self-reproach. "Where will you take us?" he asks. It almost sounds as though he hopes Gideon will promise a dark place from which there is no exit.

"That Droid said she went to Medical Station One. Unless a whole lot of things have changed down here since I drew credits from the Tredways, we're mighty close to there."

• Turn to section 46.



Medical Station One is a well-lit contrast to the dark tunnels outside the bulkhead. The entire room is sanitary and white. Ten beds with sophisticated monitoring equipment line the left-hand wall. Along the right-hand wall stand two-meter cabinets full of supplies. At the far end of the room, a roughly humanoid figure with the delicate appendages of a medical Droid stands at a surgical table.

A young woman lies on the table. Her striking red-brown hair cascades off the table, nearly touching the floor. She has prominent, high cheekbones and a firm, petite chin line. Even in the glaring light of the medical station, her lips are full and red. Several bruises and abrasions mar her otherwise perfect skin.

A vacsuit and a pile of clothes rest on a nearby chair. Although Luke finds the woman almost irresistibly attractive, his chivalry immediately overpowers his more basic emotions. He politely clears his throat to announce his presence. The Droid quickly covers her torso with a sheet. Holding his hands in plain sight, Luke moves forward. Sidney remains near the door.

"How is she?" Luke asks.

Dena opens her eyes. They are emerald green and bottomless as a Sivorian sea. "Give me the blaster," she weakly orders.

"Wait a minute," Luke says, admiration for her courage as well as her beauty stirring in his breast. "I'm not Imperial. My name is Luke Skywalker. I've come to help you."

The Droid holds Dena's blaster pistol over her body. She does not take it. "Skywalker?" she asks. "Anakin's son?"

Luke stops in his tracks. His heart pounds wildly and his head almost spins with surprise. "Yes," he answers.

Dena struggles to focus on his face. A glazed film covers her eyes and the pupils have dilated to the circumference of Luke's little finger. "His son is as handsome as he was."

Blood rushes to Luke's cheeks. "Your brother has been arrested," he blurts. "We didn't expect to find—this," he finishes lamely. "How did you—"

Dena's brows furrow and she clenches her jaw firmly. "Sebastian can't have Erling!" she gasps.

Luke nods. "I'm sorry; I saw the Governor arrest him."

"Then you must save him!" Dena says. She clutches at Luke's arm and the sheet slips down her torso. Dena appears not to notice. "Swear it, on your father's name!"

The Droid gently forces her to lie back down. "Please, Miss Tredway. You have a ruptured spleen and a brain concussion. You must lie still."

"Take him to Ire Eleazari. His asteroid is uncatalogued—" her breath comes in shallow gasps now. "Erling will know its coordinates."

"What about you?" Luke asks. "Will he watch over you?"

"Erling is the important one."

"I can't go after Erling until you're safe."

Dena closes her eyes and says nothing for thirty seconds. Luke takes her wrist and gently shakes it. She doesn't respond.

"We're taking her with us," he tells the Droid.

"Of course—to the infirmary."

"The infirmary no longer exists," he says. "We'll take her to a Rebel base."

"Oh my," the Droid says. "She shouldn't travel that far—however far it is."

"It's 96 hours, and we have no other choice."

"Take me to Eleazari," Dena gasps. "Coordinates 506.34-604.342-47.65 in four hours. Then get Erling!" Her eyes remain closed.

"How do you know the coordinates?" Luke asks.

She does not respond.

The Droid performs a series of diagnostic tests, then says, "She's in a coma, sir."

"No!" Luke cries. "Bring her out of it!"

The Droid does not answer. Instead, he administers a quick series of injections, then slips her into her vacsuit. As he does so, a message chip clatters to the floor. Luke pockets the chip, then helps the Droid seal the suit. They transfer her to a litter and bind her in a body splint. Finally, the Droid places an artificial aural stimulator over her ears. "I've stabilized her to the limit of my ability," he reports. "She needs rest now—preferably in a fully equipped hospital."

"Ire Eleazari's will have to do," Luke says. "Erase your data banks—completely."

"I'm sorry, sir," the Droid responds. "As that would destroy my primary programming, I cannot obey without authorization."

Luke draws his blaster pistol. "Sebastian Parnell will take your memory apart byte by byte to find Dena Tredway. Will you do as I ask, or do I have to do it for you?"

The Droid studies the pistol. "That won't be necessary." His eyes fall dark. A moment later, he crumples to the floor.

Luke and Sidney each grasp one end of the litter and carry her out into the drift. Gideon sits in the driver's seat of a boss-buggy. When he sees the litter, he asks, "How is she?"

"Not good," Luke answers. "We need to take her to someone called Ire Eleazari."

"Never heard of him. Where do we find him?"

Luke hesitates. "It's an uncatalogued asteroid. She gave me a set of coordinates for four hours from now, but I don't see how anyone could memorize the orbital coordinates for an asteroid."

"If she says it'll be there," Gideon says, "then it'll be there. Ain't nobody that knows the Belt like the Tredways."

Luke and Sidney attach the litter onto the buggy's rear bench using a set of magnetic clips, then climb on themselves. Gideon twists around in his seat to face Luke. "Should we try leaving by the main shaft?"

"What other choice do we have?" Luke asks. He does not relish the idea of returning to the shaft area, for he is sure the Imperials have placed at least a light guard there.

"We could try the shaft number two or three," Sidney says. "The cable hoists may not be operative with the surface damage, but the repulsor manlifts should be functional."

"I've worked this mine on and off for 20 years," Gideon responds. "But I've never been to either one. I don't know how long it will take to find them."

Luke considers the problem.

They have only four hours to exit the mine, recover their ships, and reach the coordinates Dena gave them. If they get lost searching for the other shafts, they might be down here for days. On the other hand, the mine seems heavily populated with Droids. Any Droid should be able to lead them to either shaft.

- If Luke tells Gideon "shaft one," turn to section 80.
- If Luke tells Gideon "deeper into the mine," turn to section 58.

**62**

Just before he reaches the pool of light, another blaster bolt flashes from the ceiling. Luke jumps and swings his lightsaber.

Something screams, then a blaster pistol and a leathery claw fall to the floor. "Stop this!" Luke yells. He is looking up into four bright lamps; he cannot see the creatures at all.

"Kill it!" wheezes an angry voice. The Imperial snatches the blaster and fires into the darkness.

Luke hears the creatures scurry, but he cannot see them. He stops watching and relaxes. He has senses other than sight. Something clatters overhead and Luke moves his lightsaber without thought—it simply stops where it is needed. A creature hisses and moves away.

He turns around, then lunges into the darkness. A blaster shot crumps down the way and one of the dark creatures shrieks. Another dark form falls to the floor, blue-green ooze bubbling at the saber wound. Hisses and whispers rustle overhead.

Luke steps over the form. "Go away before more of you die."

A blaster bolt explodes to his left, but Luke's instinct tells him to remain motionless. Something rustles. Luke leaps straight up and swings his blade. Another cry echoes out of the darkness and a limp body tumbles to the ground.

He does not need to warn the survivors again. They bustle away, taking their lights with them.

"I don't understand why you helped me, escapee, but you have my gratitude," the Imperial says.

"I'm not sure myself," Luke says, leaving his lightsaber activated. "But don't get any ideas about turning me in."

The Imperial studies him carefully. "I owe you my life, and I won't repay my debt with treachery." He presents his dislocated finger to Luke. At the second joint, it turns ninety-degrees toward the thumb. "Do you mind holding that?"

Luke deactivates his lightsaber and attaches it to his belt. "Will you help me get off Tol Ado?" He grabs the officer's finger between his thumb and fingers.

The officer thinks for a minute. "Yes," he says at last. He pulls his hand away from Luke in a steady, even motion. The finger slowly straightens and pops back into joint. He groans. "That'll do for now. Let's see about getting you a disguise."

The officer leads the way through a maze of corridors. On the way, he explains that prisoners occasionally escape into the sub-facility. Nobody knows how many there are, but the number must be in the thousands. Many officers won't enter the sub-facility alone. He refused to believe the situation was so dangerous, so he when he was asked to check some vent-damage, he went down alone. He won't make that mistake again.

Eventually, the officer opens an access panel in the ceiling. After making sure the passage is clear, he signals Luke to follow him out. They quickly move to one of 100 doors lining a long corridor. "My ward-room," he explains, pressing his palm against the lock sensor. The door slides open, revealing a small room containing a desk, bed, and closet. He pulls a uniform out of the closet and gives it to Luke.

"Put this on. It may not fit perfectly, but it will have to do. I'll be back—don't open this door until I return."

Luke slips into the uniform and waits. It is a little long in all dimensions, but otherwise it doesn't fit too badly. Despite the fact that he saved the man's life, Luke is not sure he should trust the Imperial. The man seems sincere enough, but Imperial treachery is legendary. On the other hand, the officer could just as easily have led him into a guardroom. In the end, however, Luke realizes that his best chance of escaping lies in trust.

An hour later, the officer returns. He gives Luke a datavid with a map on it, then leads him to a small repulsor cart. "You're going to the command staff shuttle station. Your authorization number is 061960; that will take you to the Imperial supply depot on Poe. Got that?"

Luke nods. "Thanks—I don't even know your name."  
"Let's keep it that way," the officer says. "Just in case."

Luke smiles. "I understand." He feels a whole lot better about trusting the man.

Two hours later, he reaches the command station doors. Two stormtroopers stand guard. An Imperial officer escorting an Ithorian is stopped at the doors. As Luke pulls up behind them, the Ithorian turns and glares at him. For a moment, he fears the Ithorian recognizes him as a prisoner.

The alien turns back to his driver. "Did you take the scenic route? We nearly missed my shuttle." Luke breathes a sigh of relief. The Ithorian's bearing is simple arrogance.

"We have plenty of time, Oosea, sir," the officer replies, pulling forward into the station. Oosea does not respond.

Luke pulls ahead. His heart beating madly with apprehension and fear, he recites his authorization code for the stormtroopers. Much to his relief, they wave him into the station. Luke parks the cart near the entrance.

- *Turn to section 92.*

**63**

When the second switch goes off, the roar coming down the drift fades, and the breeze grows weaker. Luke eyes the blank vidscreen thoughtfully.

- *If Luke turns the switches back on, then continues down the drift, turn to section 95.*
- *If Luke turns the switches back on, and flips the right switch off, turn to section 67.*
- *If Luke turns the switches back on, and flips the left switch off, turn to section 78.*
- *If Luke leaves the switches off, then continues down the drift, turn to section 57.*

**64**

"Be sure you get at least two," Luke says.

Another volley of bolts flashes overhead, exploding into the back and ribs of the tunnel. Gideon guns the drive and turns toward the shots. The buggy's lamps illuminate four white figures kneeling at the mouth of a side drift.

The boss-buggy nearly fills the drift side-to-side. Barely a meter separates the tunnel ribs from the buggy's sides. The stormtroopers abandon their rifles and dive for cover, then the repulsor tractor reaches their position. The vehicle lurches, then bounces. Luke has no doubt Gideon's plan succeeded, at least in part.

He spins around on the bench and trains his headlamp on the left wall. His beam highlights a single trooper pressed against the rock like a spider on a wall. He squeezes his blaster trigger and an energy bolt touches the Imperial in the chest.

The boss-buggy suddenly decelerates. "What's wrong?" Luke demands, not turning away from the drift mouth. He is certain of only one enemy's fate, and it would not be wise to turn his back on any survivors.

A mechanical voice answers his question. "You must be the good guys!" it says. "I've been watching those Imperials for five minutes. Did you come for Dena?"

"Dena Tredway?" Gideon demands.

"Yeah. She's in Medical Station One. Shall I take you there?"

"No need. I know the way."

The boss-buggy speeds away. Luke did not even see the Droid.

- *Turn to section 46.*

**65**

"Let's see what those lights are," Luke says.

Gideon turns the boss-buggy down the right-hand drift. Two minutes later, they enter a spacious, white-washed cavern lit by 20 overhead lamps. Repulsor craft of all types and in all stages of disassembly line the walls. A dozen Droids labor to repair the vehicles.

At the far end of the cavern, a single Droid stands behind a waist-high counter. A wire-mesh barrier rises to the ceiling from the countertop. Behind the Droid is



a robotics workshop. Gideon stops the boss-buggy in front of the wire mesh. The Droid does not look up from his vidscreen.

"Excuse me," Luke says, climbing off the buggy. "Can you help us?"

The Droid continues studying the vidscreen for a moment. Finally, it lifts its head. "Depends on what you want, I guess."

"Which is closer, shaft two or shaft three?"

"That'd be shaft two," the Droid says.

"Can you tell us how to get there?"

"Sure," the Droid answers. He opens a drawer and pulls out hand-held datavid. He calls up a map and pushes the datavid through a slot in the mesh. "You can have it—from what I hear, we'll be shutting down soon anyway."

"Thanks," Luke says.

"Sure thing," the Droid says. "But remember, shafts two and three are off-limits."

Luke steps away from the counter, pocketing the datavid. "Why's that?" he asks.

"The air draw," the Droid responds. "It'll suck you right up the shaft and through the fan. Wouldn't be a pretty sight."

"I'll keep that in mind," Luke says.

Luke gives the datavid to Gideon, then climbs onto the boss buggy. Ten minutes later, Gideon turns into a narrow drift leading down. A distant, high pitched roar echoes up from the darkness ahead. A breeze travels down the tunnel.

*Two hours have passed since Luke recovered Dena.*

• Turn to section 72.

66

"I'm sorry," Luke says. "When those stormtroopers step off that lift, we're going to have to fight. I can't rely on you when your programming will interfere."

"It's your choice, bub," Beewunfor says.

The Droids disappear down the long tunnel. Luke and Gideon take cover near the mouth. A moment later, the ore lift arrives. As its doors crack open, Luke fires. His energy bolt flashes into the lift, then flares against something white.

As the doors continue to open, a dozen assault troopers return his fire, some with blaster rifles, some with miniature proton torpedoes, and some with suit-mounted blaster cannons. A rainbow of colors streaks from the opening, crashing all around the tunnel mouth. Luke and Gideon continue shooting, but their pitiful stream of bolts is no match for the light show erupting from the ore lift.

A white, pea-sized fireball strikes a meter from Luke. It flashes and a shockwave slams him to the ground. The breath flees his body and he cannot draw another. Rock chips shower his vacsuit, some stinging his skin even through its protection. For a moment, he is aware of gasping like a piscine in a gaseous atmosphere—then his vision blurs and his mind falls into a thoughtless haze. The tunnel walls begin spinning, and he notices a nauseous feeling in his stomach.

An instant later, a white blur stands over Luke. It says something, but Luke cannot respond through the dark curtain falling over his consciousness.

• Turn to section 73.



**67**

As the switch on the right drops, the vidscreen over the drift falls blank. The roar from down the drift continues full force, as does the breeze.

- *If Luke turns the switch back on, then continues down the drift, turn to section 95.*
- *If Luke turns the switch back on, then turns off the other switch, turn to section 78.*
- *If Luke turns the other switch off too, turn to section 63.*
- *If Luke leaves the switch off, then continues down the drift, turn to section 88.*

**68**

Luke winks at Gideon, then says, "Okay, go around." "Around?" the Droid asks suspiciously.

"Through the utility entrance in the shop?" Gideon asks.

Luke nods. "Open the bulkhead from inside and let us in. That won't interfere with your instructions, will it?"

The Droid studies Luke for a long moment. "Medical Station One is closed."

"So what are you going to do about it?" Gideon says, climbing back onto the tractor. "You two wait here."

"Sure," Luke says, motioning Sidney to step away from the door.

Gideon starts the engine and backs the boss-buggy down the drift. The Droid looks from Gideon to Luke and Sidney, then back to Gideon, then to Luke and Sidney. Finally, it says, "You're going to wait here?"

"That's right," Luke says. "Until he opens the bulkhead from the inside."

"I didn't know there was another entrance."

"You're the equipment operator. Why would you need the data on utility manways?" Sidney asks.

The Droid considers this for a moment. "My data banks don't include any entries for utility manways," he comments.

"See?" Sidney says.

"You are going to wait for your friend, correct?"

"Yes," Luke says. "Right here."

Deeforthreefive steps away from the door and scurries down the drift after Gideon. When the Droid has travelled 20 meters, Luke steps over to the bulkhead and deactivates the latch. The pneumatics hiss and the door cracks open.

When he detects the gasp of the pneumatics, the Droid stops and turns around. "Medical Station One is closed," he says.

Luke and Sidney quickly step inside.

- *Turn to section 61.*

**69**

"We might be better off if the Imperials spread out," Luke answers Gideon. "It will even the odds. Let's catch up to that light." He turns to walk down the corridor.

"Hold on there, young fellow," the prospector says. "If we walk, we'll never get anywhere. This mine has over 200 kilometers of drifts." He climbs into the driver's seat of a small repulsor-lift tractor. Although only a single seat faces forward, a bench runs along the width of its rear. "We'll take this boss-buggy, if she'll start. Sidney, see if there are some spare lamps lying around."

While Gideon fiddles with the boss-buggy, Luke uses his lightsaber to fuse the control boxes of the other vehicles. He is thankful that the person at the other end of the tunnel did not think to do as much.

A minute later, the boss-buggy repulsors whine to life. Sidney returns with a handful of flat lights mounted on adjustable synthoweb straps. Gideon places one of the straps on his head and a beam shines from the lamp. Luke examines the lamp Sidney gives him. A small powercell rests next to the bulb. When he slips the synthoweb strap over his head, it fits snugly and securely without adjustment. A powerful lightbeam shines any direction he turns his head.

Gideon motions his passengers to climb aboard. A moment later, they zip down the tunnel after the fading light. The whine of the boss-buggy repulsor-drive echoes off the tunnel walls, creating an incredible din. Luke's world shrinks to the circle of light cast by his headlamp. With the tremendous clamor of the boss-buggy, he can sense only what he sees. That is not much—drab gray rock rushing through a yellow circle two-meters in diameter; perhaps the tail of the buggy or Sidney's knee occasionally bouncing into view. His peripheral vision sees only darkness, and what is dark underground seems nonexistent.

If Luke concentrates on holding his chin up and his head steady, he can watch the shaft sleeve diminish into nothing. Distance and proportion seem exaggerated underground. The end of the tunnel frames the shaft in an ever-contracting sleeve, and the lights marking the only exit the Rebel pilot knows fade with unsettling rapidity.

As he reflects on the isolation of this noisy hole, it suddenly occurs to Luke that there must be an atmosphere down here. Otherwise, the tunnel would not be so noisy and dusty.

He does not get the chance to question Gideon about his realization. When he turns to face forward, two successive blaster flashes nearly blind him. They appear out of the pitch dark Luke had assumed was tunnel wall. For all he knows, an army might be lurking there; he did not have a chance to shine his headlamp in the direction of the flashes, and it is now perfectly dark. He rips his headlamp off and leaps from the boss-buggy.

- *If Luke returns the fire, turn to section 54.*
- *If Luke does not fire, turn to section 36.*

70

"Are you crazy?" Luke yells. "Hold it!"

"What?" Gideon yells back. He twists around to face Luke. The boss-buggy swerves toward the wall and its lamps illuminate an intersection corner. A white figure dives out of their path.

"Jump!" Luke bellows. He grabs Sidney and leaps off the bench. The Pada flies off into the dark. Luke falls with no sense of where his feet should be.

The boss-buggy crashes into the wall. In the same instant, Luke strikes the ground. He cannot tell the thunder of the tractor crash from the jolt of his body hitting rock. A flash lights the tunnel, then Luke feels himself roll along the floor. Although he has lost his bearings, he has a general sense that his momentum carries him toward the burning buggy. An orange glow grows brighter every rotation.

At last, Luke comes to a rest, dizzy and battered. He reaches for his lightsaber. Before his numbed fingers unclip it, a white boot steps on his arm. He looks up into a blinding light.

"Don't move!" orders the electronic voice of a stormtrooper.

Luke hears at least two others approaching.

*Luke is smart enough to listen to the assault trooper, at least for now. This adventure is over until he escapes from Governor-General Parnell. But that's another story. . . Return to section one and try again.*

71

"There's a time to fight, and there's a time to run," Luke says. Sidney's muzzle relaxes. "This is a time to fight," Luke finishes.

Sidney's ears flatten, his relief changed to apprehension. The Pada scurries down the drift and turns off his light. "I'll be right here if you need me."

Luke resists objecting. This is no time to argue ethics. Instead, he deactivates his own headlamp by pushing it off his forehead. After turning off the buggy's drives, Gideon does the same. They settle into the drift to await the assault troopers.

In complete darkness, sound becomes vision. Behind Luke, Sidney's breath comes in deep, loud rasps. Were it not for the steady whisper of the stormtrooper's propulsion jets, Luke would worry about Sidney's respiration alerting the enemy.

Gideon remains silent, therefore invisible. Luke last saw him across the drift, but does not know if the prospector remains there. Being ignorant of his partner's position bothers Luke, but if he cannot find Gideon, neither can the enemy.

A minute later, the stormtroopers reward his patience. A beam of light passes along the floor in the main tunnel. It sweeps from side-to-side, searching for possible trouble. But the assault troopers are no more used to fighting underground than Luke. The sweep of the beam falls far short of the side-drift in which he and Gideon hide.

The point trooper passes the drift, completely unaware of its existence. By the time the rest of his squad reaches the it, he is 50 meters away. As the next two

troopers come into view, Luke fingers his trigger. He cannot see his weapon in front of his face, so he cannot aim. Instead, he simply points the pistol at the far trooper and pulls the trigger.

Gideon's bolt flares in the same instant. The trooper drops like a cargo barge in a deep gravity well, his torso smoking in two places. Gideon fired at the same target!

The other trooper turns down the drift and zips past Luke and Gideon, still oblivious to their presence. His lamp illuminates Sidney cringing along the wall, pistol clutched to his breast. Luke lifts his pistol to fire, but an assault trooper's powerful light catches him from the left and dazzles his eyes. He points his blaster at the light and fires blindly.

A red bolt blazes out of the light and explodes above his head, showering him with tiny rock chips. He rolls away. Another flash streaks out of the light and strikes the wall where he sat a moment ago. A green bolt from across the drift answers the shot. An explosion rumbles through the tunnel and a fireball engulfs the trooper. Gideon just saved his life!

Behind Luke, near Sidney, six shots crump into rock. Before Luke can turn to help, an Imperial bolt bursts into a tiny fireball over Gideon's head. The prospector returns the shot, but it ricochets harmlessly down the tunnel. The Imperial who shot at Gideon has taken a hint from his ambushers and turned off his headlamp. Luke does not turn around; he can do nothing to help Sidney now, but he may be able to save Gideon.

Luke waits. Nothing happens for a long moment. Then the Imperial fires. His armor reflects the light of his blaster bolt for a split second. That is all Luke needs; he fires two quick shots. The trooper screams, then the faint glow of burning armor lights the blackness ten meters ahead.

There is no time to await the trooper's fall. Luke turns to face Sidney, expecting to find the last stormtrooper training a blaster rifle on him or Gideon. Instead, a motionless lamp shines at the ceiling. The stormtrooper does not move.

Luke activates his headlamp. Sidney sits huddled against the rib of the drift, his blaster pistol still trained on the dead stormtrooper. The Pada's eyes are open wide with horror, and his muzzle sags in grief-stricken frown. He holds his ears cocked forward at a stiff angle that betrays his anger.

"The Imperial raised his rifle to shoot and I squeezed the trigger," Sidney explains. "I didn't have time to think—"

"It's okay," Luke says. "You had no choice."

Sidney lifts his eyes. "The Pada always has the choice."

"So you decided to live," Gideon says. "Nothing wrong with that. Let's move it before the rest of the squad shows."

Luke gently places a hand under Sidney's arm. "We've got to go, or there will be more killing." Sidney reluctantly stands.

As they return to the boss-buggy, an electronic voice addresses them from the darkness ahead. "You must be the good guys."

"We are," Luke answers. "Show yourself, Droid."

Ten meters away, a light flickers on. A two-meter Droid carefully executes the Rebel's command by

shining its own light over its body. It has powerful hydraulics and dust-protected joints. "Did you come to help Dena?" it asks.

"Sure did," Gideon answers.

"She went to Medical Station One," the Droid reports. "Follow me."

"No need," Gideon says, climbing into the driver's seat and starting the boss-buggy. "I've been there before."

• *Turn to section 46.*

## 72

"If that noise is normal for the mine. . ."

"We're on the right track," Gideon nods.

As they travel downward, the roar coming up the drift grows louder. Every 500 meters, another tunnel connects with the one they travel. The breeze increases with each intersection. By the time they have traveled four kilometers, dust, refuse, and even small pebbles fly along in a stiff wind.

Gideon stops in front of a flashing vid-display which reads: "Danger. Ventilation crew only." The roar is so loud that Luke reseals his vacsuit to shut out as much noise as possible. Gideon and Sidney do likewise.

An electrical switch box hangs on the left wall. Two switches protrude from the box, and a small display screen above the box reads: "Extreme Danger: Deactivation or activation without authorization from Mine Superintendent will result in termination."

"This is it," Gideon says. "I'd bet my name on it."

"Safe bet," Luke comments, hopping off the boss-buggy to study the electrical switch box. Not for the first time, he wishes Dena was not in a coma.

- *If Luke leaves the switches alone, turn to section 95.*
- *If Luke pulls the switch on the left, turn to section 78.*
- *If Luke pulls the switch on the right, turn to section 67.*
- *If Luke pulls both switches at the same time, turn to section 82.*

## 73

"Aaaaahhhhhh!"

It is dark. More than dark—black.

"Where is Ire Eleazari?"

Luke lies on cold metal. His temples throb with unbearable pain, and his entire body aches as though a Droid has given him a sound thrashing. "Aaaaaahhhhhh!" Another scream of agony.

"Do you think I enjoy this? Speak—or the pain will grow worse." The interrogator's voice is reasonable and sympathetic; he is just doing his job.

Luke mutters, "I don't know any Ire—" Another scream interrupts him; the voice belongs to somebody else. The Rebel pilot slowly comes to his senses. He rests on a bare metal bunk in a dark cell. The interrogator's voice—and the victim's screams—come from a large chamber somewhere outside his room.

With a sinking heart, Luke realizes the Imperials have captured him. He stands and explores his cell with his hands. It is two meters wide and three meters

long. There are toilet facilities near the head of the bunk. At the foot of the bunk is a door with two slots in it.

The interrogation continues for hours. Luke has no choice but to listen to it. The Imperials must have designed this cellblock so that the entire inquisition rings through every cell. For Luke, the worst moments are when a machine buzzes or whirs and the victim does not scream. It leaves him wondering if the being died, or if the pain is so intense it cannot yell. Simply being in a cell is torture.

Nobody disturbs Luke for what must be days, though he has no way of marking the passage of time. Even his meals—which consist of a foul-tasting protein paste—come at irregular intervals. In the rare hours when a torture does not prevent him from thinking rationally, Luke contemplates his situation. Although he has no way of knowing what happened to Artoo-Detoo, he feels confident the little Droid is already back at Rebel Base. Artoo has a knack for self-preservation. He seems almost invisible to living beings, for it seldom crosses their minds that a Droid might be something to worry about. As for the others—he knows nothing, and could do nothing if he did.

For himself, on the other hand, Luke has plenty to worry about. For all he knows, the Imperials intend to let him rot in this dark cell. If he is to escape, he must take positive action. But he is trapped in a dark metal cell with no equipment. His only contact with the outside world comes when some Droid slips a plate of food into his cell. What can he do?

A plan occurs to him; he must use the only resource he has to take advantage of his only contact with the outside world. He lies down on his bunk and turns his attention inward, trying to find the tranquility that serves as a conduit for the Force. A strange lightness tickles his brainstem; he seizes on that tingle and focuses his entire concentration on it. His meditation runs hours, extending into days, perhaps even into weeks. Luke only dimly notices the food-plates dropping into his cell; he draws his sustenance from a different source.

At last, the door opens. An Imperial officer steps over the pile of decaying food in the entrance and enters the cell. "I can never get used to the smell of rot," he says, restraining a gag. Luke focuses his will on remaining perfectly motionless, on slowing his breath and heartbeat to imperceptible rates, and on feeling cold. He concentrates on being dead.

The officer shines a light on his face, then places two fingers on his throat. Luke remains motionless. "Wonder how this happened? He wasn't even scheduled for interrogation yet." The Imperial quickly retreats.

Two stormtroopers enter the cell and carry Luke to a repulsor litter waiting outside his cell. The litter is on a metal balcony running the length of this level. On the other side of the balcony, an open pit descends toward the bottom of the dimly lit block. "I'll meet you outside the processing center." The two troopers take Luke through a series of bright offices. At last, they attach his litter to the end of a long train of similar conveyances. The officer deposits a bag on the litter.

"Take 'em away, Stan!"

The litter lurches down a long corridor and past a set of heavy blast doors. Thirty minutes later, the ghoulish train pauses while a heavy set of double doors slowly opens. The doors lead into a room where several Droids load bodies onto a long conveyor belt from similar trains. To the right of the train, an access panel rests slightly ajar on the floor. To the left, a short hallway leads to a series of doors. Luke grabs the bag on his litter and rolls off onto the floor.

- *If Luke sneaks down the hallway, turn to section 56.*
- *If Luke crawls into the access panel, turn to section 94.*

74

"Let's be sure we get in," Luke says. "Let's get arrested." He starts down the ramp.

"What about Gideon's ship?" Sidney asks. "We aren't going to leave it here?"

"Can't think of a better place," Gideon answers. "This place is filled with tourist craft. By the time a guard notices this one, we'll be dead or out."

They lock the scow, then sneak through a door labeled "Authorized Personnel Only." Within 30 seconds, a squad of stormtroopers surrounds them.

"What is the meaning of this?" demands their officer, Lieutenant Salva.

"The tour wasn't complete enough?" Luke offers, raising his hands in surrender.

An hour later, a shuttle carrying Luke and his companions enters a processing bay. The center is little more than a huge, dreary docking bay divided by force fields into 100 shuttle-sized holding pens. Black intra-system shuttles in various stages of disembarkation occupy most pens. Anywhere from ten to 100 disheveled and frightened prisoners of all races stand beneath each shuttle's wings, awaiting the unloading of their shuttle-mates. Like Luke and his companions, each prisoner's appendages are held together by short plasalloy shock manacles. Twenty stormtroopers and a black-clad officer stand inside each pen to supervise the debarking process.

Remote controlled blaster cannons and observation cameras suspended at the ends of robotic arms dangle into the bay. The ceiling itself is lost in darkness, so Luke can only guess what horrors hang concealed in its murky abyss.

Five meters off the floor, a balcony runs around the exterior of the bay. Two hundred stormtroopers stand behind a variety of heavy weapon emplacements. In the center of the balcony's interior wall, a 50-meter transwall opens into a vast gray room filled with computer equipment and bustling technicians. A dozen officers wearing foreboding black uniforms stand behind the transwall. They watch the operations below with the keen interest of demons selecting souls for damnation and torment.

As the shuttle lands, the despair of imprisonment on Tol Ado fully strikes Luke for the first time. Parnell designed the facility not to crush a being's spirit, but to smother it. Crushing implies destruction, and destruction would be too kind for Governor-General Parnell. A prisoner without spirit is dead in all but the physical sense, and the dead don't suffer.

Instead, by guarding against it so obviously, Parnell maintains the hope of escape. Then he buries that hope under the weight of impersonal and systematic oppression. The prisoner can make no appeal for justice, mercy, or even death. To Tol Ado, he becomes a body to march lockstepped into oblivion.

By the time Luke and his friends stand beneath their shuttle wing, Luke realizes that if they are to succeed in their plan, they must escape before the system sweeps them into a dark corner to be forgotten. But for now, they must wait—any escape attempt here would be suicide.

The shuttle guards drop three duffel bags in front of the prisoners. The bags contain their personnel belongings—blasters, comlinks, chronometers, Luke's lightsaber, etc. The Imperials have not yet decided how to categorize Artoo-Detoo. The guards have forced him into line with the other prisoners, but have not even bothered to place a restraining bolt on his shell. The Imperials apparently have no standard procedure for dealing with Droids.

"These are the saboteurs?" asks the reception squad officer. Without awaiting a reply, he continues, "General Parnell is aware of your performance. You may return to duty."

Salva and his guards return to their shuttle without speaking a word. The officer ignores the prisoners, except to make sure the 20 stormtroopers watch them carefully. Luke feels more than a little overestimated.

They stand in their pen for over an hour. During that time, over 150 shuttle-loads of prisoners march out of the bay under heavy guard. Finally, a three-man repulsor cart approaches. Governor-General Parnell and an aide ride in the back. "These are the tourist center prisoners?"

"Yes, General."

Parnell studies them carefully. When he reaches Luke's face, the general glares at Luke for a long moment. "I know you, boy."

Luke does not answer.

"To the Deathblock for interrogation," Parnell says.

"As you order, General."

Parnell leaves.

Three stormtroopers pick up the three duffel bags. Ten troopers step behind the party, and the remainder form up in front. After asking processing control to deactivate their force-field, the officer issues a march order.

He leads them out of the processing center into a long white corridor. Despite the fact that his prisoners are shackled hand and foot, the officer maintains a quick pace. Luke and his companions must perform a tricky shuffle to keep up. Three hundred meters down the hallway, they reach a T-intersection. The officer turns down the left-hand branch. Luke, Gideon, and Sidney follow, but Artoo continues straight down the corridor.

"Hey!" snaps a stormtrooper. He grabs Artoo. Sparks fly and the Imperial quickly withdraws his hand. The officer continues down his corridor, oblivious to what is happening behind him.

The little Droid increases his speed. The stormtroopers raise their blaster rifles to their shoulders, but hesitate to fire. They appear confused, as if they don't

believe the Droid is attempting to escape. Finally, a trooper reports the situation to the still-oblivious officer.

"What's wrong with it?" the officer asks Luke.

Luke shrugs. "Who knows?" He is stalling for time. "Maybe a faulty motivator. Salva's guards smashed him around pretty hard."

"Call him back," the officer orders.

Luke obediently turns toward the intersection. "Artoo-Detoo, come back here this instant!"

Artoo chirps defiantly. Luke cannot see him.

"I don't think he's listening to me," the Rebel pilot reports.

The officer's face grows red with frustration. "I will not have a Droid make a fool of me in front of General Parnell. Bring that thing back, or you'll all be on report!"

The guards obediently charge down the corridor. Even the three stormtroopers who had been carrying the duffels head off, perhaps glad to be relieved of the menial labor. Their parcels are haphazardly dumped on the floor. The officer watches them go, the veins on his forehead bulging with anger. A moment later, he is the only Imperial in sight.

- If Luke runs, turn to section 91.
- If Luke attacks the officer, turn to section 98.

**75**

"Your memory is excellent, sir," Luke answers. He suddenly feels very uncomfortable. Every officer in the center watches to see the outcome of his inadvertent encounter with the Governor-General.

"You outfitted the platoon detailed to capture Erling Tredway, did you not?"

Luke breathes a sigh of relief. "I was involved with that project, yes."

Parnell turns away, impressed with his own memory. "Carry on with the good work, Colonel."

Luke moves toward the back of the center, anxious to escape the scrutiny of Sebastian Parnell and the officers watching him. He works his way past row after row of black uniformed men inconspicuously and jealously studying him. Finally, he reaches an open door guarded by two elite stormtroopers. A vidsign above the door reads: "Sub-facility task-force only." Inside, a ragged Twi'lek with a moon-shaped scar above his left eye talks with two senior staff generals.

Luke searches for an empty computer interface. He hopes information regarding Erling Tredway will be available to Command Center terminals. Unfortunately, he senses he is still the object of considerable scrutiny, so it may prove difficult to find a work station that affords the privacy he needs.

"Don't let 'em bother you," says a grim-faced colonel. "They're jealous. The old man wouldn't remember most of their faces if he shared a survival bubble with 'em. You're one of the lucky ones—he'll promote you to general the next time you meet."

"If someone in here doesn't reassign me to waste disposal," Luke says. The colonel has the weathered features of a field commander, but his left leg is missing. Despite his friendly manner, the man has a cold and ruthless bearing.

"You look like you need a hand. New to Command?" Luke nods. "New to Tol Ado. I came here from the Belt."

"Pirate patrol?"

Luke nods.

"Maybe I can help. It never hurts to know someone who knows the general."

"Thanks," Luke says. "I'm working on a follow-up report for the Tredway operation. The terminal in my office is locked out and I don't have the proper authorization code."

"Why don't you request authorization through central computer services?"

"I'd like to finish the report before General Parnell finishes Tredway," Luke says. "Maybe he won't flinch so much when he sees what it cost."

"I see your point," the colonel says. "Hold on." He rattles a string of commands into his interface. A moment later, a diagram of a tiny block appears on his screen. It has no more than 500 cells, but twice the normal number of heavy weapons emplacements and guards. In the center of the block is an interrogation arena. Judging from the specifications of the equipment in the arena, interrogations in this block are not pleasant. The colonel reports, "Erling Tredway is being held in the Deathblock, level two, cell five. That'd be 205."

"The Deathblock?"

"You are new, aren't you? Directly below us—at the bottom of administration central. You'd better rush that report, by the way. Nobody lasts more than two days down there."

"Then what?" Luke asks.

"They don't escape, that's for sure."

"He can't kill Tredway!"

The old colonel studies Luke carefully. "Why not?"

Luke hesitates, afraid he has let his prejudice give him away. "Tredway's arrest caused a lot of unrest. His death might throw the whole system into revolt." If Sidney's devotion is any example of the fanaticism of Erling's followers, Luke doubts he is exaggerating.

The colonel nods. "True. But some things are worse than a revolt."

"But the economics—Like what?"

"I've said too much already. Just finish your report."

Luke studies the Imperial. The older man has set his jaw and returned his attention to his vidscreen. "Thanks for your help," Luke says.

"Remember you owe me a favor."

"You can count on me," Luke says. He returns to his repulsor cart and smiles menacingly at Gideon and Sidney. "It's to the Deathblock with you two."

Both their faces pale appropriately.

He follows the ramp system down through a complicated series of spirals and turns. They finally reach a dark level barren of traffic and personnel. The single lit corridor stretches straight to the center of the complex. On this level, the prison consists of 500 solitary isolation cells and a platoon of crack stormtroopers.

A dull set of gray doors comes into view. In front of the doors rest two light ion cannons. Each cannon's crew stands in front of their weapons. An officer stands before the doors.

- Turn to section 93.

**76**

"Let's see who left that door open," Luke says. "Maybe they know where they're going."

The drift curves to the left and down at a fifteen degree slope. After ten minutes of spiraling downward, Luke gives up trying to estimate how many loops they have made. At last, the drift ends in front of another open fire door.

Gideon advances the tractor through the doorway. The tunnel levels and branches immediately. The left branch curves sharply away into the darkness. The right branch runs straight ahead. Two hundred meters down the drift, a ring of light moves away from the fire door. A dull ache starts deep within Luke's brain and his stomach grows slightly queasy.

Unfortunately, the object casting the light-ring does not illuminate itself.

- If Luke follows the ring of lights, turn to section 81.
- If Luke turns down the left branch, turn to section 90.

**77**

"Who knows what we'll find in those lights?" Luke comments. "Let's take the left-hand branch."

Gideon obediently turns left. The tractor skims along a rough, narrow drift that curves and winds back on itself like a snake. Once again, Luke's sense of direction becomes totally confused. The fact that Gideon turns corners and takes branches with no apparent reason does not help.

Thirty minutes later, the prospector stops. The tunnel ends five meters ahead. It doesn't dead-end—it simply drops away into nothingness.

The drift leads to a huge cave. Luke cannot see the top, bottom, or other sides of the cavern. It is simply a vast hole in the middle of the asteroid. Somewhere in the distance, a rock clatters against another, then both bang into fresh targets. Before long, Luke hears a short-lived rockslide.

"These are the stopes," Gideon comments. "I've always had a hankering to see 'em."

"What is it?" Luke asks.

"The primary ore-body," Sidney reports. "All of the drifts we've been through are just accessways for moving the men and equipment. The stopes are the great big funnel that drops the ore into the series of chutes at the bottom of the mine. It's the most efficient method of mining enormous orebodies."

Gideon backs the tractor up. "Well, it's a cinch this isn't the way out. Let's try that branch back past the big Y just before the T." He looks to Luke for approval.

"By all means," Luke says. He has seen so many intersections that he can't begin to guess which one Gideon means.

Gideon, however, knows exactly where he is going. A short time later, he stops at a branch in the tunnel. The left-hand drift continues straight ahead. The right-hand drift angles downward at about ten-degrees and curves slightly to the right. A slight breeze blows from behind the buggy into both tunnels. A faint, high-pitched roar rolls up the drift on the right.

- Two hours have passed since Luke recovered Dena.*
- If Luke follows the drift on the left, turn to section 50.
  - If Luke follows the drift on the right, turn to section 72.

**78**

As the switch on the left pulls down, the roar coming up the drift fades and the breeze grows weaker. Over the drift, the vidscreen flashes the message: "Mine Ventilation: Yellow Alert."

- If Luke turns the switch back on, then continues down the drift, turn to section 95.
- If Luke turns the switch back on, then turns off the other switch, turn to section 67.
- If Luke turns the other switch off too, turn to section 82.
- If Luke leaves the switch off, then continues down the drift, turn to section 57.

**79**

After retrieving his X-wing, Luke heads for Tol Ado alone. Gideon and Sidney await his return just beyond sensor range. He is unsure how he will get Erling off Tol Ado, since the X-wing has no room for a passenger, but he will worry about that problem when he gets to it.

A thousand kilometers before the X-wing reaches the sensor shield, Luke knows the Imperials have identified him. His flight computer shows TIE fighters scrambling from orbital stations to meet him. The scramble looks like a swarm of stingfliers leaving their warren. Luke angles his shields forward, determined to waste no time dogfighting.

The TIEs start firing at long range. A dozen energy bolts leap out to meet him even before he sees the firepoints of their exhaust ports. Their shots strike his shields, then dissipate harmlessly. As he hoped, Tol Ado's garrison is so strong that the pilots have no experience defending it.

Luke activates the targeting computer, then returns fire. His bolts streak toward a target still indistinguishable from Tol Ado's black background. Only a tiny fireball lets him know the shot found its target. If he can continue shooting like that, he just might penetrate the Imperial defenses.

By the time he finishes selecting his second target, the TIEs have closed to medium range. He can see their tiny, insect-like forms buzzing straight at him. Another volley of TIE fire flares from the swarm. Luke would not call it a formation, for the enemy tactics are so sloppy they are almost non-existent.

This time, the TIE bolts rock the X-wing. Artoo reports the shields felt that hit. Luke begins dodging the X-wing back and forth to make it more difficult to hit. He fires, and four bolts turn another target into a fireball.

Luke turns back to the targeting computer. He has no trouble finding targets—more TIEs join the swarm every second, and nobody seems interested in dodging. He selects the closest, then fires again. When he looks out of the canopy, another fireball greets him.

So do fifteen double-winged balls of terror. The TIEs have closed to minimum range. More energy bolts

than Luke can count criss-cross his path. He quickly evens the shields, then fires based on visual targeting; he can't help but hitting something.

The X-wing lurches, jolts, then shakes, bouncing Luke around like the ball in a baby's rattle. The instruments flicker off, then return. Something hisses in the back of the cockpit.

Artoo whistles, then displays a message on the vidscreen.

"What do you mean, 'beat it?'" What kind of language is that for a Droid?

Artoo elaborates with a long report. Luke concentrates on the things most important to him: canopy seal broken, life support system down, and targeting computer in need of re-calibration. He doesn't need to be told again. Luke breaks hard to port, and seals himself in his vacsuit. This plan is failing miserably.

Six energy-clouds open over the canopy, slamming the X-wing so hard that Luke's right shoulder pulls the safety harness from its mounting. A wave of pain runs through his body and his vision blacks out. When the vision doesn't return, he knows he has only moments before passing out. He opens the thruster to maximum, then gasps, "Take us home, Artoo."

*Even Luke Skywalker can't sneak past 124 TIE fighters, as he has just discovered. Back at the Rebel base, his squadron commander makes sure he understands that.*

*This adventure is over for him. Return to section one and try again.*

**80**

"We can't risk getting lost," Luke says. "If we don't make Ire Eleazari's, we'll need four days to take her to safety."

"By that time, the Erling might be dead!" Sidney warns.

"Exactly," Luke says.

The repulsor engines whine and Gideon turns toward the main shaft. A few minutes later, he stops. The tunnel mouth lies a hundred meters ahead. Eight stormtroopers stand at the edge of the shaft area looking down the tunnel toward them.

"We must find the other shafts," Sidney says.

"We could run 'em down," Gideon says. "I might take out three or four with the tractor."

- *If they look for another shaft, turn to section 58.*
- *If they charge the stormtroopers, turn section 47.*

**81**

"Catch those lights!" Luke orders.

"If that's what you want," Gideon says. He opens the throttle wide and the boss-buggy streaks down the drift, repulsor engines whining.

At first, they make little progress catching the light-ring. It seems to travel as fast as the tractor. After five ear-numbing minutes, however, the ring stops moving and turns to face the buggy. Over a dozen individual lamps shine up the drift, but their beams fall far short of Luke and his companions. However, now that the light source is no longer moving, the buggy quickly closes the distance.

At 50 meters, the buggy's lamps finally illuminate the light source. A dozen assault troopers stand in the drift, their weapons aimed to fire. Gideon quickly slows the buggy.

"I thought this might happen," he says.

"Why didn't you say something?" Luke demands.

The prospector does not have a chance to answer. The stormtroopers open fire, filling the narrow tunnel with blue-white flashes and red streaks. "No use running," Gideon growls, opening the tractor's throttle to maximum, "they'll just back-shoot us." The boss-buggy zips headlong into the shower of Imperial fire.

Luke draws his blaster pistol and pulls the trigger. His single bolt seems pitifully inadequate against the storm of red and white. Gideon aims for the center of the Imperial formation and yells a defiant curse. The buggy has closed to less than 20 meters.

A blaster bolt hits Gideon square in the chest. The old prospector's body slams backward, arms limply flopping to his sides. Luke leans over Gideon's body and grabs the steering wheel with his left hand. He continues firing with his right. As the tractor speeds onward, Gideon slumps off the driver's seat, eventually slipping completely into the darkness below the levitation thrusters.

With less than five meters to the formation; Luke couldn't stop if he wanted to. He holds a steady course. The stormtroopers fire again, showering the buggy with miniature proton torpedoes. The whole front end explodes, jetting flame and energy plasma to the ceiling.

The boss-buggy lurches, but momentum carries it forward. It bounces over the middle of the Imperial line. Sidney screams and flies off the bench into the midst of the stormtroopers. Luke doesn't have time to debate whether to stop for the Pada. The buggy is decelerating—fast!

He releases the steering wheel and turns to face the stormtroopers, blaster pistol still gripped in his right hand. He quickly drops the weapon. Six stormtroopers stand less than two meters away, their weapons trained on his chest.

A figure wearing a black vacsuit approaches: Sebastian Parnell. "How nice of you to return Dena Tredway to us," he says, a bitter smile on his lips. "If you will be kind enough to step down, I shall see that you receive an appropriate reward."

Luke slowly steps down, his hands held in plain sight. "I've already seen your rewards, General. I promise to repay you in kind."

Parnell's smile disappears. "You won't live that long, my boy." The general nods to somebody standing behind Luke.

A sharp thwack echoes through the young Rebel's skull, then his knees buckle and he falls unconscious.

- *Turn to section 73.*

**82**

When the second switch goes off, the vidscreen over the drift falls blank. The roar coming down the drift fades, and the breeze grows weaker.

- *If Luke turns the switches back on, then continues down the drift, turn to section 95.*
- *If Luke turns the switches back on and flicks the right switch off, turn to section 67.*
- *If Luke turns the switches back on and flicks the left switch off, turn to section 78.*
- *If Luke leaves the switches off, then continues down the drift, turn to section 57.*

**83**

Luke ignores the officer and continues on his way. "Lieutenant, stop immediately! I need your assistance. A prisoner has escaped from the Deathblock—" The officer stops midsentence.

Cursing his luck, Luke detaches the lightsaber from his belt. Before he activates it, however, the officer is already backing down the corridor at high speed. Luke turns around and flees back toward the disposal center. As he leaves the cross-corridor, he runs headlong into a squad of stormtroopers and an Imperial officer.

"Halt for inspection!" the officer commands.

The stormtroopers raise their rifles and Luke flees back into the cross-corridor. This time, he meets two cartloads of troopers. He dodges to the right, hoping to slip past them.

No luck. The driver of the first cart alters course and knocks Luke into the wall. He activates his lightsaber, but when he tries to stand, his knees buckle.

Six stormtroopers jump from the carts and train their blasters on him. "You can die here or in your cell," says one.

Luke deactivates his saber. The cell may be gloomy, but at least he can try to escape from it.

*Luke returns to his cell in the Deathblock. He'll have to think of another trick for his next escape attempt. The Imperials are now shooting prisoners they suspect of being dead. Return to section one and try again.*

**84**

"How about 396 and 398," Luke says.

"You may proceed."

The door hisses, then slides aside.

- *Turn to section 107.*

**85**

They follow the corridor for two kilometers before finding a door. Luke palms the opener, his lightsaber in his hand. As the door hisses back, the room's ceiling lamp activates automatically. Plascompound crates fill the room top to bottom.

"Just storage," Luke says, stepping back into the corridor.

"What is that?" Sidney cocks his head. His ears slowly fidget.

"What?" Luke and Gideon ask simultaneously.

"The whine—coming down the corridor."

"You're hearing things," Gideon responds.

Luke hesitates. Maybe he hears something too: a mechanical scream—but so faint he might be imagining it.

"It might be—"

"Repulsor motors!" Luke finishes, reactivating the door opener. "In here."

The sound grows louder at an incredible rate. Gideon, Sidney, and Artoo scurry through the door. Luke follows an instant later. A tiny dot has appeared down the corridor.

He closes the door, but uses the butt of his lightsaber to prevent it from closing entirely. An instant later, a black flash zips past. Luke punches the opener and steps out of the room. A black repulsor cart streaks down the corridor, already so distant the driver is barely visible.

Backing into the room once again, Luke reports, "It was just a repulsor cart. But it reminded me of something—this is a whole planet. If we don't find out where Erling is, we'll never get out of here."

"Perhaps this will help," Sidney says. He pulls a black uniform from a crate.

"An Imperial uniform might keep 'em from nabbing us so fast," Gideon says, "but how can we use it to get around this hell-world?"

Artoo whistles from the other side of the crates. Luke follows the sound and finds him standing at a vidterminal. He has extended his electronic interface appendage so that it almost touches a computer jack.

"Artoo may have an answer," Luke says. "Go ahead. See if you can locate Erling Tredway."

Artoo plugs into the jack. Schematic diagrams flash across vidscreen so fast Luke cannot even count them. A minute later, a message appears on the screen: "Information classified. Enter authorization code."

Sidney holds the uniform to Luke's shoulders. "You can pass for the Imperial officer. If the R2 unit can find the Command Center, you can find out where they hold the Erling."

"Can't that good-for-nothing machine bypass the authorization?" Gideon demands. "I don't want to get no closer to Sebastian Parnell than we have too."

Luke considers both options. Artoo can certainly bypass the authorization code, but he has a good chance of alerting the Imperials when he does so. On the other hand, impersonating an Imperial officer may be tricky. If he blows a password or appears ignorant, he stands as good a chance of triggering an alarm as Artoo does bypassing the authorization code.

- *If Luke impersonates an officer, turn to section 108.*
- *If Artoo bypasses the authorization code, turn to section 106.*



Tol Ado is a cavity in the starlit curtain of space. It is a swarthy, somber world entombed in layer after layer of coal-colored clouds. It is a swirling black absence where stars should shine instead; it is, at last, the ultimate heart of darkness.

Sebastian Parnell has chosen his prison world well. So black are its clouds that they swallow the light from the system's weak orange sun and assimilate it like a blackfruit digests a nectarsect. The sight of the prison planet sucks away hope and willpower like a black hole sucks away light. The closer a traveler ventures, the more he fears he has reached at last that dark place of legend—that dark place from which no soul escapes.

Tol Ado seems suitably sinister to Luke. He expects no less of Parnell's cruelty. The Empire places such value on crushing spirit that the mere fact that such a black planet exists guarantees it lies under Imperial control. But Luke has faced the dark heart of the Empire before, and he knows it can be illuminated. If he has his way, before long he will open a pinhole in Tol Ado's black cowl.

A system of over 100 evenly spaced orbital stations hangs above the planet. Tiny double-winged balls flit from station to station, their exhaust flames creating streamers that look like nothing so much as a silk web. Were it not so menacing, the satellite system might be beautiful contrasted against Tol Ado's clouds.

Gideon pilots the scow to the largest of the stations, located directly over the planet's north pole. A rudely efficient voice guides them into a docking bay on the far side of the station. When they finally step off the scow's entrance ramp, an armed stormtrooper greets them.

"Form a line at the entrance," he says, pointing at a bulkhead. A dozen other creatures already stand there, nervously awaiting the start of the next tour. Three "Squid-heads," properly known as Quarren, stand at the head of the line. The humanoid Quarren have leathery skin, turquoise eyes, and fingers with suction-cups. Their heads resemble four-tentacled squids—hence the nickname many spacefarers prefer.

Behind the Squid-heads stand seven members of a Stictex family. The Stictex are not even vaguely humanoid. They have eight legs, any two of which they can stand upon. A shiny carapace covers the back of their cylindrical bodies, and a set of lacy wings protrudes from a slot in the center of the carapace. To a human, their heads are disgusting—and there is simply no other way to describe them. A dozen optic nerves protrude on short, prehensile stalks at all angles from the skull. Six finger-length slits serve as a nose, while a pair of fully articulated pincers protrude from an jagged maw.

A Twi'lek male and female stand three meters behind the Stictex, their skull tentacles intertwined in an expression of affection. They both smile in anxious anticipation of the tour.

As soon as Luke and his friends assume their places in line, the bulkhead door opens. An Imperial officer addresses the group.

"In the name of Governor-General Sebastian Parnell, greetings. This exhibit has been prepared to educate

citizens regarding the consequences of criminal activity in this sector of the Empire. I am Lieutenant Salva, your guide for this tour. Follow me."

He leads the way into an observation room looking directly down on the black planet. "As you may have noticed, Tol Ado is buried at all times by heavy cloud cover. These clouds contain a mixture of hydrogen fluoride, hydrogen sulfate, hydrogen chloride, carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, and other chemicals generally fatal to most life-forms. Aside from its poisonous atmosphere, the planet also possesses another unpleasant feature—a surface temperature of approximately 477 degrees Celsius. This is hot enough to melt some soft metals. In addition, the atmospheric pressure is ten times that on most habitable planets—enough to crush an individual of almost any species. Needless to say, escape from the prison facilities to the planet surface is an impossibility. Follow me."

He walks into the next exhibit, which contains a holographic display of the planet's satellite system. "The planet is shielded by a system of 124 orbital sensor stations. Each station guards a designated sector against unauthorized entry or exit. In case someone is foolish enough to penetrate this screen, each station houses one TIE starfighter. We can easily swarm an attempted breach at any point. Follow me."

The next exhibit is a reproduction of a cell. "Tol Ado consists of 1,400,036 cell-blocks. Each cell-block contains 4,000 cells identical to this one." He opens a durasteel door, then shines a hand-held light inside. "Each cell is precisely three meters long and two meters wide. It contains a bunk such as this—" he shines the light on a sheet of metal suspended from the wall. "As you can see, toilet facilities are located next to the head of the bunk. We do not waste valuable energy lighting cells for prisoners. In order to prevent blindness, each prisoner may open the cover of this 50 square-centimeter grate for two hours out of every 20."

"Nice touch," says the female Twi'lek. Both she and the male giggle.

Lieutenant Salva ignores the comment. "Through this access panel," he points to a thin slot in the bottom of the door, "a Droid serves one balanced meal per day. Follow me."

The next exhibit is a holograph of a supply barge in a docking bay. "Some of you may have already calculated that we have nearly six billion cells on Tol Ado. At present, we are 90% occupied. This requires a great deal of logistical support. On the surface, we have housing for over 2,000,000 stormtrooper squadrons, 3,000 equipment shops, 10,000 supply docks to accept supplies from our depot on 76,095 Poe . . ." Salva continues to drone statistics designed to impress the casual tourist with the efficiency of Imperial incarceration on Tol Ado.

At length, the tour ends and the group returns to the docking bay. The Quarren appear uncomfortable—disappointed or possibly frightened. The Twi'leks smile and laugh, apparently having enjoyed themselves a great deal, and who can say what the Stictex feel? Luke climbs back aboard Gideon's scow.

"What do you think?" Gideon asks.

"There must be a way in," Luke says.

"Getting in's easy," Gideon chuckles. "Just tell them who you are. I reckon getting out's the tough part."

"Perhaps we could stowaway aboard the supply barge," Sidney suggests. "We know where the depot is."

Gideon snorts. "And how are you going to find Erling once you're inside?"

Artoo whistles confidently.

Gideon eyes the Droid with an mixture of malice and astonishment. "All right, then. Even if you find him, how are you going to get out? With your ship, you're better off to fight your way in; at least if you make it, you'll know you can fight your way out."

"May the Force preserve us from the bloodthirsty fool," Sidney murmurs.

"You got any better ideas?" the prospector demands.

- If Luke fights his way into Tol Ado in the X-wing, turn to section 79.
- If Luke stows away aboard a supply shuttle, turn to section 104.
- If Luke allows himself to be captured, turn to section 74.

## 87

"Take it easy," Luke says. "I'm turning around."

Luke and his prisoners retrace their steps down the long corridor, then try another. After three exhausting hours, they run across a repulsor cart idling outside a storage room. Boxes have been stacked high in its rear passenger seats. Somebody is rummaging around inside the room, but Luke cannot see whether it is a stormtrooper or an officer.

Luke lifts Artoo into the passenger seat, then pushes the boxes out of the cart. Sidney and Gideon climb in without being told to, and Luke jumps in the driver's seat. As they streak off down the corridor, an officer comes out of the room with an armload of boxes and yells a curse at them.

"With language like that, I hope he doesn't expect us to send someone back for him," Luke comments.

- Turn to section 96.

## 88

"What are you up to?" Gideon demands. "We don't have all cycle."

Luke nods. "Just trying to figure out these switches."

- Turn to section 95.

## 89

"Yes, sir!" Luke responds.

"A prisoner has escaped from the Deathblock and is believed to be in this vicinity. I must stay here to organize the manhunt. Will you take this visitor to the command staff shuttle station?"

"Of course, sir," Luke says. He is painfully self-conscious about his uniform's poor fit and condition, but there is nothing he can do about it.

"I am not accustomed to being escorted by junior officers, Colonel," the Ithorian says, the mouths on both sides of its neck speaking in unison.

"I beg your indulgence, Oosea," the colonel says, mangling the Ithorian name as he dismounts from the cart. "I must capture the escapee before he disappears into the sub-facility. The Deathblock has never lost a prisoner."

Luke climbs into the driver's seat. "Where is the command staff shuttle station?" Luke asks.

The colonel frowns, then digs a miniature datavid from his pocket. He calls up a map and gives it to Luke. "Your authorization code is 100858. Return the datavid to the Deathblock." He addresses the Ithorian. "Please accept my assurances that General Parnell is making every effort to locate Ire Eleazari."

"I hope so," Oosea answers. "If the Empire wishes a base on Ithor, my herd must never learn the truth about Ire's disgrace."

"He shall soon be silenced forever," the colonel says. "The shuttle will take you to our supply depot on Poe. From there, you can arrange transport home without arousing suspicion. Journey in comfort." He nods to Luke.

Oosea does not speak to Luke for the entire two hours it takes to reach the command staff shuttle station. Luke is just as happy to remain silent; he has never cared for traitors. At least he will have something of value to report when he returns to base. And, if Alliance Intelligence has any contacts on Ithor, Oosea will soon pay for his treachery.

When they reach the command staff shuttle station, Luke unloads Oosea without ceremony. He parks the cart near the entrance.

- Turn to section 92.

## 90

"I've got a bad feeling about those lights," Luke says. "Let's go left."

"Smart boy," Gideon says. "They must be stormtroopers."

They follow the drift for 50 meters before coming to another branch. The tunnel on the left leads straight ahead, while the one on the right curves away and descends. A faint breeze blows into both tunnels, but a high-pitched roar comes up the one on the right. Someone operating machinery in the drift, or a part of the mine itself?

*Two hours have passed since Luke recovered Dena.*

- If Luke follows the left-hand branch, turn to section 50.
- If Luke follows the right-hand branch, turn to section 72.

## 91

"Run for it!" Luke yells, shuffling down the corridor at top speed.

"Are you crazy?" Gideon yells back, following him.

They have barely progressed a dozen meters when an electric jolt runs through Luke's limbs, sending painful waves rolling at his brain from his wrists and ankles. His muscles clamp his bones so tightly he

stiffens like a board. A moment later, they relax, but he finds he has no control over his body. His knees buckle and he crumples to the floor, dizziness washing over him like high tide over a sandbar. Gideon and Sidney fall next to him.

The escort officer walks over to Luke, fingering a small button on his belt. "Now you know why we call your restraints shock shackles." He activates his comlink and calls the stormtroopers. "Forget the Droid; it was just a diversion."

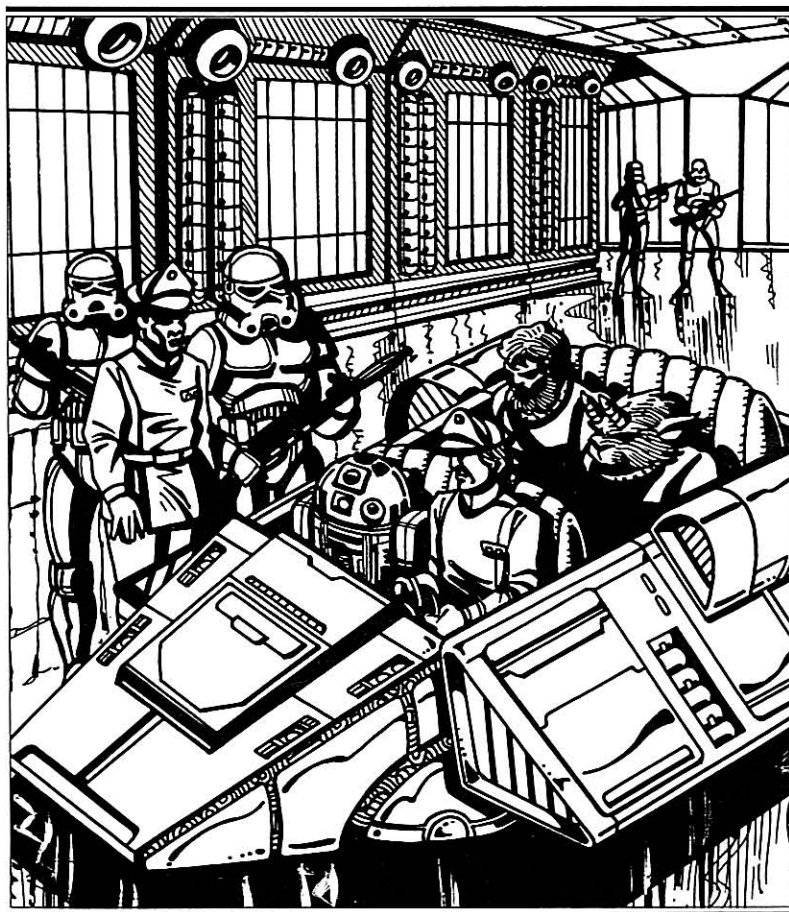
Luke tries to answer, but finds his vocal apparatus as paralyzed as the rest of his body. A dark curtain descends over his eyes and he feels himself falling into a restless dream.

• Turn to section 73.

92

The command staff shuttle station is probably the smallest launching bay on Tol Ado. A small control center overlooks 12 launch stations. Black, heavily armed shuttles occupy half the launch stations. Only one shuttle appears ready to leave.

At the end of the hangar, a selective atmoshield holds Tol Ado's atmosphere at bay. As Luke watches the black gas whirl and eddy, he feels as though he is buried in the planet's core instead of standing on its surface.



Oosea climbs aboard the shuttle preparing to launch. Luke allows a few minutes, then follows himself. Inside, the shuttle consists of a dozen rows of seats. A single stormtrooper stands at the entrance.

"Authorization code?" Luke recites the code he has been given, hoping the stormtrooper cannot hear the pounding of his heart as clearly as he can. To his relief, the trooper stands aside. "Choose your seat."

He takes a seat near the Ithorian, who regards him with a cold gaze for a long moment. Luke fingers his lightsaber; his seat choice is not an accident. He has bad feelings about Oosea. If the Ithorian causes him any trouble, he wants to be close enough to take his revenge before he falls. Perhaps the significance of Luke's seat is not lost on Oosea, for he simply turns his head away and pretends not to notice Luke.

Ten minutes later, the shuttle launches.

*Luke is free! The shuttle flies to the busy Imperial depot on Poe. From there, Luke has no trouble returning to Rebel Base, where he finds a relieved—and perhaps smug?—Artoo awaiting him. Unfortunately, he cannot consider the mission a success—and not just because he failed to find a new location for the Rebel Base. Return to section one and try again.*

93

Luke stops the repulsor cart in front of the officer. "Two prisoners for processing," Luke says.

"Why is a quartermaster transporting prisoners?" the officer demands.

"Sub-facility task-force," Luke answers. "I just captured them and received a new assignment."

"Congratulations." The officer signals the guards. The heavy blast doors grind open, revealing a depressing off-white corridor. A full transwall dominates the end of the corridor. Behind it stands a single Imperial officer flanked by two guards. Remote-control observation cameras line the corridor. Luke eases ahead.

At the corridor end, he stops. The officer on the other side of the transwall says nothing. "Command Center ordered me to bring these prisoners down. They are to be processed."

A panel opens to their left. "Dismount and enter."

Luke grabs his blaster rifle, then motions his "prisoners" forward. The panel leads into a short corridor with an open door in its end. "Prisoners through there," orders the officer. Gideon hesitates, but Luke nudges him with the rifle.

Gideon reluctantly obeys, followed closely by Sidney. The door closes, separating the party with a grim clunk. "Thank you, Colonel," the officer says. "You may return to your normal duty."

Luke looks at one of the cameras. "I captured these prisoners personally. I would like to watch the processing."

"An unusual request," the officer replies. "But we have no regulations prohibiting it." A panel on the right side of the corridor opens and Luke steps into an office crowded with furniture. This room has no observation cameras. Two stormtroopers stand by a door marked "parasite shower." Another door leads from the back of the room. A vidsign above it reads, "Cell-block access: condition Green."

"Place your weapon in the rack," the officer says, indicating a collection of blaster rifles hanging from the wall. Luke complies, then detaches his lightsaber and activates it.

"What's that?" The officer reaches for an alarm button.

Luke steps forward and separates the officer's arm from his body, then draws the blade across his torso. The stormtroopers whirl at the man's scream. One stares dumbly at the bloody heap on the floor, but the other fires at Luke. The bolt explodes in the rack of blaster rifles, showering the room with sparks and deafening explosions.

Luke sidesteps the next shot and swings the blade into the stormtrooper's midsection. He catches the other with the back swing. Both collapse, motionless.

He turns to Artoo. "You have three important things to do, Artoo. First, continue the processing program for Sidney and Gideon, but slow it down. Things must look normal down here, or we're in big trouble. Second, open Erling Tredway's cell when I call you. Third, find an escape route—I doubt we can leave the way we entered. Is that clear?"

Artoo beeps affirmatively. Luke deactivates his lightsaber, takes a moment to straighten his uniform, then goes to the door in the back of the office. The vidsign reads, "Cellblock access: condition Yellow."

A voice crackles from a speaker in the door: "Cellblock access limited due to prisoner processing. State your reason for requesting entrance."

Luke hesitates. He can blast his way through the door. Although the fastest way into the block, it might attract unwanted attention. He can ask Artoo to change the cellblock access back to condition Green. This will take valuable time. Finally, he can claim he wants to examine the cells assigned to the prisoners being processed. This option will either work or fail completely, depending upon whether it falls into the normal parameters of security procedure.

- *If Luke forces his way through the door, turn to section 102.*
- *If Luke asks Artoo to change the access condition, turn to section 111.*
- *If Luke bluffs his way through the door, turn to section 120.*

**94**

Luke drops off the right side of the litter and scrambles to the access panel. He lifts it and drops into the darkness below without pausing.

He lands in a dimly lit corridor. Pipes, vents, wires, and equipment of all kinds line the passageway to both sides. The tangle is so thick that it reminds Luke of the jungle on Yavin's moon.

A blaster bolt crumps down the way. Luke opens the bag he brought from his litter. As he hoped, it contains his personal effects—including his lightsaber. He pulls the saber from the bag, closes the access panel overhead, then starts down the corridor toward the sound of the blaster fire.

A hundred meters down the corridor, a single, partially-clad Imperial officer stands in a pool of light. He is unarmed, and has several jagged gashes on his face.

Six creatures, black as Tol Ado itself, hang from the ceiling by long, thin tails. They have square flap-like ears, and for eyes, red slits set in a hairy, wrinkled brow. Each holds a blaster in its claw-like hands.

"Strip, Imperial!" says one. It fires its blaster at his feet. "Strip and die in humiliation."

The officer's legs shake with fear, but he obediently continues unfastening his trousers. Luke notices that his right ring finger has been dislocated.

As he activates his lightsaber, the young Rebel studies the situation. The creatures are clearly torturing the officer to death. Luke cannot allow it. When he thinks of the bloodcurdling cries he endured while sitting in his cell, the pilot reaffirms his hatred of such cruelty—which ever side the torturers claim allegiance to. He can try to discourage the black creatures from their activities, or he can simply attack.

- *If Luke tries talking first, turn to section 103.*
- *If Luke attacks, turn to section 62.*

**95**

"Let's go," Luke says, resuming his seat.

Gideon opens the throttle and the boss-buggy eases past the blinking vidscreen. Within seconds, they are zipping down the drift. The roar grows louder, and the breeze grows stronger with each meter they progress.

Presently, Luke notices that Gideon is traveling recklessly fast—the ground is slipping through his lamp-beam so fast it is nothing more than a blur. "What's the hurry?" Luke asks.

"No hurry," Gideon answers.

"Then why are you pushing so hard?"

"Who's pushing?" Gideon asks. "I'm in reverse. We're being pulled."

"What?" Luke screams.

Gideon does not have a chance to answer. The drift suddenly opens into a square, durasteel box. "Jump!" Gideon yells, leaping from the driver's seat.

He falls straight upward, his arms flailing madly as he attempts to catch something to hold onto. Luke feels the tractor fall away from beneath him. He looks down just in time to see it crash into a steel wall. It bounces off the wall, then begins a slow tumble in the bottom of the box. Dena's litter remains attached to the bench on the back.

Luke's heart drops to the pit of his stomach. If she is not already dead, the tumbling tractor is beating Dena to death in front of his eyes. He cannot help her because he is falling UP a shaft.

Although he realizes his life is in danger, fear does not trouble Luke. Instead, he is angry—angry at Sebastian Parnell for attacking the Tredway complex, angry at the stormtroopers for pursuing Dena underground, and, most of all, angry at himself for letting her die.

Small tractor pieces begin to rise. Luke's situation is painfully clear to him. They have definitely found one of the exhaust shafts. Its powerful fans are overpowering the asteroid's weak gravity field and drawing Luke and his friends up the shaft.

Luke no longer sees the bottom. Gideon's light continues to tumble a few meters over his head, and he occasionally catches glimpses of Sidney somersaulting below. Otherwise, the shaft is completely dark.

Although his comlink still functions, Luke wishes he could deactivate it. Both Sidney and Gideon scream at the top of their lungs, but he can make out no words. The fan roar almost overpowers their screams. Luke hopes it soon will—he cannot think clearly with such desperate voices crying for help.

The situation might seem comical if Luke not realize what awaits them at the top of the shaft. The fan blades are certainly two meters or more in length, and must rotate many thousands of times per minute. When they pass through the blade plane—well, nobody will need to worry about recovering the remains.

Luke and Sidney have one narrow chance of survival, but Gideon is beyond help. Luke detaches his lightsaber and activates it, holding the energy blade directly above his head—the direction he hopes is up.

To his surprise, he has only seconds to contemplate his plan. Static suddenly replaces Gideon's screams. He feels something impact his saber's energy blade. Sparks rain over his head and several deafening crashes echo off the unseen walls.

Luke changes directions; he now flies perpendicular to the ground. His plan worked—he sheered off the fan blades! A moment later, he shoots into a well-lit tunnel. A huge durasteel grate blocks his path ahead. He is in the filtering system.

Luke strikes the heavy durasteel mesh with a bone-jarring thud. The suction from shaft one pins him against the grate, and he feels himself losing consciousness. Both his head and his body ache terribly, and he is too weak to work his way off the grate. As his vision fades, he wonders how long it will take the fans to run out of fuel. Hours? Years? Until then, he fears he is stuck here like a winged-stinger splatted on a wind-screen.

*The situation is not quite as bad as Luke fears. He will eventually recover consciousness and crawl off the grate, but he will be in no condition to continue this adventure. Return to section one and try again.*

**96**

Four hours later, Luke slows to a crawl. They have reached the outskirts of the Administrative Center. It reminds him of the blood-ant towers he occasionally found in Tatooine's deserts, crowded and busy as the cities of Ord Mantell. Over an area 75 kilometers in diameter, layer after layer of white-walled complex rises a full kilometer off the surface. Each layer is a city in itself, dedicated to some purposeless bureaucratic function.

As they move toward the complex center, the corridor grows crowded with repulsor carts operated by low-ranking Imperial officers. An outbound powerwalk runs along the left edge of the corridor, and an inbound powerwalk runs along its right edge. Stormtroopers, civilians, and a few officers scurry along the powerwalks. An occasional pedestrian stops to stare at Luke and his prisoners.

Luke takes the first down ramp he sees, then follows it through a complicated series of spirals and turns. They finally reach a dark level barren of traffic and personnel. The single lit corridor leads toward the

center of administrative complex. On this level, the center consists of 500 isolated cells and a platoon of crack stormtroopers.

A set of dull gray doors comes into view. In front of the doors rest two ion cannons. Each cannon's two crewmembers stand behind their weapons. A single officer stands before the doors.

• Turn to section 93.

**97**

"I left it at Ire Eleazari's," Luke says.

"Eleazari? You know—? No, you must have seen my family."

Luke hesitates, trying to find the best way to tell Erling about the Imperial raid. Finally, he realizes there is no good way to break this kind of news. "I took your sister Dena to Eleazari's. The Imperials killed everybody else."

Erling gasps, then falls silent for nearly a minute. At last, he asks, "Parnell?" His voice shakes with sorrow—or is it rage? "Don't answer," he quickly adds.

Luke's comlink beeps again. "Are you coming?"

"Yes," Erling answers. Two feet shuffle in the darkness. "This won't go unanswered!"

Luke activates his comlink. "Artoo, shut down all lights in the cellblock—and deactivate the backup lamps."

Not an instant later, the cellblock falls completely dark. "Grab my belt," Luke whispers, catching Erling's hand and guiding it to his waist. "Don't let go."

Outside the cell, the angry voices of two officers flutter about the dark like Mynocks on a stray asteroid. Luke leads the way along the balcony, fearing the ringing of their steps will begin attracting blaster bolts any moment. Fortunately, the stormtroopers are rustling about in the sable depths overhead and couldn't hear a Dewback below. Luke and Erling reach the lift and descend without incident.

They reach the door to the processing center just as power returns to the cell-block. Twenty lamps flood the block with more light than has fallen on it since construction, but the second level balcony protects Luke and Erling from detection. Luke leads the way into the processing office.

Inside, Sidney and Gideon squat below a table, each holding a blaster rifle. Through the transwall overlooking the main accessway, Luke sees General Parnell and two aides stopped at the open blast doors. Parnell converses with the officer in charge of the emplacement. Ten stormtroopers follow in two more carts.

"How do we get out of here?" Luke asks Artoo.

The Droid toots pitifully, then displays a diagram on the vidscreen. A hundred meters beyond the blast doors, a sub-facility tunnel crosses beneath the corridor. "That's it?" Luke demands. "That's our escape route?"

Artoo whistles a reply-tone that from a living being would indicate anger.

"I'm sorry, Artoo. I should have known getting into the Deathblock would be a lot easier than getting out."

"We're trapped here like a bunch of Rivorian grain-bandits. It's been nice knowing you." Gideon's voice betrays no fear.



"It's not over yet," Luke says. "Everybody into the cart. We'll drive past like nothing's wrong." When the odds are this bad, it's time to bluff. His friend Han Solo taught him that.

"Be sure Erling has his back to Parnell."

With more than a little hesitation, Luke's companions climb into the repulsor cart. They lay the blaster rifles they took from the dead stormtroopers on the floor. Luke loads Artoo into the passenger's seat, then starts down the corridor. He can think of a million reasons this plan should fail, but they have no other choice.

As they move down the corridor, security cameras whirl and turn to follow their progress. Despite his urge to gun the cart's engines and flee, Luke forces himself to move patiently. So far, their bluff seems to be working.

When they close to ten meters, Parnell's aides study Luke's overloaded repulsor cart with cold, appraising eyes. Luke unclips his lightsaber. His stomach feels like it's trying to suck his intestines and lungs into itself. Parnell ignores them and continues talking with the officer. With a little luck, the officer will not interrupt the conversation to challenge Luke.

They pass the blast doors. The aides continue to watch, but say nothing. The officer briefly looks away from Parnell and nods to Luke, then returns his attention to the general. They're going to make it!

Then, as they pass the second load of stormtroopers, their cart wobbles and something clatters in the rear. "Murderer!" screams Erling. A half-meter behind Luke, somebody fires a blaster rifle. He turns around and sees the gate officer collapse with a smoking hole in his chest. Erling stands in the rear of the cart, a blaster rifle cradled in his arms.

"You crazy—"

Crumps and explosions drown out the rest of Gideon's curse. The ion cannons flash white energy balls and Parnell's bodyguard fires blaster rifle bolts in rapid red streaks. The corridor erupts into flying shards and vaporized metal. The ion shots open two great holes in the walls.

Luke guns the repulsor cart and returns his attention to the corridor ahead, still unable to believe what he has seen with his own eyes. They were almost safe! He cannot begin to understand the demon that possessed Erling.

"Get down!" Gideon yells at Erling.

The Imperials fire again. Multi-colored energy streaks flash past the cart. The ion cannons strike the floor thirty meters ahead, opening five-meter hole. Somebody screams.

"The Gideon fell out!" Sidney exclaims.

Luke slams on the decelerator and looks behind. Gideon lies on the floor, still cradling his blaster rifle. Even as Luke watches, several blaster bolts strike the inert body.

Luke's heart sinks. The prospector was a true friend and a brave man. More Imperial fire reminds Luke that he dare not pause now to mourn. The stormtroopers have turned to pursue up the corridor. Luke faces forward again and accelerates. The hole in the floor looms like a gravity well in deep space. The chasm will suck them inside as surely as a black hole.

Then Luke remembers the sub-facility tunnel. If he can drop the cart evenly into the hole, they should land upright—and he hopes these repulsor engines are strong enough to catch them before they crash. The facility floor isn't nearly as forgiving as Tatooine sand.

"Hold on!" he yells, closing the throttle. The cart decelerates just as it clears the hole's edge. The occupants feel their stomachs jump as the floor drops away, and the drives have nothing to push against, but they are falling more-or-less level. A bouncing lurch in the next instant indicates the presence of a surface beneath them. Luke almost crows in triumph—it worked! The repulsor drives held up! He grins at Sidney in relief, and activates the headlamps.

A drab gray wall lined with yellow pipes stands directly ahead. The tunnel fades to darkness both right and left. Rhythmic pounding rumbles up the way from the left. All remains quiet to the right.

- If Luke turns to the left, turn to section 121.
- If Luke turns to the right, turn to section 127.

**98**

Luke studies the officer, a predatory grin on his lips. The officer looks from Luke to Gideon to Sidney, then back to Luke again. "You planned this!" he hisses.

"Now, Gideon!"

The officer drops his hand to his belt. Luke cups his hands together and hits the man in the stomach. The Imperial doubles over, grasping his stomach with both hands. Gideon steps behind him and loops his manacles around the man's throat.

"You would not dare!" gasps the officer.

Gideon snugs the manacles down. A grimace of effort creases the prospector's mouth. Luke, seeing no choice except to finish the officer off, clubs him in the side of the head. A hollow pop sounds from the man's neck, then he stops struggling.

"Sidney, bring the duffel with my gear."

Sidney does not budge. He is staring at the dead Imperial.

"Snap out of it! Bring my duffel over here."

Sidney shakes himself free and fetches the bag. Luke withdraws his lightsaber and activates it, then cuts his shackles off. He does the same for Sidney and Gideon.

Around the corner, the tramp of armored feet announces the return of the stormtroopers. Sidney starts back toward the other two duffel bags, but Luke grabs his shoulder.

"We don't have time," he says. He pulls his comlink and chronometer out of the bag at his feet, then runs up the corridor as fast as he can. Sidney and Gideon follow.

They soon reach another T-intersection. Luke takes the left branch. A moment later, an alarmed shout

echoes down the passageway. Luke increases his speed—he knows if their escape is to prove permanent, they must put as much distance between themselves and the stormtroopers as possible.

Five minutes, four left and two right turns later, Luke stops in front of a door. He gasps for breath so hard his ribs feel as though they will break any moment. His muscles burn so much they feel like an afterthruster, and his knees wobble like a couple of faltering gyroscopes. It's been several weeks since he exercised in the gravity of a full-sized planet, and his body feels like it. Gideon and Sidney do not hold up even as well as Luke. As asteroid prospectors, they rarely return planetside. Both the human and Pada look as though they will collapse if they run a step further.

Luke palms the opener and the door slides open. An overhead lamp automatically lights the room. Although the chamber is crowded with furniture, Luke does not take the time to study it. All that matters to him is that it contains no Imperials. Sidney and Gideon join him, and Luke closes the door.

While they lie panting on the floor, Luke studies the room. It is some sort of meeting room or waiting chamber. A large black table dominates its center, while plush comfortable chairs line the walls. It contains no indication that anyone ever uses it.

After catching his breath, Luke activates his comlink and calls Artoo. The stormtroopers undoubtedly forgot about the Droid after learning their officer had fallen. Luke tells Artoo how to find them, then deactivates his comlink.

Ten minutes later, Artoo beeps outside the door, and Luke joins him in the hallway. There are no stormtroopers in sight. He signals Sidney and Gideon to follow, then travels up the corridor 50 meters. Another hallway opens to the right. This one stretches straight as a blaster bolt as far as his eye can see.

"That one looks like it goes somewhere," Gideon says.

Luke shrugs. "Might as well try it."

- Turn to section 85.

**99**

Luke enters the coordinates Dena gave him into the flight computer. Artoo displays a message reporting it will require nearly an hour to reach the coordinates at Gideon's maximum speed. It will be close, but they should catch the asteroid—assuming they run into no trouble.

As Luke unfastens his vacsuit, he remembers the message chip that fell out of Dena's suit. He retrieves it and plugs it into the X-wing's data slot. A short-haired human female in her forties appears on the vidscreen. Luke is surprised to identify Mon Mothma, supreme commander of the Rebel Alliance.

"Greetings, Dena. As always, I have time only for a brief message. I trust that you understand the brevity of our communication does not reflect the magnitude of your contribution to the Rebellion.

"My spies tell me your brother Erling's resistance efforts have begun to irritate General Parnell. We normally applaud any thorn in an Imperial governor's

side, but Erling's value transcends the effect of any local rebellion. You must silence your brother before he angers Sebastian Parnell further.

"It is unfortunate that we cannot tell Erling how important he is to the Alliance. However, I must defer to your judgment on this matter.

"Farewell, and may the Force protect you and your family."

Luke replays the message several times, astonished that Dena is working with Mon Mothma herself. He has seen the legendary leader only once, but the respect with which his commanders regard her is enough to awe him. It seems incredible that he should have stumbled upon an operation she is supervising personally. Any doubts he has about rescuing Erling disappear; if the young Tredway is important enough to concern Mon Mothma, he is important enough to rescue from Tol Ado.

The message may also explain the mystery regarding the ferocity of the Imperial attack on 24 Tredway. If General Parnell knew of Dena's affiliation with Mon Mothma, he would certainly attempt to capture her and destroy any resources she could direct toward the Rebellion. And if he knew of the importance Mon Mothma attached to Erling, he would no doubt arrest and interrogate Dena's brother. It certainly appears that Parnell knew about the message—the question is, how?

It is a question Luke must ponder at another time. He has reached Ire Eleazari's asteroid. The planetoid is a tiny, lopsided rock no more than half a kilometer on a side. Several deep craters dot its surface, but Luke sees no sign of life.

He opens a hailing channel. "Ire Eleazari, are you there?"

No answer comes.

"Is this the right asteroid?"

Again, no answer comes.

Luke circles the over-sized dust grain several times. There are no signs of habitation. It seems all but impossible that he came to the wrong coordinates. He might have remembered them incorrectly, but the chances of actually finding something at the wrong location are over a million to one.

He tries once more. "Ire, we're friends of Dena Tredway. Sebastian Parnell destroyed 24 Tredway. Dena is injured and needs a place to recover."

A light suddenly shines from the bottom of a deep crater. "You may disturb my solitude," answers a voice. It almost sounds like two voices.

Luke follows Gideon's scow into the crater. It is actually a short tunnel leading into the interior of the asteroid. When they pass the first right angle in the tunnel, the drab exterior walls of a modest underground dwelling appear.

Luke sets his X-wing down, then reseals his vacsuit and climbs out of the fighter. Gideon lands behind the X-wing and lowers his belly ramp. A moment later, the old prospector and Sidney emerge from the scow with Dena's litter. Luke leads the way to the dwelling's airlock.

When the interior bulkhead opens, a single Ithorian greets them at the entrance to a gloomy apartment. The Ithorian has a roughly humanoid body, but Luke

cannot miss the reason starfarers have nicknamed the race "Hammerheads." A long, flat neck curls forward from the body. It thins out rapidly and turns upward. At the top of the thinnest part of the neck is a "T" shaped-head. A dark, serene eye sits on either end of the T.

"Dena Tredway may stay as long as she wishes," the Ithorian says. He has two mouths, one on either side of his broad lower neck. When he speaks, both mouths move, giving his voice a stereo-like quality. "However, I have exiled myself from the herd, so I must ask you to leave quickly."

Luke looks up abruptly at the Ithorian's words. He wants to ask why Eleazari would take such a drastic step, but restrains himself from asking the question aloud. "Of course," he says, simply replying to the statement. "Can you take care of her?"

Eleazari leads the way to a fully equipped medical console. "Yes. I was a healer in my own herd. Place the litter there." He points to the floor next to the console.

"We have one more favor to ask," Luke says. "Parnell has taken Erling to Tol Ado—"

The Ithorian's eyes light with alarm. "That is very bad."

Luke nods. "We're going to try to rescue him."

"Then you will start at the visitor center," Ire says. The statement is a command, not a question or suggestion.

"Visitor center?" Luke questions. He's never heard of such a thing in an Imperial prison.

"Yes," the Ithorian answers. "Sebastian Parnell's vanity may serve you well. He considers Tol Ado a masterpiece; like any art collector, he cannot resist showing it off. There, you may learn many things which can help you."

Luke nods. The wisdom of the Ithorian's idea is obvious. "But I have an X-wing—" he ventures.

Eleazari's eyes narrow and he studies Luke with a certain respect. "You may leave it here."

"Thank-you," Luke says. "We'll be on our way, then."

The Ithorian sighs sadly. "Yes."

Luke follows Gideon out the airlock. He is dying to ask the Ithorian about the Tredways, why he exiled himself, what involvement Dena has with the Alliance, and a hundred other things. But his spacefaring has taught him that such inquiries would be a rude imposition on the Hammerhead's solitude.

After unloading Artoo, Luke helps the little Droid up the steep ramp into Gideon's scow. The interior is dark without being gloomy. Like most prospecting ships, Gideon's craft consists mostly of a battered cargo bay for carrying ore to a mill. The repulsor engines, slow but powerful, sit directly aft of the cargo bay. The crew quarters, which Gideon maintains neatly but without decoration, are organized for both comfort and efficiency.

Gideon raises the airlock ramp, then directs Luke to a seat. A few moments later, they leave Ire Eleazari's asteroid and lumber toward the Tol Ado tourist center.

*Remember that Luke left his X-wing at Ire Eleazari's asteroid. He may need the starfighter later.*

• Turn to section 86.



**100**

"I would like 203 and 207," Luke says.  
"You may proceed."  
The door hisses, then slides aside.

- Turn to section 112.

**101**

"I left it at 40,005 Milton," Luke says.  
Erling responds a moment later. "In 12 hours, you will find 40,005 Milton at coordinates 900.34-297.00-346.95."

"How do you know?" Luke asks.

"My family settled 24 Tredway. We've been in the Belt a long time. Now go."

Luke briefly considers taking Erling by force, but that would make him no better than Sebastian Parnell. The Alliance fights for freedom; if he resorts to kidnapping, he has already lost the battle. Luke slips out of the cell and returns to the processing center.

Inside, Sidney and Gideon squat below a table. Each holds a blaster rifle. The office is otherwise empty; they have removed any sign of the earlier struggle. Through the transwall that overlooks the main access-way, Luke sees General Parnell riding toward the processing center. Two aides ride with him, and another cart of stormtroopers follows.

"Where is the Erling?" Sidney demands.

"He refused to leave," Luke responds.

"What?" Sidney hisses. "Did you not find him?"

"I found him," Luke says. "He wants to stay to inspire his followers. Now let's forget about him; we have other problems."

If Parnell discovers them in the processing center, they're doomed. They have only two chances. The three of them can ambush Parnell and his guards. If they win, they might use Parnell as a hostage to guarantee their safe escape. If they don't win quickly enough, stormtroopers will overwhelm them in seconds.

Their other option is to hide in the disinfecting chamber. Luke has no definite plan after that, but there may be some chance in stealth. Whichever they do, they must act quickly!

- If Luke ambushes Parnell, turn to section 128.
- If Luke hides, turn to section 118.

**102**

Luke grabs a blaster rifle from a fallen stormtrooper and fires at the door. The cellblock access immediately changes to condition Red. A siren wails in the cellblock.

"Release Sidney and Gideon!" Luke orders. "We're not fooling anybody. I'll go for Erling."

Artoo trills a series of alarmed whistles.

"Not now, Artoo," Luke says. "We don't have time." He pushes the door. With the big hole where it once had a lock, it opens easily. Luke steps into the cellblock.

A green flash hits him in the shoulder, hurling him back into the office. Luke's head bangs the floor so hard the durasteel chimes, but he barely feels any pain. In fact, he feels little except the fright of an endless fall into the silent depth of his own mind.

*Luke will stop falling—when he wakes up in a Deathblock cell. Perhaps he will be more patient when he attempts to break out. Return to section one and try again.*

**103**

Just before he reaches the pool of light, another blaster bolt flashes from the ceiling. The officer flinches away from the burst and drops his pants to the floor.

"Stop this torture," Luke commands, "In the name of the Alliance!" He hopes his tone will give them pause, and his mention of the Rebellion will indicate his sympathies. Unfortunately, it is impossible to read the sudden silence.

The Imperial's reaction is a mixture of embarrassment, anger, and shock. His stare focusses slowly on the young pilot he sees before him, lightsaber softly humming.

"Alliance! How—"

With no warning, two of the red-eyed creatures drop down to shoulder level, grab the Imperial officer by his armpits, and heave him into the darkness overhead. The man doesn't even have time to scream.

Luke reacts a split second later, leaping to the place the Imperial had been standing. But his lightsaber meets nothing except the structural grid—a shower of sparks and a wrenching metallic groan attest to that. Then silence returns. The Rebel can see nothing beyond the four anchored lamps in the black heights overhead. He pauses, but they have gone, and taken the officer with them.

He closes his eyes briefly in regret that he failed to free the Imperial, but Luke knows he has little time to waste in recrimination. He is a fugitive himself. Leaving this place must be his top priority.

The man's uniform lies crumpled in a wad. Luke takes it and retreats down the passageway, where he quickly tries it on. It is a size too long in all proportions, but it should pass a cursory inspection. Luke attaches his lightsaber to the belt, then moves quickly down the corridor.

He stops at the third access panel he reaches. He should be far enough away from his escape site to avoid detection. And he certainly does not want to get caught down here in an Imperial uniform!

After carefully cracking the panel open to make sure his exit will be unobserved, Luke climbs from the sub-facility. He replaces the panel, then turns down a cross-corridor. The cross-corridor connects to a larger, busier passageway. It is then that Luke notices the sticky dampness on his left collar.

He rubs the area and his fingers come away bloody! Luke hazards a glance down at the collar. Fortunately, the nature of the stain is unclear; it simply appears to be a glistening, darker area on the black uniform. Luke turns down the corridor, trying to keep his left side to the wall.

"Lieutenant!" An Imperial officer stops his repulsor cart three meters in front of Luke. An Ithorian rides in the passenger seat. It holds its long, flat neck curled diffidently away from the officer. The two eyes on its hammer-shaped head regard Luke with contempt.

- If Luke ignores the officer, turn to section 83.
- If Luke responds, turn to section 89.

**104**

"Let's stowaway," Luke says. "We'd be foolish fighting through that net INTO prison, and I don't want to turn myself in."

"All righty, that means we're heading out to that supply depot the guide was so proud of." The prospector quietly leads the party back towards the *Rockcan*, and they lift off.

Sneaking aboard a supply shuttle turns out to be easier than expected. The traffic at 76,095 Poe is so heavy that Gideon lands in a crowded hangar without trouble. Supply barges and shuttles of all sizes rest in haphazard order on 1,000 acre floor. After they put down the belly ramp, a Droid approaches and asks, "What is your cargo?"

"TIE parts," Luke answers.

"Shop number?"

Gideon shakes his head. "Didn't give us one. Just said to bring the load over here."

The Droid pauses. "Procedure must be followed properly. Next time, accept no order without a destination number. Understand?"

"Yes," Luke answers.

"You are priority number 607. Go to loading dock G-79 in six hours. We'll confirm the order there."

"What do we do in the meantime?" Gideon demands.

"Whatever you like," the Droid responds. "The Poe cantina is open at all hours—but don't be late to your dock. You'll lose your priority number."

"Sure thing," Gideon responds. "This is too easy," he whispers to Luke.

After the Droid leaves, they unbuckle their blasters, lock Gideon's scow, and go to the closest dock. A dozen laborers are hand-loading the contents of a small shuttle into an immense barge. Luke approaches the foreman. "They said you need help."

"Who said that?" the foreman snaps, turning to study the hangar floor.

"Don't get mad at me." Luke points at a Droid resembling the one that greeted them. "Him."

"Oh," the foreman answers. "Blasted mechanicals! Always telling you one thing and doing another. Okay, get to work."

Luke, Gideon, and Sidney join the laborers shuffling boxes from the shuttle to the barge. Artoo-Detoo wheels himself aboard and parks himself next to a line of other Droids. After 20 minutes of work, Luke leads the way deep into the barge and selects a hiding place between two rows of immense crates.

Three hours later, the foreman seals the cargo bay and the barge lifts off. In the dark, the trip to Tol Ado passes slowly but without incident. Finally, the barge decelerates and lands on the planet. This is the first time in weeks Luke has been in full gravity; his knees feel weak and uncertain.

Nevertheless, when the barge doors open, he steps out ahead of Gideon and Sidney. Each of the stowaways tries to simulate stupidity while carrying a box. Ten astonished laborers and two stormtroopers greet them.

"Special delivery for the command center," Luke says.

The laborers look at him dumbly, but one trooper eventually asks, "What is it?"

Luke shrugs, hoping the miner and the Pada behind him are looking equally blank. "They don't want us to know. Who gets it?"

The stormtrooper looks across the docking bay. "Give it to the dockmaster."

The three of them walk off the loading dock. When Artoo follows, the stormtrooper points his blaster rifle at the Droid. Artoo whistles.

"That's part of the package," Luke says.

"Why didn't you say so?" The Imperial lets the Droid pass.

Luke presents the three cartons to the dockmaster, then asks, "Where can we wait for a return barge?"

Without looking up, the dockmaster points around the corner. "There's a pilot's lounge."

"Thanks," Luke says. He leads the way around the corner. Sidney looks about to speak, but the young Rebel holds up a hand for silence. Instead of entering the pilot's lounge, he opens a door leading out of the docking bay. It opens into a long, white corridor. He steps through, then signals the others to follow him.

- Turn to section 85.

**105**

"One-seventeen and 129 sound good," Luke says.

"You may proceed."

The door hisses, then slides aside.

- Turn to section 107.

**106**

"Bypass the code, Artoo," Luke orders.

Artoo whistles excitedly, then goes to work. Error messages and security warnings alternately flash on the screen. Artoo calmly whirs and clucks, oblivious to the tense silence of the others in the room.

Two minutes later, the vidscreen shows a route from their present location to a small square in the lowest level of the administrative complex. A moment later, a diagram of a cellblock blinks onto the screen. It contains only 500 cells but has twice the normal number of guards and heavy weapons emplacements. The cells surround an open interrogation arena, which Luke slowly realizes must make it impossible for any prisoner to escape the screams of each tortured victim.

The third cell on the right side, level two, lights up. It is number 205.

"Good, Artoo," Luke says.

As if on cue, an Imperial officer's face replaces the diagram. "Terminal PN-9854, explain your violation of authorization procedure regarding the Deathblock."

"Deathblock!" Sidney gasps.

"Droid malfunction!" Luke offers quickly, hoping to cover the Pada's outburst. "I'm analyzing supply loss patterns."

"This violation was no Droid malfunction! You should have requested proper authorization."

"I can't wait that long," Luke responds, switching off the vidscreen. "Let me try on that uniform, Sidney." Luke does not yet know how they will rescue Erling, but he now has no doubts it will involve deception and impersonation.

After finding a uniform that fits Luke, the party leaves the room. Luke hopes the lightsaber on his belt won't attract unwanted attention. Although Imperial officers don't carry lightsabers, Luke refuses to abandon his favorite weapon. Besides, it seems unlikely he will meet anybody who might recognize an inactivated lightsaber.

Two hours later, they turn a corner and come face to face with two stormtroopers. Behind the stormtroopers, an Imperial major helps a raggedly dressed Twi'lek into an access panel on the floor. The Twi'lek has a crooked scar over his left eyebrow.

"Sub-facility task-force," the first stormtrooper says. "Turn around."

"I don't care who you are," Luke says, stalling. "I captured these two prisoners near the docking facility. I'm appropriating your transportation."

"Your authorization code does not supersede ours," the trooper replies, raising his blaster rifle menacingly. "You must turn around."

- *If Luke turns around, turn to section 87.*
- *If Luke stalls, turn to section 119.*

Luke steps into the Deathblock. The entire block is constructed of glistening black metal designed to foster terror and hopelessness in the hearts of detainees. A short corridor opens straight ahead into the interrogation arena on level one.

On Luke's right, a personnel lift rises toward the murky heights of the block. Somewhere up there lurk 50 stormtroopers. Luke takes the lift to the second level, where he knows Erling Tredway sits inside a dark cell. The metal manway outside the cells rings with each step he takes.

A spotlight suddenly illuminates him. "You're on the wrong level," reports a megaphone.

Luke's hand drops to his lightsaber, though it will do him little good against blaster rifles and ion cannons.

"You're a quartermaster!" the megaphone exclaims. "You shouldn't be in here!"

Luke steps out of the spotlight, but a dozen blasters and two ion cannons flash anyway. The shots ricochet off the wall and manway. He steps away from the wall.

He steps into nothingness and falls. Whether he fell off the balcony or Imperial fire dissolved it, he does not know. His body bounces off some unseen piece of equipment, then smashes into the first floor. Pain flares in his head and he feels sick to his stomach. A moment later, Luke's vision blackens and his hearing fades until he is no longer conscious.

- *Turn to section 73.*

"See if you can locate the Command Center," Luke says.

By the time Luke finds a uniform that fits, Artoo displays a map showing how to reach the Command Center. It is approximately 450 kilometers away! Unfortunately, so is anything else that sounds remotely helpful; Tol Ado's launch stations were built well away from the cellblocks to deter escape attempts.

"Okay, prisoners," Luke says, attaching his lightsaber to his belt, "we'll just have to find transportation where we can." He hopes the lightsaber won't attract unwanted attention, but he has no intention of leaving it behind.

Gideon leads the way into the passageway. An hour later, they hear another repulsor cart approaching. When it comes into view, Luke steps out from behind the "prisoners" and flags it down.

The black streak flashes to a stop. Two stormtroopers sit in the front. "I'm taking this vehicle," Luke says, hoping he sounds more authoritative than he feels.

The troopers look at each other, then at him. "But sir, we're 300 kilometers from our duty station!"

"That is unimportant. I found these prisoners hiding near the supply bay, and you know what that means." He pauses to let them consider just what that does mean. "I'm taking them to Command for interrogation. Dismount, now!"

The stormtroopers reluctantly obey, and Luke motions the "prisoners" into the back of the cart. Artoo stops at the edge of the cart and whistles plaintively. Luke motions at him, then says, "Put the Droid in the passenger seat."

After they obey, Luke takes one trooper aside. "I also need your blaster," he whispers. "The Droid is unarmed, but the prisoners don't know that."

The stormtrooper sighs, then gives Luke the weapon. "Perhaps we should take them back, sir? They look dangerous."

"You must be joking!" Luke snaps, climbing into the driver's seat. "I captured these prisoners, and I will take them to the Command Center. Do you understand?"

The stormtrooper steps away. "Yes, Colonel."

"Good. I'll send someone back for you."

As Luke turns the cart around, he overhears one stormtrooper comment, "Those prisoners will tear that quartermaster to pieces."

Luke gulps down a snicker as he realizes this is just like a stunt he and Deak pulled in Anchorhead, then guns the cart. It even handles like a speeder back home.

Four hours later, Luke slows the repulsor cart to a crawl. They have reached the outskirts of the Administrative Center. The center vaguely reminds him of the crowded cities of Ord Mantell, except that it is completely enclosed by sanitary white walls. Over an area 75 kilometers in diameter, layer after layer of complex rises a full kilometer off the surface. Each layer is a city in itself dedicated to some purposeless bureaucratic function.

As they move deeper into the complex, the corridor grows crowded with repulsor carts operated by low-ranking Imperial officers. An outbound powerwalk runs along the left edge of the corridor, and an inbound powerwalk runs along its right edge. Stormtroopers, civilians, and a few officers scurry along the powerwalks, occasionally stopping to stare at Luke and his prisoners.

Luke takes the first up-ramp he sees, then follows it through a complicated series of spirals and turns. Finally, they reach a level dominated by captains and majors. Luke stops the scooter in front of a walkramp entrance guarded by two stormtroopers.

"Watch these prisoners," he orders. "I'm going to Command for instructions." He unloads Artoo and turns up the ramp.

The stormtroopers stand to attention, then obediently point their weapons at Sidney and Gideon. The ramp ends in a lobby outside a transwall. On the other side of the transwall, several hundred officers monitor computer terminals, bustle from one superior to another, or argue with their peers. He pauses to sedate the butterflies in his stomach, then marches into the Command Center, Artoo follows, incapable of the emotion which makes Luke's knees quake.

The guards here also allow them to pass without question. Luke quickly turns toward the back of the room. He bumps into three dark uniforms.

"Slow down, Colonel," orders a familiar voice. "It can't be that important!" The voice belongs to Sebastian Parnell.

Luke averts his eyes. "I'm sorry, sir. I'm new up here." He steps aside to let the general and his party pass.

"Be more careful. I can't have my officers getting trampled, is that clear?"

"Yes, sir." Luke moves forward.

"Colonel!" snaps Parnell. "Have I dismissed you?"

"No, sir," Luke answers. He stops moving, but does not look at Parnell.

"I never forget a face. Have we run into each other before?"

- If Luke answers yes, turn to section 75.
- If Luke answers no, turn to section 109.

109

"You must be mistaken, sir," Luke says.

"Nonsense," Parnell growls. "I know your face. You were associated with the Tredway operation."

Luke breaks into a cold sweat and his stomach knots into a tangle. "No sir. I'm just a quartermaster." He feels the attentive gaze of the entire command staff on his back.

Parnell glares at Luke menacingly.

"If you'll excuse me, General, I have a report to finish."

The command staff gasps as one man and a murmur rustles through the room like wind through dried and lifeless leaves. Despite the reaction of his officers, Parnell does not seem to take offense. "Carry on."

Luke hurries to a vacant computer interface. A hundred angry eyes follow him. When the command officers grow bored of watching him, Luke orders



Artoo to plug into the interface jack. He hopes a command terminal won't be subject to the same authorization restrictions as the one they tried previously.

Artoo flashes screen after screen of interesting but useless information across the monitor. He pauses for a moment each time to allow Luke to glance at the contents. The most interesting thing they run across is a map of the sub-facility. Certain regions are labeled "escapee strongholds" or "supply raider route." Apparently, a number of prisoners have escaped into Tol Ado's cavernous sub-regions.

"Excuse me, Colonel," says a familiar voice. Luke lifts his head and finds himself staring down the barrel of a blaster rifle. Six stormtroopers surround him, and General Parnell stands behind them. "I remember now where we've met."

Luke reaches for his lightsaber, but a hollow crack echoes through his skull before he finds it. His vision fades and he slumps to the floor.

- Turn to section 73.

**110**

"If it's just the same to you, we're kind of in a hurry," Luke says.

"Your choice, but stay away from the city if you know what's good for you." The Gorums disappear back into the gloom overhead.

"Hey!" Luke calls. "Our directions!"

No reply comes. He continues into the maze, always trying to take the left-hand passageway where possible. His efforts to keep track of their route meet with little success, however. He soon finds himself as lost as he ever remembers being.

An hour later, a wall of debris rises ahead. The largest Gamorrean Luke has ever seen stands in front of a gap leading past the wall. He cradles a light blaster cannon in his arms as if it is a rifle.

"Who goes there?" he calls.

Remembering his uniform, Luke whispers, "I wish we had that Gorum with us."

"If you'll just do as I say, we can get out of here—"

"Be quiet!" Luke says. Something about Erling's voice makes the Rebel pilot want to listen to him. However, Erling has nearly gotten them killed twice now—Luke has no intention of trusting the man's judgment.

The Gamorrean brandishes the blaster cannon menacingly. "Answer, or I'll shoot!"

Something black and frightening drops onto the cart's hood. "It's Tormey, with some escapees. I'm taking them to into the city." It is the Gorum that harassed Erling earlier. He turns to Luke. "So you were in a hurry, huh?"

• Turn to section 117.

**111**

"No access required. Cancel request," Luke says.

"Request cancelled," the electronic voice responds.

Luke turns back to Artoo. "Return cellblock access to Green."

Artoo chirps, then hums for a full minute. Finally, the vidsign indicates cellblock access has returned to Green.

• Turn to section 112.

**112**

Luke steps into the Deathblock. The entire block is constructed of glistening black metal designed to foster fear and hopelessness in the hearts of detainees. A short corridor opens straight ahead into the interrogation arena. Detainment devices crowd the center of the chamber, but each is carefully positioned so the interrogator can reach the victim from all angles.

Along the walls, manual and robotic torture devices lurk in the shadows beneath the second floor balcony. Though the light is too dim to see clearly, the long, twisted appendages protruding from the soulless machines send shivers down Luke's spine.

To his right, a personnel lift rises into the murky depths overhead. Somewhere in the darkness above,

50 stormtroopers lie in wait with nothing better to do than watch Luke. Given the dimness of the block, they will not trouble Luke when he goes to Erling's cell. But escaping will be another problem—the block is just bright enough to show two forms leaving instead of one.

Luke takes the lift to the second level. As he walks down the balcony, it rings with every step. He forces himself to walk close the rail despite his desire to sneak through the shadows near the wall. Luke is scared; he would not be human if the sinister ambience here did not frighten him. He cannot imagine sitting in a dark cell while another prisoner's anguished screams echo from the block's durasteel walls.

Luke stops at cell 205 and orders Artoo to open it.

A quiet buzz sounds from the door and Luke pushes it open. The cell interior is black as Tol Ado itself. "Erling Tredway?" Luke steps inside.

"Who else, Imperial slime?"

Luke admires Erling's defiance. "I'm not Imperial," he answers. "I've come to rescue you."

"Rescue me?"

Erling's surprise puzzles Luke. "Before Parnell kills you—or worse."

"How unfortunate. You've wasted your effort, I'm afraid."

"What's wrong?" Luke asks. "Are you shackled or injured?"

Erling chuckles. "Neither. I don't wish to be rescued."

Luke can't believe his ears. "I thought you just said you don't want to be rescued."

"That's correct," Erling replies. "So just be on your way. I don't want any bloodshed on my account."

They don't have time for this argument! "That's very noble," Luke says, his voice betraying his impatience, "but you don't understand what Parnell has in store."

"He's already begun. With all the screaming out there, I haven't had more than four hours of sleep in a row."

"Your turn will come, you know."

"Then I shall endure in the name of freedom and dignity. When the Senate hears of my imprisonment—"

"The Senate!" Luke exclaims. "Emperor Palpatine disbanded the Senate months ago!"

Erling remains determined. "Then my hardships shall inspire the natives of Sil'Lume. They will rise in rebellion."

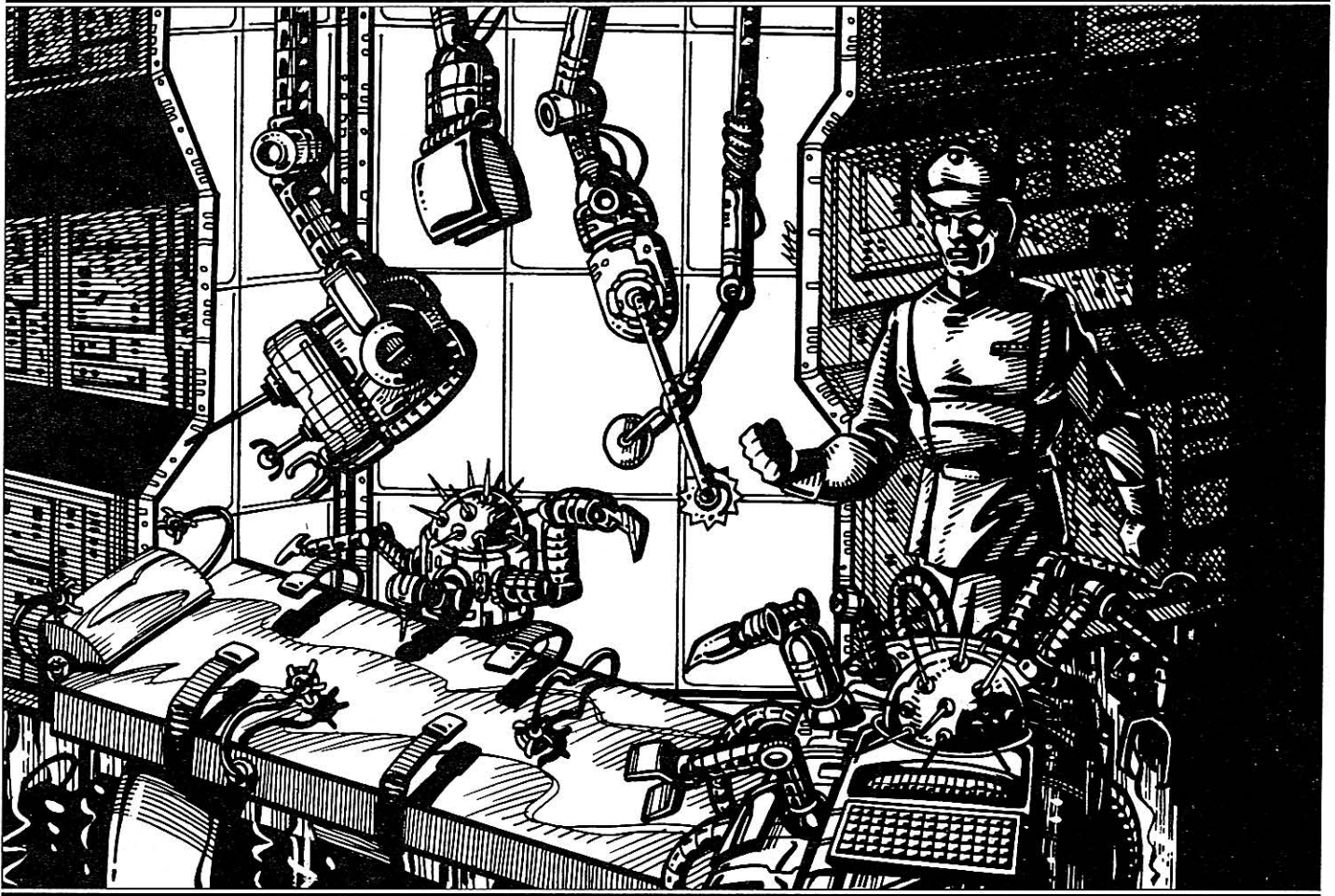
"Is this your idea of rebellion?" Luke hisses, waving his arms in an invisible gesture at the unseen walls. "Sitting in the dark waiting to be tortured to death? The Rebellion can do without that kind of leadership." Although Luke cannot help respecting Erling's courage, he is growing tired of the man's foolishness. "He'll make you talk. Nobody can avoid it under torture."

"I know nothing of value to Sebastian—not even the names of my followers."

Luke sighs in frustration. "Then Sebastian Parnell knows something you don't. He didn't arrest you to avoid trouble—a martyr is twice as much trouble as a speechmaker."

"Precisely my point. Now, won't you leave?"

"Why are you determined to die?" Luke snaps.



"I am not determined to die," Erling replies. "Sebastian is determined to kill me."

The asteroid belt aristocrat's reply is so smug that Luke loses hold of his temper completely. "What am I doing here?" he growls. "General Dodonna'll have my wings for this!"

"Dodonna!" Erling gasps. "The Alliance sent you?"

Luke sees his first glimmer of hope, but he does not dare risk revealing his affiliation with the Alliance to a man who is determined to be tortured. In fact, letting Dodonna's name out was a mistake. "I came," he says noncommittally.

"Why?" Erling's voice betrays a note of resentment.

"I thought you needed help," Luke says. "I'm sorry if I interfered with your funeral plans." Luke's comlink beeps twice; it is Artoo's danger signal. "I've got to go. Please hold off telling Parnell about me as long as possible. It's going to take forever to find the asteroid with my X-wing."

"I can help you," Erling says. "Where did you leave it?"

"I can't say," Luke responds. "Parnell will get it out of you."

"Probably," Erling admits. "But I can tell you exactly where to find any asteroid in the Belt. My interrogation will not be rushed. By the time I break, you can be safely away."

Luke hesitates.

"We may not fight in the same manner," Erling says, "but we fight for the same thing."

The young Rebel pilot has to admit there is truth in that statement. "Okay."

- If Luke left his X-wing on the asteroid Milton, turn to section 101.
- If Luke left his X-wing anyplace else, turn to section 97.

113

Luke decelerates, stopping barely an inch from the huge machine. When he turns around, their pursuers' headlamps illuminate them from less than ten meters.

"May the void take your souls!" yells Erling. He raises a blaster rifle.

"No!" Luke cries, diving away from the cart. Before he touches ground, a dozen blaster bolts tear into the cart. It immediately erupts, throwing Luke across the tunnel. He smashes into the wall, then crumples to the floor. By the time the Imperials dismount, he feels himself slipping into unconsciousness.

*Although this is the end of the adventure, it isn't the end for Luke. After awakening in one of General Parnell's cells, he must find a way to escape. But that's another story—return to section one and try again.*

**114**

"We'll run," Luke says. "We'd be terrible in a fight." His emotions are so churned up with annoyance at Erling and fear that the Imperials will trap them and uncertainty at Sidney's reactions that he cannot think straight, he can only react. If he can get out of the line of fire and find somewhere he can stop for a moment...

• *Turn to section 121.*

**115**

Luke studies the hangar carefully, looking for a way to cause a little excitement without being seen. A small command center overlooks the entire dock area. Several security cameras hanging from the high ceiling monitor all operations in the bay. No matter what he does to distract the stormtroopers and quartermasters, the cameras will see them as they enter the barges. In order to make the diversion work, they must blind the security cameras, and only Artoo can do that.

A plan occurs to Luke. He issues instructions to Artoo, then leaves the repulsor cart near the exit and leads Sidney and Gideon into the dark recesses along edge of the bay. Artoo-Detoo wheels himself to the command center and enters unnoticed. Through the transwall overlooking the docks, Luke watches the Droid disappear behind a bank of computers.

A minute after General Parnell leaves, the hangar erupts into a cacophony of alarm wails and sirens. The force shield separating the bay interior from Tol Ado's atmosphere blinks and sparks. Black gas begins seeping through the upper right corner. When they see the cause of the alarm, stormtroopers, laborers, and quartermasters all rush for the exits. Only Droids remain oblivious to the threat of a catastrophic breach of the system.

Luke motions Sidney and Gideon forward. "We're cleared for loading."

"Good plan," Gideon says. "Which barge?"

It is a difficult question. Since the barges are used to carry freight to Tol Ado, their cargo holds will probably be empty and therefore devoid of hiding places. It seems obvious the Calamarian is riding in a barge to avoid being observed along the normal routes of travel to and from Tol Ado. Therefore, there may be cover in the barge he entered. On the other hand, if he sees them, the Calamarian might sound the alarm.

- *If Luke selects the barge the Calamarian entered, turn to section 149.*
- *If Luke picks the other barge, turn to section 122.*

**116**

"Right, the authorization code," Luke says. "Give me a minute." Although he does not close his eyes, Luke turns his attention inward. Erling will soon eat his flippant dismissal of Jedi ways.

When nothing happens, he takes three deep breaths and relaxes, trying to find that inner calm that serves as conduit for the Force. Something tickles the base of his brainstem. Good—it's working.

"What are you doing?" Erling whispers.

"Be quiet!" Luke snaps. Under his breath, Luke curses Erling for interrupting his meditation. A storm of aggravation sweeps through his body, blowing his tranquility away. The tingle fades as quickly as it came. "Ben—help me!" he whispers.

"What is your authorization code?" the guard demands.

Luke grabs his lightsaber. He throws the repulsor cart into reverse and leaps at the guard. "Get out of here!" he yells.

The surprised guard reacts slowly. Luke activates his lightsaber and chops into the trooper's shoulder. Even before the injured trooper crumples to the floor, Luke turns to face the second guard.

He finds himself staring down a blaster rifle. He dives for the ground. An energy bolt flashes, and Luke somersaults toward the trooper's feet. He comes up swinging. The energy blade cuts the astonished guard's rifle cleanly in half.

A white flash blinds Luke. A shockwave slams him flat against the floor and a hollow thump echoes through his skull. Everything fades to black.

• *Turn to section 134.*

**117**

The Gamorrean steps aside.

"The city" is a collection of partitions made from sheet metal, plasticates, wire draped with cloth, or whatever else the inhabitants can find to divide living space. Lanterns shine every ten meters or so, giving the place the appearance of a primeval village. Beings of all types and shapes watch the repulsor cart pass. Luke recognizes Ithorians, Calamarians, Quarren, Sullustans, Togorians, Khoans, and even a Jawa. He also sees a dozen races he cannot identify. Most are bipedal and remotely humanoid. They do pass a furry, canine-snouted snake that gives Luke the creeps, however.

Tormey finally stops them in front of a large structure made entirely from sheet metal. He leads the way inside, followed by Luke and his companions. A large Wookiee with matted fur and yellowed teeth sits at a makeshift table. Several beings sit with him, but only one catches Luke's eye—a Twi'lek with a hooked scar over his left brow. The Twi'lek shows no sign of recognizing Luke.

The Wookiee growls a question at Tormey, watching Erling as if instinctively sensing he is the party leader.

"They have come to arrest us, Warburton," Tormey replies.

The Wookiee roars in alarm.

"Tormey's joking!" Luke says quickly. Wookiees have a quirky sense of humor. "We're refugees from the Deathblock."

This calms Warburton. He grumbles a question at Erling. Warburton's assumption that Erling is the leader of the party bothers Luke. More than uneasiness causes his discomfort; Luke has no doubt Erling will say something to get them into more trouble.

Tormey turns to Erling. "He wants to know—" Tormey stops midsentence and steps to the door. He flaps his ears forward and listens intently for several seconds.

Nobody says a word. Finally, he returns, "The white-shells are coming, Warburton!"

Warburton glares at Erling menacingly, then barks an order.

"Yes." Tormey turns to Erling. "You are to man the outer perimeter with my Gorums. Warburton fears you are Imperial spies."

Erling starts to object, but Luke cuts him off. "Let's prove him wrong," he says. He knows better than to argue with a Wookiee.

They return to the repulsor cart and leave the city. Although he says nothing, Luke senses that Sidney would rather avoid the combat and flee. Erling, however, relishes the prospect. Luke silently marvels at the change. Certainly, having one's family slaughtered might drive even the most peaceful man to violence. But Erling should be sullen and withdrawn, not prideful and jealous. He seems to consider the attack a challenge to his personal dignity.

Tormey asks Luke to park the repulsor cart. He assigns Luke and his companions to a small tangle of equipment. They are not to attack until they see the Gorums fight.

"Where is everybody else?" Erling asks.

"They are here," Sidney responds, cocking his ears this way and that. "I have never heard such silent creatures."

Luke detaches his lightsaber from his belt. The conditions are ideal for a melee weapon. As they wait, the butterflies in Luke's stomach churn like feeding

bats. He knows better than to think about dying; that is a sure road to panic. But he can't help being frightened, and the longer he waits the more frightened he becomes. He can't imagine how Sidney and Erling feel; neither has the kind of combat experience he does, and he still considers himself a novice soldier.

Finally, the whine of a repulsor drive announces the Imperials' arrival. Luke prepares to activate his lightsaber. A single repulsor cart comes into view; it carries four stormtroopers armed with blaster rifles. Luke knows this cart is the point-scout. It moves ahead of the main body to flush out enemy ambushers.

Erling rustles, perhaps preparing to charge.

- *If Luke whispers a warning, turn to section 123.*
- *If Luke remains silent, turn to section 133.*

**118**

"Into the disinfecting chamber!" Luke orders. "Don't even breathe until they're gone!"

Gideon, Sidney, and Artoo crawl into the chamber, dragging their weapons along. Luke follows a moment later.

Parnell and his men arrive 20 seconds later. "The office is empty!" exclaims an aide's muffled voice.

"Somebody's head is going to roll for this!" Parnell snaps. "Major Joseph, see if you can find out who's responsible for this. TX-840, man this station until relieved."





"Yes, sir," responds a stormtrooper.

"Major Anbow, It's time Erling Tredway gets his first taste of interrogation, don't you think?"

"Oh, yes sir," answers Anbow. He sounds entirely too enthusiastic.

As soon as they leave, Luke silently groans. He did not anticipate that they would man the station. He takes a deep breath, then stands and raps on the wall.

"Let me out!" Luke says. "They locked me in here."

"Who?" the stormtrooper demands, opening the disinfecting chamber door.

Luke steps into the entrance corridor, then leaps into the processing office, his lightsaber flashing. "The Rebels!" he snarls, swinging the blade at the stunned stormtrooper's side. The trooper falls before he knows what hit him.

Luke quickly loads Artoo and his companions back in their repulsor cart. As they reach the first camera in the accessway, it swivels and follows their progress. The second camera also tracks them, and the third, too. Finally, they reach the entrance to the Deathblock. The doors open automatically and Luke eases through. His heart beats so fiercely he almost fears it is trying to escape his body. One more obstacle.

The officer turns around. "What's wrong?"

Luke stops the cart. "I'm off the sub-facility task-force," he says. "General Parnell threw a fit when he saw these guys. After I take them to their blocks, it's back to counting datavids."

"Too bad," the officer comments.

"Easy come, easy go," Luke says. He engages the repulsor motors and starts down the corridor.

A minute later, they reach an up ramp and start out of the Administrative Complex. Luke is too angry to answer Sidney's questions about Erling's refusal to leave the Deathblock. He nearly died trying to rescue someone who doesn't want to be rescued. In fact, he might still die—for nothing!

At last, Gideon says, "They're going to figure out you ain't no quartermaster and we ain't no prisoners when they find that last stormtrooper. What do we do now?"

"Stow away aboard a supply barge?"

"No good," Gideon comments. "They'd be expecting that."

"We still have my uniform," Luke says.

"Perhaps we should steal the shuttle," Sidney suggests.

"That's more stupid than stowing away," Gideon says. "We'd never get past the atmosphere shield. You know how well those prisoner docks are guarded."

"Not the prisoner shuttle," Sidney says. "The crew shuttle. They must have transport to and from the orbital stations."

"And where do we go from there?" Gideon asks.

- *If Luke stows away aboard a supply barge, turn to section 137.*
- *If Luke steals a crew shuttle, turn to section 141.*

"But I'm 300 kilometers from anywhere," Luke objects, "and I have two prisoners."

"We have our orders," the trooper responds.

The Twi'lek disappears into the access hatch and the officer slams the panel shut. The hatch is now indistinguishable from the rest of the floor. The major straightens up. "Hold, TX-567," he says. "Approach, Colonel."

Luke pushes past the stormtroopers, who train their weapons on Sidney and Gideon. "I need your repulsor cart."

"Where did you capture these prisoners?" the major asks, ignoring Luke's demand.

"Near the docking bay," Luke answers.

"Which one?"

Luke pauses. He does not understand docking bay designations. "I'll make my report directly to Command," he says.

The major smiles. "That won't be necessary. We can interrogate your prisoners, Colonel."

"I think I outrank you," Luke answers testily.

"The Colonel certainly remembers general order BT346 requiring all personnel to cooperate with the sub-facility task-force?" The major steps toward the prisoners, ignoring Luke. "I will take the escapees, quartermaster," he insists.

Luke detaches his lightsaber. "No you won't!" He activates the blade. The officer and stormtroopers all turn to face the source of the throbbing hum.

"What is the meaning—"

Luke charges past the officer and slices the energy blade across both stormtroopers' torsos. A smoking gash appears in each breastplate. The first trooper flings his rifle away and staggers backward, his agony echoing from the walls. The second trooper simply drops his weapon and doubles over.

The officer reaches for the second trooper's blaster rifle. Luke twists to his left, drawing the blade across the Imperial's right side. The man screams in pain, then drops.

Luke snatches a blaster rifle, then opens the access panel in the floor. The Twi'lek is gone. Gideon drags a stormtrooper to the opening and dumps him down. "Might as well give 'em a decent burial," he says.

Luke nods. "Anything to keep them from being discovered for a few hours." He wrestles the other stormtrooper's armor-clad body to the hole and drops him in, and Sidney reluctantly pulls the officer over, too.

As they climb aboard the repulsor scooter, Luke studies the smudges on the floor. Anyone stopping to investigate will immediately realize the substance is blood, but the Rebels do not have the time or equipment to clean up. They must hope whoever passes this way does not bother to look at a dirty floor.

Luke guns the repulsor cart and it accelerates down the corridor. The tiny vehicle handles like a speeder on Tatooine, and Luke allows himself to enjoy the thrill of piloting a small, fast-moving craft.

- *Turn to section 96.*

120

"I wish to inspect the new prisoners' cells," Luke says.

"The prisoners do not have assigned cells."

Luke hesitates, his heart pounding wildly. Although the voice sounds electronic, he does not know whether it belongs to a sentient being or a mechanical. Either way, his answer must be the same, though he suspects a sentient may be more suspicious of him. He takes a deep breath, then, trying to sound casual, says, "They haven't? Our interaction terminal must be glitched. Give me a list of possibilities."

"One moment," the voice answers. Luke breathes a sigh of relief. It sounds like he's dealing with a mechanical. "The possibilities are 117 and 129, 203 and 207, and 396 and 398."

- If Luke selects 117 and 129, turn to section 105.
- If Luke selects 203 and 207, turn to section 100.
- If Luke selects 396 and 398, turn to section 84.

121

Luke swings the cart to the left and accelerates. It whizzes down the dark corridor. Luke barely registers what the dim headlamps show him before shooting past. With every meter, the pounding thunders more loudly.

A blaster bolt zips past Luke's head. By the time it explodes in the left-hand wall, they have passed the impact sight. Luke hazards a look over his shoulder. A pair of headlamps follows 100 meters behind. A stream of blaster fire streaks from above the lights.

When Luke turns back around, the cart's headlamps illuminate a huge machine. A Droid sits atop the machine, facing away from Luke. The machine slams one-meter floor panels into place every other second. On the right, there is perhaps a meter-and-a-half of clearance. Luke guesses the gap is about two centimeters wider than his cart. To the left, the machine is flush with the wall.

- If Luke squeezes past the machine, turn to section 130.
- If Luke turns around, turn to section 113.

122

"We don't want that Calamarian to give us away," Luke says. He leads the way to the far barge. Inside, it is crowded with crates. Luke and his companions hide between the crates, moving deeper into the hold as more cargo is off-loaded.

Eventually, the crew unloads the last few crates and discovers them. Although Luke instinctively activates his lightsaber, he recognizes the futility of attacking the laborers. A few minutes later, a squad of stormtroopers takes them to the Deathblock for processing.

*Luke cannot escape for now; the odds are too steep. But General Parnell is sure to "interrogate" him, and Luke will have his opportunity then—if he feels up to it! But that's another story. Return to section one and try again.*

123

"Not yet!" Luke whispers. "Get back!"

"What?" Erling asks.

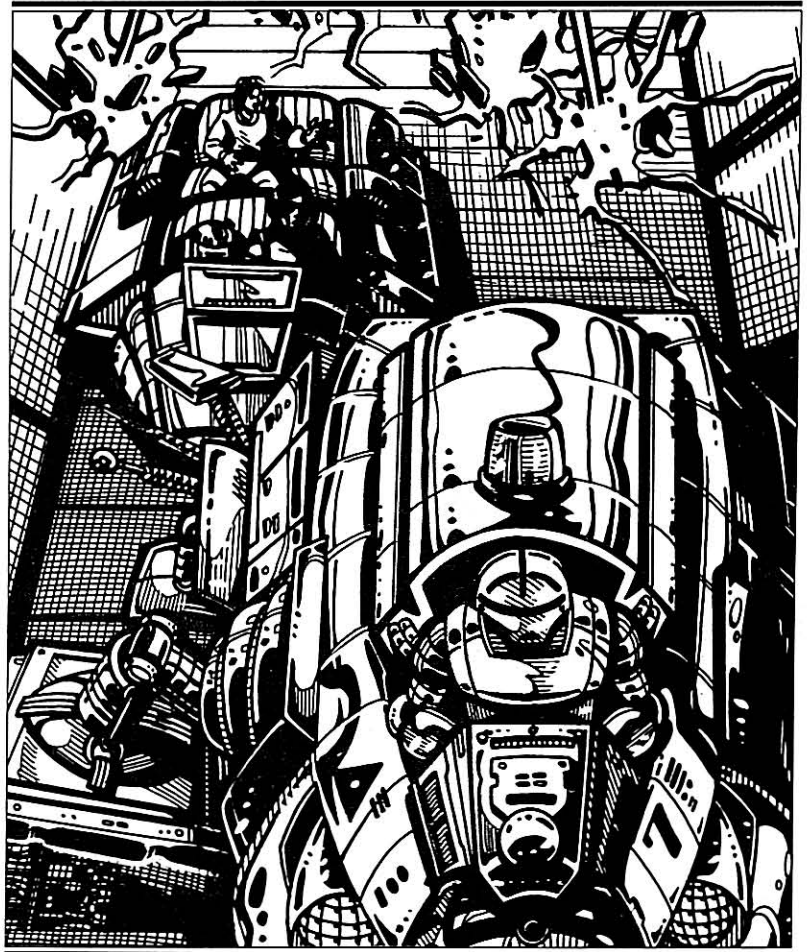
The stormtroopers stop. The trooper in the passenger seat activates a spotlight. Sidney pushes Erling flat to the floor, then drops his rifle and bolts across the narrow passageway. The spotlight locks onto him immediately. Two blasters flash. The bolts knock the Pada several meters down the way.

Luke bites his tongue to keep from yelling. He can only hope that Sidney survives the wounds he has taken, and that it is not the second life Erling has cost. He vows there won't be a third.

The two troopers in the rear jump off the cart. They cover the flanks while the passenger shines the spotlight into the tangle surrounding their corridor. Although the light passes over several Gorums, the trooper does not notice them. Finally, one of the flank guards flicks a light over Sidney's still body.

"Just a straggler," he reports. "He wasn't even armed." They continue on their way. Luke lets out the breath he had been holding as he hoped the troopers wouldn't further blast the Pada's form.

The main column arrives a few moments later. It consists of a platoon of stormtroopers mounted on 15 repulsor carts. When the last cart enters the corridor,



20 blasters flare. The occupants of the carts at both ends of the column fall to the floor, their armor shattered and smoking. The final cart explodes, showering the corridor with dozens of metal shards.

The remaining stormtroopers leap from their vehicles and fire blindly into the black tangle. Luke suddenly understands why the Gorums patrol outside the city. They hang in the upper reaches of the metal forest, well above the stormtroopers' effective range. They fire again and more stormtroopers fall.

The survivors throw themselves into the shelter of the equipment jungle. One trooper lands between Luke and Erling. Erling screams in terror. Luke activates his lightsaber, then swings the blade into the trooper's back. The armor opens like a crustacean's shell. Several Imperial shots answer the stormtrooper's cry, drawn perilously close by the glow of Luke's blade. He deactivates the blade and steps to cover behind a cable-draped vent-box.

The battle degenerates into a crosshatched pattern of flashes and flares. Luke moves ahead and sees a white form lying on its back. Two bolts streak from its weapon and a Gorum screams, then flutters to the floor. Luke activates his lightsaber and chops into the trooper's midsection. An electronic gurgle issues from the voice transponder.

Luke deactivates his blade and searches for another enemy. No more bolts flash, however. He cautiously makes his way back to Sidney's unmoving body. A Quarren has lifted the prospector gently.

"He's alive?" Luke blurts.

"Barely. We have some equipment; this one is brave. He may have the use of it."

Several Gorums collect the weapons from dead Imperials. He admires the efficiency of their ambush. It will be a long time before Parnell cleanses his sub-facility of escaped prisoners.

Tormey—at least the Rebel pilot thinks it is Tormey—stands next to Erling Tredway's kneeling form. He holds a pistol against Erling's head. Luke attaches his lightsaber to his belt.

"There you are," Tormey says. "You fought well. Warburton will welcome you into our ranks. But this one—" he gestures contemptuously at Erling—"this one is foolish. I am sorry, he must die."

Erling's face betrays no emotion. He simply stares at the floor.

Luke addresses Erling. "I don't understand why Sebastian Parnell wants you so badly," he says, silently including Mon Mothma's name alongside Parnell's. "You sure aren't military material. And while you're impressive at first sight, I don't think you could lead a Bantha out of a burning corral."

Erling does not meet Luke's eyes. "I agree," he says. "Now I understand why Mon Mothma refused my commission."

"Do you want to do it?" asks Tormey.

Luke shakes his head. "No. And I can't let you kill him."

Tormey shrugs. "You have no choice."

Erling looks Luke straight in the eye. "I'm not afraid to die," he says. "The only thing I'm afraid of is failing, and I've already done that."

Despite Erling's attitude change, Luke feels little sympathy for him. Sidney's death is too real a possibility. But he can't let Erling die—for his own reasons, as well as for Mon Mothma's. "Erling, for once just be quiet and do what you're told. Okay?"

For a moment, Erling looks as if he will argue. But when Luke's gaze does not falter, the other man nods.

"I'll make you a deal, Tormey. In exchange for Erling's life, I'll tell you how the stormtroopers found your city."

Tormey thinks for a moment, his ears slowly flapping. "It is a bargain; I am certain they did not follow you."

Luke tells Tormey about his previous encounter with the Twi'lek he saw in Warburton's council room. He is careful to present only the fact that he saw the Twi'lek with the sub-facility task force. He draws no conclusions, for it is possible he is mistaken.

Tormey gasps. "Santo! It explains a great many things. I will send somebody along to show you a way from here."

"I can find the way," Erling says.

Tormey eyes him dubiously. "If you become lost and near this location again, we will kill you."

"I can find the way," Erling repeats stubbornly. "Trust me," he insists to Luke.

• *Turn to section 132.*

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## 124

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Luke activates the cart's headlamps and moves forward at a leisurely pace. As he approaches, the technician stops working and turns to watch. He looks from the approaching cart to the darkness below the platform, then back to the cart. Luke lowers his gaze, but his headlamps do not yet illuminate what the tech is looking at.

Four blaster bolts flash out of the darkness. Two of the streaks explode in the cart's hood, temporarily blinding Luke. The cart trembles, then lurches to a stop.

"They think we're escapees!" Erling yells.

"We are!" Luke yells back. Another salvo strikes the cart. This time it explodes, slamming Luke into a wall. A hollow thump echoes through his skull. He feels as though the corridor is a giant barrel and he is being rolled around inside it. By the time he hits the floor, he is already unconscious.

• *Turn to section 73.*

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## 125

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"I'm sorry, Erling," Luke says.

Erling swallows hard, his face growing pale. "I understand. Go; too many people have already died on my behalf."

Tormey returns Luke's lightsaber. "Nobody can survive alone in the sub-facility. You are welcome to stay."

Luke shakes his head. "I can't."

Tormey escorts Luke to the edge of the city, then says, "May the dark cloak hide you from enemies."

"You, too," Luke says.

Luke accelerates into the darkness. Even though Erling's rashness caused the deaths of two good friends, Luke feels wrong about leaving him with the escapees. But he doesn't have any other choice; Warburton's men outnumber him five-to-one, and they have weapons. Not respecting their law would simply get him killed. Besides, he has a much better chance of escaping without Erling along.

*Luke is right. Without Erling along, he eventually finds his way out of the sub-facility and sneaks aboard a supply shuttle. When he returns to base and makes his report, however, both General Dodonna and Mon Mothma seem disappointed in him. This mission has ended in failure for Luke; return to section one and try again.*

126

They continue down the corridor without comment for two kilometers. Finally, Luke can contain his anger no longer. "I understand how you must feel about your family," he says, "but that was the stupidest thing I've ever seen anyone do, Erling."

"What?" Erling asks defensively.

"What?" Luke screeches. "Gideon is dead!"

"The Rebellion demands sacrifices."

"You know nothing of the Rebellion!" Luke snaps. "I've seen men and women by the thousands die for freedom—but this is the first time I've seen anybody die for stupidity."

"Some of us don't have the benefit of Alliance training," Erling snaps back. "And if you're such a warrior, why didn't you save my family from the Imperials?"

"Don't think I didn't try!" Luke says, fighting back his anger. Although Erling's question is far from fair, Luke realizes it is probably a consequence of the aristocrat's grief. Nevertheless, it hurts, for Luke cannot help feeling some guilt over the destruction on 24 Tredway. "We all did—especially the man you got killed."

"The man is dead—even I can't bring him back. What do you want?"

"Nothing," Luke says. "I expected more from a Jedi's son."

Erling snorts.

"What's that mean?"

"Being a Jedi didn't save my father. His sad devotion to the 'mysterious Force' brought nothing but injury and misfortune—and left my mother to raise her children alone."

"You blame his death on the Force?"

"No—the lack of the Force. It doesn't exist."

"How are you so certain?" Luke asks.

"I am." There is no doubt in the man's dismissal.

"You've certainly given us every reason to trust *your* judgement so far," Luke responds. Erling's attack on the Jedi strikes too close to home.

Erling responds with a hurt silence, which suits Luke just fine. But Sidney is not content to let the matter lie.

"Erling, may I ask a question?"

"Certainly. I know you, don't I?"

"I have attended many resistance discussions. When you fired at the Governor Parnell, you meant to kill, did you not?"

Erling does not answer for a long time. Finally, he says, "Under certain conditions, killing is justifiable."

"What conditions?" Sidney asks. "Back on Tredway, I killed in defense of myself and my friends, and I still cannot justify it. How can you justify your attack?" His voice is desperate, not accusatory.

Apparently, Erling Tredway is not as familiar with his disciples as he would like to seem. Luke winces as he addresses the Pada by the wrong name. "Come now, Seymour! The man ordered the murder of my entire family!"

"I do not understand how his evil justifies yours. Did your speeches ring with hollow words? Do you believe in the violence?"

"How dare you!" Erling snaps. "I don't have to justify my actions to you—or anyone else, for that matter."

They travel another half-hour in uneasy silence. The corridor reaches a four-way intersection. Luke stops. The sub-facility here changes from corridor to cavernous basement. It is crowded with wires, pipes, vents, ducts, fans, and other dark shapes. Luke cannot imagine how the engineers and maintenance Droids find their way around down here, let alone locate a problem. A twisted network of environmental equipment extends into the gloom, a vast tangle of artificial undergrowth rivaling the most inaccessible jungle-worlds in the galaxy.

Something clatters overhead.

Luke looks up immediately, but sees nothing. He watches for several minutes, but detects no indication that anything lurks above. "Any idea where we're at, Artoo?"

The Droid hums for a moment, then beeps once.

Luke faces his passengers. Both watch the murkiness overhead as if expecting a dozen stormtroopers to drop on them any moment. "Any ideas?" he asks.

"Shhhh!" Sidney urges. The Pada's ears rotate like radar dishes tracking an airboat. A minute later, he says, "It's gone. Something was breathing above us."

Luke studies the dark ceiling. "Good ears," he comments. "Did you hear anything that might help us out of here?" Whatever was above them, he doubts it is Imperial.

Sidney shakes his head. "I'm no good underground."

"We should continue straight ahead," Erling says.

Luke ignores him and turns left. Fifty meters later, a blaster bolt zips across their path. Luke stops the cart, but nothing else happens. "Did anybody else see that?"

"Sssh!" Sidney's ears are rotating again. His muzzle is furrowed in concentration. Finally, he says, "It's gone again."

"What?" Luke demands. He is more than a little impatient.

"Something overhead. It's very quiet."

"And armed," Luke observes. He starts down the corridor again, but another bolt zips across their path. Luke stops immediately, realizing that somebody—or something—doesn't want them to go any further. Artoo extends a short appendage and shines a light at the ceiling. Something large and leathery scurries away.



Erling fires at the murky ceiling. Before Luke can chastise him, blaster shots of all colors and intensities lace the area. Luke jumps off the cart and rolls. He stops face-to-face with a pair of red slits.

Erling yells angrily, and Sidney squawks. Luke slowly raises his hands, then looks at his companions. Six creatures, black as void and visible only as silhouettes, hang from the ceiling by long thin tails. They have square, flap-like ears. Their red eyes glow whenever they catch the light. Each holds a blaster in its claw-like hands.

The creature above Erling holds Erling's blaster rifle. Another hangs face-to-face with a trembling Sidney. "Give me one reason we shouldn't kill you all," says the creature above Erling.

"I—I'm Erling Tredway," he responds, his face white as a stormtrooper's armor.

The creature seems to accept this for moment, then crinkles its face into what must be a self-deprecating frown. Luke starts chuckling. He cannot help himself, for whoever these creatures are, Luke doubts they care who Erling Tredway is.

The creature hanging in front of Erling hisses rhythmically, its whole body trembling. Erling's fear gives way to anger and he glares first at Luke, then at the stygian horror hanging in front of him. "What are you?" he demands.

The creature stops hissing, then slowly curls forward until its ears caress Erling's cheeks. "A Gorum,

and I'm going to suck your brains out through your ears." It flicks the bridge of Erling's nose with a forked tongue.

Erling's knees buckle and he drops to a seat. His face has turned pale yellow. The creature twists on its tail to face Luke. "Suck his brains out through his ears, yes?" All six creatures break into rhythmic hisses.

Luke smiles. "It might serve him right." He stands and brushes himself off. "We're kind of lost."

"Then you are no colonel?" he gestures at the insignia on Luke's collar.

Luke self-consciously studies his uniform. "No. I just borrowed this." He starts unbuttoning the collar, painfully aware that it can only mean trouble.

"Don't worry. One of our number saw you fleeing the white-shells."

Luke breathes a sigh of relief. "Thank the Force. Can you tell us how to get out of here?"

"To where? Sub-facility is the only free place on Tol Ado."

"We want to leave Tol Ado."

The creatures break into a fresh round of hisses. "Leave? No joke?"

"Yeah," Luke says.

*"You come with me. Then maybe your senses return."*

- If they don't go with the Gorum, turn to section 110.
- If they go with the Gorum, turn to section 142.

127

Luke wheels right and accelerates down the corridor. The pipes lining the walls blur into yellow streaks. Luke stays in the middle of the dark corridor, expecting a dead end or sharp turn any moment. Instead, 200 meters down the way, the tunnel branches. Luke stops. "Which way, Artoo?"

"Left!" Erling commands. Luke, still angry about Gideon's death, ignores him.

Before the Droid answers, three blaster bolts zip past the cart. A hundred meters back up the corridor, two sets of headlamps pursue them.

"Forget it," Luke says. "I'll do the best I can." Refusing to follow Tredway's suggestion out of spite, he takes the right-hand tunnel and enters a maze with dozens of intersections. Within seconds, he stops trying to remember their route. He simply concentrates on losing the pursuers.

At last, Sidney reports the pursuing headlamps have disappeared. Luke slows to a crawl, then eases into the next intersection. To their left, a tremendous pounding rumbles down the passageway. A shaft of light shines into the corridor.

"We're back where we started!" Erling snaps.

"You want to drive?" Luke asks angrily.

A blaster bolt crosses the front of the cart, cutting short Erling's response. A single set of headlights approaches from the right. Another blaster shot streaks out of the light, this time striking far short of the cart.

"Your turn," Luke says. "Do we fight or run?"

Sidney shouts "Run!" at the same time Erling shouts "Fight!"

"Why do I have to make all the decisions?" Luke mutters.

Running decreases the likelihood of getting caught, but promises a long chase. Fighting will decide the matter quickly, though it may be more risky.

- *If Luke fights, turn to section 136.*
- *If Luke runs, turn to section 114.*

**128**

"Everybody down," Luke says. "Don't even breathe until the last Imperial enters."

He hides behind a desk. A moment later, the Imperials enter the office. "Where is everybody?" demands the first aide.

"This is strictly against procedure," comments another.

"Heads are going to roll!" says Parnell. His voice comes from the doorway. "This is desertion of a duty post." He still does not enter. The aides are inspecting the office. They have only seconds. Luke fingers his lightsaber. If he can grab Parnell before—

"Hey!" says an aide.

A blaster bolt crumps into a body. Luke stands in time to watch an officer collapse. Gideon shoots another. Parnell has already stepped out of the office. The office door slams shut.

Luke turns toward the back of the room. The door leading into the cellblock is also closed. The vidsign over it reads: "Cellblock access: condition Red."

"Looks like we're out of luck," Gideon says.

Gas begins to hiss from unseen jets. "I guess so," Luke says. He already feels light-headed.

- *Turn to section 73.*

**129**

Despite Erling's words, Luke feels little sympathy for him. Sidney's death is too fresh in his mind. Nevertheless, he can't let Erling die—for his own reasons, as well as for Mon Mothma's. "Erling, I don't know why you're so important to Sebastian Parnell. You sure aren't a military leader, and I doubt you could lead a Dewback to water. But I can't let you die."

Erling looks as if he will argue for a moment, but when Luke's gaze does not falter, he remains quiet. Luke addresses Warburton. "So far, only my companions have died. Therefore it is my right to judge this man."

Warburton studies Luke for a long moment, then looks at the Twi'lek. Finally, he growls a lengthy response.

"He says if you stay in our city, he is the judge of this one's fate. If you leave, you may judge."

"Then we will leave."

Tormey returns their weapons, then climbs aboard the repulsor cart. He escorts them through a maze of corridors that Luke thinks leads generally away from the city. Finally, he tells them to stop. "Do not return this way," he warns. A moment later, the Gorum disappears into the darkness.

"Now where to, Artoo?" Luke asks.

The Droid beeps helplessly.

"I'll get us out of here," Erling says.

"Sure." Luke responds with the same hopelessness he used to feel asking Uncle Owen to send him to the Academy. The thought makes him close his eyes briefly. His stubborn, opinionated uncle might have had a lot in common with Erling Tredway—had they ever met.

"I will. Trust me."

- *Turn to section 132.*

**130**

Luke eases the cart toward the wall until it rubs. Sparks fly like a pyrotechnics display. Despite his attempts to keep moving at full speed, friction slows them. He must fight to keep the nose from turning toward the wall.

"Are you trying to kill us?" demands Erling.

"No," Luke snaps. "That's your department."

Two blaster bolts explode overhead, showering them with pieces of durasteel and plascompound. They reach the flooring-machine. It towers over the cart like a super-freighter over a starfighter. Another floor section slams to the ground, blocking the entire corridor for an instant.

Luke eases away from the wall, his attention fixed on the single centimeter between the machine and his cart. They start to accelerate, but he eases up on the throttle. Two more blaster bolts sizzle overhead. A floor section drops into place again and Luke accelerates. They pass the mammoth machine just before it drops another floor section.

"We live!" Sidney exclaims.

Luke swings back to the middle of the tunnel. A thunderous clap lets him know the Imperials will pursue them no longer.

- *Turn to section 126.*

**131**

Luke selects the busiest barge and leads his little party over to it. He addresses its quartermaster, "Command sent me down to pick up a classified load," Luke says.

The captain studies Luke, then Sidney and Gideon. He consults his datavid and punches a few buttons. "Of course, sir. Go ahead."

"Thank you," Luke says. He leads the way aboard the cavernous ship. When they are safely out of earshot, he turns to Gideon and Sidney. "We'll make a few trips, then find a good hiding place."

"Sounds good," Gideon comments.

As they walk down the cargo hold ramp, six stormtroopers step into view. Luke immediately starts back up the ramp, but six more stormtroopers step out of their hiding places at the top of the ramp.

Luke drops his box, then slowly leads the way back down the ramp. "Sorry, Colonel," the quartermaster says, placing a sardonic emphasis on the last word, "Command alerted us to watch for you three hours ago."

*This adventure is over for Luke, at least until he can escape from the Deathblock. Unfortunately, that will be a while. Return to section one and try again.*

**132**

"Trust you?" Luke snorts. "Give me a reason."

Erling gestures at Luke's lightsaber. "You have more reason to trust me than you do Jedi ways." His tone confers his contempt of the Force, and the Rebel pilot responds instinctively to the latter part of the statement, not even curious about Tredway's 'reasons' any more. The aristocrat's deprecation of their fathers' beliefs galls him almost past his ability to hold his temper.

"I doubt it," Luke says bitterly.

They continue down the corridor in silence. Erling occasionally suggests making a turn. Luke sometimes follows the suggestions and sometimes ignores them, depending on what his own instincts tell him. The passing time cools Luke's anger, and he considers apologizing to the other man. But he cannot break the tenuous peace just yet.

Eventually, however, they pass out of the cavernous equipment tangle and reach a T-intersection. A walled corridor similar to the one through which they entered the sub-facility runs in both directions.

From the right, the distant whir of machinery echoes down the corridor. To the left, the passageway remains silent. Luke starts to turn left. Erling asks, "Where are you trying to go?"

"To an outlying launch station."

Erling gestures to the right. "Then go this way."

Luke pauses. He has no idea where he is, but he doesn't see how Erling could, either. His instinct tells him to turn left, away from the noise.

- *If Luke turns left, turn to section 135.*
- *If Luke turns right, turn to section 138.*

**133**

Luke remains quiet, hoping Erling will wait for the Gorums to fire. But he has no such luck. Erling jumps to his feet and yells, "What are we waiting for? Charge!" He fires his blaster rifle. The bolt streaks harmlessly across the cart hood.

The Imperials respond immediately. The stormtrooper in the passenger seat activates a spotlight and floods Erling's vicinity with light. The two in the back provide covering fire, and the driver throws the cart into reverse thrust.

The spotlight illuminates Erling. Sidney throws himself at the young Tredway, knocking the human to safety. The stormtroopers fire and two bolts strike the Pada, slamming his small body down to the floor.

Luke cannot stop himself from screaming. He activates his lightsaber and leaps from his hiding place. He slices the blade across both troopers on the right-hand side of the cart. Their breastplates crack like eggshells. The spotlight operator falls from his seat, then the cart is past.

The driver wheels around to face away from his attackers. While he pauses to change directional thrust, five blaster bolts flash from the dark tangle. The remaining passenger flies out of the cart and crashes into a vent-box.

The driver accelerates, a dozen blaster shots chasing him. Luke deactivates his lightsaber. When he turns toward Sidney, he comes face-to-face with Tormey's angry red eyes.

"This will cost you your lives!" A blaster barrel presses against his back. An unseen Gorum takes his lightsaber.

Tormey and one other Gorum take Luke and Erling back to Warburton's building. Erling remains quiet on the trip back, but Luke cannot restrain his anger.

Erling does not respond. When they finally reach the command building, Tormey directs them both inside. Warburton sits at his table, the Twi'lek at his right elbow and a sad-eyed Calamarian at his left. The fish-headed Calamarian is outlining a last ditch defense plan.

When the Calamarian finishes, Tormey explains the ambush failure. To Luke's surprise, Warburton remains calm. He dispatches a Sullustan and a Quarren with new defense orders, then growls a long question at Tormey.

"In truth," Tormey replies, "it was stupidity. This human—" he points at Luke—"destroyed two white-shells at the risk of his own life. He would not have done that if they were spies."

Warburton ponders Tormey's words, then utters his judgment.

Tormey turns to Erling and translates the pronouncement. "Unless you can provide something of worth equal to the damage you have caused, Warburton will put you to death. Since we do not believe you are Imperial spies, there will be no torture."

Luke studies the Wookiee for a moment. He knows it will do no good to argue. "I have something of greater value," he says.

"Then speak, and do it quickly. We must soon do battle."

Watching the Twi'lek carefully, Luke explains that he has seen him before—with the sub-facility task-force.

"Liar!" the Twi'lek says, stepping away from the table.

Warburton thrusts out a massive hand and snags the Twi'lek by a skull-tentacle. He growls at Tormey.

"You may join us," Tormey says, "you have explained much. But the other human must die. That is our law."

"I can't allow that," Luke says.

Tormey shrugs. "Join him or not. That is your choice."

Before Luke can object again, Erling says, "I'm not afraid of death. The only thing I'm afraid of is failing, and I've already done that."

- *If Luke insists that Erling be spared, turn to section 129.*
- *If Luke agrees to Warburton's judgment, turn to section 125.*

**134**

The light hurts Luke's eyes. In fact, it hurts everything. His head feels like a cracked eggshell. How much danger is there, he wonders, of his brain spilling out? Judging from the gauze clouding his thoughts, some of it may have already escaped.

His body aches, too. Somebody must have locked him onto a conditioning servo. Not only do his muscles

feel bruised, they feel exhausted and sore—as if he just landed on a high-grav planet after two-years in weightlessness. What happened to him?

The light shifts. An Emdée-five medical Droid hovers over him. Beyond the Droid, he sees only a black expanse. He tries to sit up and finds himself strapped to an examining table. A man's steps ring on a durasteel floor, then echo off metal walls.

"My electronic friend says you will live." Sebastian Parnell! Luke tries to turn his head, but a thick strap holds it firmly in place. "You are very fortunate. We collected the stormtrooper in a bag. Did your special talents save you?"

Luke's stomach knots in fear. His fingers tremble uncontrollably. The darkness seems more sinister, the medical Droid less an instrument of mercy than a tool to prolong torture. And of course, there are the mechanical horrors lurking in the dark recesses of the arena. If Luke could see them, they might not seem so distressing. But Sebastian Parnell has thought of that.

"What talents?" Luke asks.

A pulsing hum sounds to the left. Even without turning his head, Luke sees the fluorescing beam of his lightsaber. It drifts toward his chin, the blade's brilliance making the darkness all the more black. "Come now. When I found this, I realized you were no ordinary prisoner."

"Then you know your foul chamber will not affect me."

Parnell chuckles, holding the saber an inch over Luke's nose. Perhaps he expects the proximity of the blade to scorch Luke; however, the lightsaber is so energy efficient that it emits no heat. "I would enjoy putting that to the test," he says. "Unfortunately, the pleasure will be Lord Vader's."

"Vader!" Luke gasps. The last he had seen of Darth Vader was at the Battle of Yavin, when the Dark Lord's crippled starfighter tumbled away into deep space. Apparently, he has survived.

"So there is something you fear," Parnell says, deactivating the lightsaber. "I shall enjoy our meeting. It may be that I can learn something from him."

"If you live that long!" Luke threatens.

Parnell chuckles. "To me, it appears a long life should be your concern. Unless, of course, you expect Erling Tredway or your Droid to shorten my days."

"Then they are free!" Luke concludes.

"I did not say that," Parnell replies smugly. He addresses somebody in the darkness. "Return him to his cell, and post four guards at the door. Be sure he is here when Lord Vader arrives."

Parnell drops Luke's lightsaber on a table, then marches out of the arena. Four stormtroopers unstrap Luke and escort him to a cell on the third level of the Deathblock. When the cell-door clangs shut, Luke finally allows despair to wash over him.

Although he wants to blame Erling for his capture, the Rebel pilot knows better. His own pride landed him here. If he had not allowed Erling's remarks to overcome his judgment, he would have realized he could not use the Force while so angry. And if he had not allowed pride to dictate his actions, he would not have tried to use the Force for a feat he had seen performed but once.



Instead of saving Erling, as he intended to do, Luke endangered him. Even if Erling and Artoo are still free, it is only a matter of time before Parnell catches them. Luke wants to punish himself, but nothing he can do will change the situation. He allowed his emotions to lead others into trouble, just as Erling did with Sidney and Gideon. That's about as far from being a Jedi as he can get.

Realizing his escape will depend more on steady nerves than self-reproachment, Luke lies down and closes his eyes. A little sleep should refresh him and restore the energy he will need when he sees an opportunity to escape.

Later—how much later, he cannot determine—Luke awakens to sound of his cell opening. He immediately jumps to his feet, alert and ready for any opportunity. A black armored figure stands in the doorway, silhouetted against the dim light permeating the cellblock. A flared helmet rests on its head and a black cape falls from its shoulders.

But the figure is not Darth Vader, and its disguise cannot fool anyone who has spent time in the company of the real Dark Lord. Vader stands a full quarter-meter



taller than this man, and he is much broader in the shoulders. And, though this figure might frighten somebody who knew Vader's reputation, it lacks the tangible menace that accompanies Vader like an aura. Most importantly, Luke feels only a small hint of the Force in this individual—certainly not the power of the Dark Side associated with the Dark Lord.

"I will take the prisoner with me," rasps the figure. Despite the electronic filter, Luke recognizes the voice of Erling Tredway.

"We need an authorization code, Lord Vader," says a guard.

Erling stiffly turns to the speaker. "Do you really want my authorization?"

The guard pauses. "No," he says at last.

For a change, Luke must admire Erling's resourcefulness. Though Erling could never hope to match Vader's true malice, his presence does carry with it a certain command. Add to that the dread of the Dark Lord's mere name, and only the most foolhardy Imperial would dare challenge him with procedure.

"Out with you!" growls the guard, perhaps more anxious to be rid of Vader than Luke. Luke complies, stopping at the door to contemptuously look over his new captor. "We meet again, Foul Lord," he says. For this masquerade to work, he must do his part.

The guard holds out a pair of manacles. "That won't be necessary," Erling says. "They wouldn't slow him down." The stormtrooper studies Luke with fresh respect, then steps away.

Erling pushes Luke toward the lift. "You will pay dearly for your insolence."

Halfway into the lift, Luke stops, forcing Erling to stumble into him. "Don't forget my lightsaber," he whispers.

Erling shoves him. "Try that again, and I may finish you here." On the first floor, Erling requests Luke's effects. He sticks the lightsaber in his belt. They then leave the Deathblock in the same repulsor cart Luke commandeered after arriving.

When they are clear at last, Luke says, "You must be crazy! How did you know Vader was coming?"

Erling explains. When Luke jammed the repulsor cart into reverse and attacked the stormtrooper, it was all Erling could do to get control of the vehicle. By the time he did, the fight had ended and reinforcements were coming. He ducked back into the storage room they found after escaping the sub-city. Artoo tapped the computer to monitor what happened, and reported that Darth Vader was coming. When he heard that, the plan just sprang into Erling's mind.

"Good work," Luke says. "We won't have any trouble getting into the launch station this time."

Reasoning that Darth Vader's presence would seem most natural in the command staff shuttle station, they return there. As they turn toward the launch station, something tickles the base of Luke's brainstem. A wave of nausea washes over him, nearly robbing him of his breath.

"What's wrong?" Erling asks.

"A disturbance—" Luke gasps. "We're in danger!"

- *If Luke continues to the launch station, turn to section 151.*
- *If Luke turns back to find a hiding place, turn to section 147.*

**135**

Luke continues down the passageway on the left, ignoring Erling's suggestion. They are both guessing about the way out, but at least Luke is not asking for trouble by turning toward the noise on the right. The corridor runs ten kilometers before Luke notices a light ahead.

He stops the cart and deactivates its headlamps. Fifty meters ahead, a repulsor platform hovers a meter and a half below the ceiling. A technician and a Droid stand on it, their heads and arms inserted into an open access panel. Wires and tubes hang from the panel like exposed intestines.

The technician leans over the edge and says something to the darkness below. Somebody hands him a long two-pronged tool.

"Maybe we should turn back," Erling suggests.

"They're just techs," Luke says, a trifle belligerently. "What can they do?"

- *If Luke continues forward, turn to section 124.*
- *If Luke turns back, turn to section 144.*

**136**

"We'll fight," Luke says. They can prepare an ambush or charge head-on. Charging involves more risk, but might prove more productive. He just might force the other driver into a wall. But charging also allows the Imperials several easy shots.

His other option is to retreat a few meters and shut off the lights. The Imperials will assume Luke ran. Luke should be able to surprise them when they round the corner.

- *If Luke charges the Imperials, turn to section 143.*
- *If Luke ambushes the Imperials, turn to section 140.*

**137**

"Let's go to a supply barge," Luke says, "A quartermaster's uniform ought to get us aboard."

Several hours later, they arrive at a supply dock. Fifty Droids and a dozen sentient laborers are unloading the two barges that occupy the mammoth hangar. A platoon of stormtroopers roams the floor, but generally the armored forms appear inattentive. A quartermaster captain stands at the entrance to each barge.

Another repulsor cart enters the bay a moment later. A well-dressed Calamarian sits in the back of the cart with Sebastian Parnell. He is unusually pale, almost as white as Luke. Most Calamarians have darker, salmon-colored skin. As the cart passes, the fish-like Calamarian twists his bald, high-domed head around to study Luke. His two bulging eyes seem unusually menacing for a member of his race. Parnell pays no attention to Luke's party and continues talking to the Calamarian. Luke breathes a sigh of relief.

"Now what?" Gideon asks.

"A diversion?" Sidney suggests. "Then we sneak aboard?"

Luke hesitates. A diversion does not make use of their best resource—his borrowed uniform. It has served them well so far, but will their luck hold for one more bluff?

Parnell's driver takes his passengers to the closest supply barge. The Calamarian exchanges warm farewells with the general, then accepts a small bag and climbs into the depths of the barge. Luke finds the transaction strange; Mon Calamari is one of the few worlds in open revolt against the Empire.

- If Luke tries a diversion, turn to section 115.
- If Luke tries a bluff, turn to section 131.

**138**

Luke turns the cart around. An hour later, they round a gentle curve and the whir suddenly increases in volume. "I hope this route won't get us killed," Luke says.

"I don't know what's causing that noise," Erling says, "but I do know this leads to the launch stations."

The whir continues, growing louder as they travel. A large yellow pipe, a meter in diameter, appears overhead. Luke and Erling must duck to keep from scraping their heads on it. Five kilometers later, the passageway widens and the pipe runs into a huge box. As soon as they pass the box, the whir fades.

Two hours later, they reach an intersection. Erling instructs Luke to turn right. The corridor soon angles upward and ends in a set of sensor-activated doors. Luke eases past the sensors, nervous about what they may find on the other side. The doors hiss open.

A short corridor stretches 20 meters ahead, where it forms a T-intersection with another corridor. A closed door stands on each side of the short hallway. Unlike the sub-facility tunnels, these corridors are so well lit that Luke's eyes hurt. The doors clang shut behind them. Luke parks the cart next to the door on the right.

"We can't travel like this," Luke says. "If we run into somebody before our eyes adjust, we're in big trouble."

He unloads Artoo and sets him in front of the door. "Open it." The Droid obediently extends an appendage and deactivates the lock. Luke steps inside as soon as the door hisses aside.

The light is less bright inside. The room is filled with confiscated equipment—blasters of all sizes and assortments, a couple of laser and ion cannons, vibro-axes, force pikes, and personal armor suits. One set of armor, especially, catches Luke's attention. It is black as a dust nebula, with a cape and a flared helmet. While not an exact replica of Darth Vader's suit, it is close enough to fool someone who has only heard of the Dark Lord. Luke does not doubt the owner of that armor was arrested for impersonating Vader. Of all the crimes a being might commit, Luke can think of nothing so foolish.

Erling steps next to Luke. "I'd like you to accept my thanks," he says. Even when he is attempting to be humble, Erling phrases his sentences in terms of his own desires and wants.

"For what?"

"Saving my life, in spite of the trouble I may have caused."

"Did cause," Luke corrects. He still does not want to forgive Erling. "Good beings died."

"Then accept my apology, too. I'll make it up."

"How?" Luke snaps. "They're gone! You can't bring them back." Erling drops his gaze and fights back an angry retort. "Forget it," Luke says a moment later. Hard feelings will accomplish nothing. "Gideon came because he wanted to. I accept your thanks, but I deserve no apology."

Erling's face softens. He takes the black helmet in his hands. "Frightening, isn't it?"

"It's not bad compared to the real thing. Have you ever seen Darth Vader?"

"Vader!" Erling gasps, dropping the helmet. "He killed my father!"

"Mine, too," Luke says. He returns the helmet to its proper place.

"He did? Your father was a Jedi?"

Luke nods. Although he is uncomfortable about revealing his identity, he continues in the hope of finding another soul that has suffered similar pains. "Anakin Skywalker. Did you know him?"

Erling nods. "Yes. He was a tall man, as strong as a Bantha and quick as a Dewback. My father admired him a great deal."



"Tell me more."

"I don't remember much. I was small when he visited. He was proud to a fault, intensely intelligent, and unusually reserved. I recall my father likening him to a geotherm—warm on the outside; inside, boiling with barely controllable energy. He was just as devoted to that misguided Jedi mythology as my father."

"Misguided mythology?" Luke echoes sharply.

"He believed in a lot of fanciful philosophies."

"You mean 'fanciful philosophies' like the Force?"

"Exactly. Please, don't think I hold such quaint belief systems against his memory—"

Luke cuts him off. "My eyes are adjusted now." Fighting to restrain his temper, he leads the way out of the room.

Not much later, they reach another T-intersection. To the left, the corridor ends in a massive pair of unguarded doors. To the right, the corridor ends in a smaller door guarded by two stormtroopers.

"The way to the right leads to the command staff shuttle station," Erling informs him, "the left to a supply dock."

"How do you know this stuff?" Luke asks.

"Just trust that I do," Erling replies.

Luke considers his options. The supply dock is probably easier to get into—but that very ease worries him. The lack of guards indicates how secure they feel about a prisoner's chance of stowing away aboard a supply barge.

The doors leading to the command shuttle station seem more accessible. If they can pass the guards without raising an alarm, they can probably leave without incident. But getting past the guards will be a problem—unless he can use the Force to persuade the stormtroopers to let them by. It is a trick he once saw Ben Kenobi use. With a little luck, he can duplicate it here—and prove to Erling the Force is more than just a 'fanciful philosophy.'

- If Luke goes to the supply dock, turn to section 146.
- If Luke goes to the command shuttle station, turn to section 148.

## 139

Luke raises his lightsaber, activating the blade as it clears Artoo. The guard reacts too slowly, and Luke chops the blade into his collar. A blaster bolt flashes overhead from the other guard.

Something jolts Luke's left shoulder, knocking him from the repulsor cart. He lands atop the stormtrooper. When he tries to raise himself, pain surges through his entire torso. He collapses back to the floor, finally realizing he has a blaster hole in his shoulder.

The remaining stormtrooper rolls Luke over with an armored foot. Waves of agony course through his body. He tries to swing his lightsaber, but finds his hand empty.

"Nobody escapes from Tol Ado," the trooper says. "Why do you prisoners keep trying?"

*Luke will escape—after his shoulder heals. Unfortunately, he'll never find out what happens to Erling Tredway, or why Erling is so important to Sebastian Parnell and Mon Mothma. Return to section one and try again.*

## 140

Luke backs the cart up and turns off the lights. "Give me a blaster rifle," he orders. "Erling, take the other one."

"You can't ask Erling to kill!" Sidney says. "I'll do it!" He snatches the blaster rifle off the floor.

"No," Erling answers. "Let me do it." He takes the weapon. Sidney falls silent, his ears pressed flat against his head and his muzzle sagging open in astonishment.

The Imperial cart wheels around the corner. Luke lights his lamps. The other driver stops immediately, sending stormtroopers crashing off the cart and into the walls. Luke fires twice, destroying one enemy headlight with each shot.

Four stormtroopers lie sprawled in the corridor, simultaneously reaching for weapons and trying to shield their eyes from Luke's headlights. The driver still sits behind the wheel. Erling fires and a black hole appears in the first victim's chestplate. Luke shoots the driver, then fires again and another trooper falls.

The other two Imperials grab their weapons. Luke and Erling each fire once more. The troopers drop before putting a finger to a trigger. Setting his rifle aside, the Rebel pilot slowly eases past the Imperials into the corridor.

- Turn to section 126.

## 141

"Let's try stealing a crew shuttle," Luke says. "This uniform won't mislead anybody after they find that last stormtrooper. Artoo, can you take us to anything that looks like a low-traffic shuttle bay?"

The Droid beeps affirmatively. Four hours later, Artoo directs them down a 50-meter corridor ending in a set of doors. A single stormtrooper stands guard.

Luke stops the repulsor cart in front of the trooper, then climbs out. "Do they have a shuttle ready to go in there?" He casually rests his right hand on his lightsaber.

The trooper nods. "Do you have an authorization code?"

"You bet!" Luke says, detaching the saber from his belt.

The stormtrooper levels his blaster at Luke. It is the wrong thing to do; at close range, Luke's lightsaber is twice as effective as any rifle. He activates the blade and cleaves the trooper shoulder to breastbone in one smooth stroke. The Imperial dies before he hits the floor.

Luke and his companions quickly load the mess into the repulsor cart. He drives it to the intersection and locks the steering mechanism, then opens the throttle wide. The cart zips down the corridor.

The party returns to the corridor and opens the doors. Inside, three shuttles rest in their launch stations. A single officer mans a small dispatch station overlooking the bay. Luke climbs up to the dispatch station, his deactivated lightsaber in his right hand.

The officer opens it without hesitation. "What is it?" "I need a shuttle."

"What's your authorization code?"

"Don't make me go through that again. I explained it to the stormtrooper."

"I don't care if you explained it to the old man himself. I've got my orders."

Luke activates the lightsaber. The officer's gaze drops to the buzzing blade, but he makes no move to attack Luke.

"You've got new orders. Clear a shuttle for launch—and don't get any ideas about secret alerts. You're coming with us."

"Yes, sir," the officer says. He enters a code, then points to the closest shuttle. "That one."

"Good man," Luke says. "Let's go."

The Imperial leads the way aboard the shuttle. Luke turns the prisoner over to Gideon's safekeeping and climbs into the pilot's seat. Although the controls are unfamiliar, he soon figures them out. A few minutes later, the shuttle climbs into Tol Ado's black atmosphere.

The ride out of the planet's atmosphere is rough and turbulent, but it passes without incident. Ten minutes later, they clear the planet's gravity well.

"Where to now?" Gideon asks.

"These shuttles have only enough fuel to make an orbital station," the officer says.

"Where can we find another ship?" Luke asks.

Gideon grins and raps the officer on the head. The Imperial slumps to the floor. "How about the tourist center? We can borrow something zippy and be long gone by the time he comes to."

"Good idea," Luke says. "But we'd better let things cool down before trying to get your ship."

"Dang right," Gideon says. "That scow ain't worth dying for. I'll fetch her in a week or so."

\* \* \* \* \*

The rest of the plan goes without a hitch. Luke finds his X-wing and returns safely to Rebel Base. Mon Mothma herself debriefs him, paying special attention to his encounter with Erling Tredway. Although she praises his bravery, Luke senses a deep sense of disappointment in her manner. It does not require a great deal of intelligence to guess that Erling Tredway meant a great deal to her. But why? And how could Luke have convinced him to leave?

*Luke escaped from this adventure with his life. That's more than most visitors to Tol Ado can say. Return to section one to see if you can discover the secret of saving Erling Tredway.*

**142**

Luke climbs back into the cart and the leader drops onto the hood. He leads them through a maze of corridors, then finally signals Luke to stop at a wall of debris. A huge Gamorrean guards a gap in the barrier. Grime cakes his green skin, and one of the tusks protruding toward his pig-like snout is broken at the lip.

"Hello, Tormey," he says. "Who are these guys?"

"Escapees," Tormey replies. "I take them to meet Warburton."

• Turn to section 117.

**143**

Luke turns toward the Imperials. Blaster bolts streak at them continuously, casting an eerie red glow along the ceiling. A moment later, sporadic blue flashes answer from Luke's cart.

The other driver holds his course steady. Luke dodges from side to side, hoping to negate the enemy's marksmanship by presenting an erratic target. The Imperial headlamps merge into one glare.

Luke dodges left, then holds his course steady. The Imperial driver sees that Luke is attempting to slip past and blocks his path. As the carts touch noses, a terrific crumpling boomechoes through the tunnel. The impact lifts Luke and hurls him forward over the hood. He briefly glimpses a stormtrooper flying past in the opposite direction, then darkness swallows him.

He strikes a smooth surface—floor, wall, or ceiling, he does not know—and bounces ten meters down the tunnel. When he finally stops, every bone in his body aches. A sticky, warm liquid covers his frame, and his head spins so badly he wants to vomit. Mercifully, he slips into unconsciousness.

*This adventure is over for Luke. After awakening in a dark cell, it will be some time before he's up to an escape attempt. Return to section one and try again.*

**144**

"On the other hand, we can't see what's beneath that platform," Luke says, remembering his resolve to think, not just react to his companion's arrogance. "Let's try your route, Erling." He slowly backs out of view of the prison crew.

• Turn to section 138.

**145**

"Let's think this over for a minute," Luke says, angling the shuttle back toward Tol Ado's atmosphere. It sinks into the black clouds. The upper air currents immediately catch it and toss it back out. A dozen blaster energy clouds open on the shuttle's shields. This time, damage control warnings light up like a meteor shower on a cloudless night. Luke forces the shuttle back into the clouds, this time at a steeper angle.

"They overloaded the shields!" Erling reports.

"Then we'll have to out-think them," Luke says. He swings the shuttle around.

Two energy bolts explode in the cockpit's face. The shuttle lurches, then noses down. The TIEs followed them into the atmosphere! Ignoring the spots before his eyes, Luke pulls up on the controls. The shuttle responds only weakly.

"Stabilizer controls two through six fused," Erling warns.

"Then we're going back to jail!"

They have only one functioning stabilizer. With luck, Luke can break their fall and guide the crippled shuttle toward a docking bay. Even a pilot of his caliber can do no more with what has become a powered rock.

*Luke has one consolation: thanks to Darth Vader, General Parnell will not be there to greet them. Unfortunately, by the time Luke can escape from Tol Ado, General Parnell will seem like a favorite uncle. Return to section one and try again.*

**146**

Luke turns left toward the supply dock. Getting past those guards without creating a disturbance is just too tricky. As they approach, the heavy doors open with a whoosh.

A short corridor leads straight ahead 20 meters, then opens into an immense hangar. Directly opposite the corridor, a selective force-field holds the black tornado of Tol Ado's atmosphere at bay. A cargo barge is passing through the force-field as they enter.

The double doors clang shut behind them. Luke eases to the end of the corridor. "Authorization code?" demands a voice on the left. A single stormtrooper stands there, his blaster rifle trained on Luke. Luke drops a hand to his lightsaber.

"This one looks like a prisoner," says another trooper, this time to the right.

"Let's see the Force get us out of this!" whispers Erling.

Erling's words send a shiver of anger through Luke. Maybe it's time to teach him a lesson about the power of the Force.

- If Luke uses the Force to help them, turn to section 116.
- If Luke attacks with his lightsaber, turn to section 139.

**147**

"Turn around," Luke orders. "Vader's here!"

"How do you know that?"

"The Force," Luke explains. "I can feel it."

"I don't feel anything."

"Then humor me!"

Erling obediently returns once more to the storage room where they rested after leaving the sub-facility. Twenty minutes later, the tingling in Luke's mind begins to subside. They sneak to the intersection and peer down the main corridor. Fifty meters away, a single repulsor cart moves toward the administrative complex. In the passenger seat sits a large, caped figure. The armor is not just black; it is the embodiment of lightlessness. Even from this distance, the figure radiates a tangible cloud of evil.

"Darth Vader!" Erling whispers.

The cart suddenly stops and the helmeted head slowly turns from side to side. Luke steps back, pulling Erling along. "He senses my presence!" This time, Erling does not argue.

When Vader does not appear around the corner, Luke dares to peer down the passageway again. The cart is no more than a speck. They climb back aboard their own cart, then return to the launch station. As they approach the doors, Erling stares straight ahead, ignoring the guards. The guards steal a glance at each other, then the left one springs into action and slaps the activator. The doors slide apart just as the cart's hood reaches the threshold.

The command staff launch station is a small docking bay, containing spaces for a dozen shuttles. At present, six shuttles sit side-by-side in the first row. A small control center sits high on the left-hand wall. To the right, a selective force-field barricades the bay against the caustic storms of Tol Ado's dark atmosphere. Even though the atmosphere is black as deep space, it seems alive with swirls and eddies—in the same way a motionless spider seems alive.

"Lord Vader!" Sebastian Parnell approaches from the left, three stormtroopers at his back. "They told me I missed your arrival."

Erling slowly faces the General. "You did. I am just leaving."

Parnell seems to notice Luke for the first time. "But you arrived just minutes ago! How—"

"Your intellect cannot comprehend the power of the Force, General."

Parnell drops his gaze and fidgets. Without looking up, he asks, "Will you grace us with your company for a few hours?"

"I have what I came for," Erling says testily.

Parnell raises his gaze and meets the dark recesses of Erling's helmet-eyes. "Of course. Shall I prepare your shuttle?"

"Immediately."

Parnell addresses a stormtrooper. "Have number six readied." The trooper hurries toward the farthest shuttle. "It will require only a moment. Tell me, is the Emperor well?"

"Do you dare test me?" Erling demands.

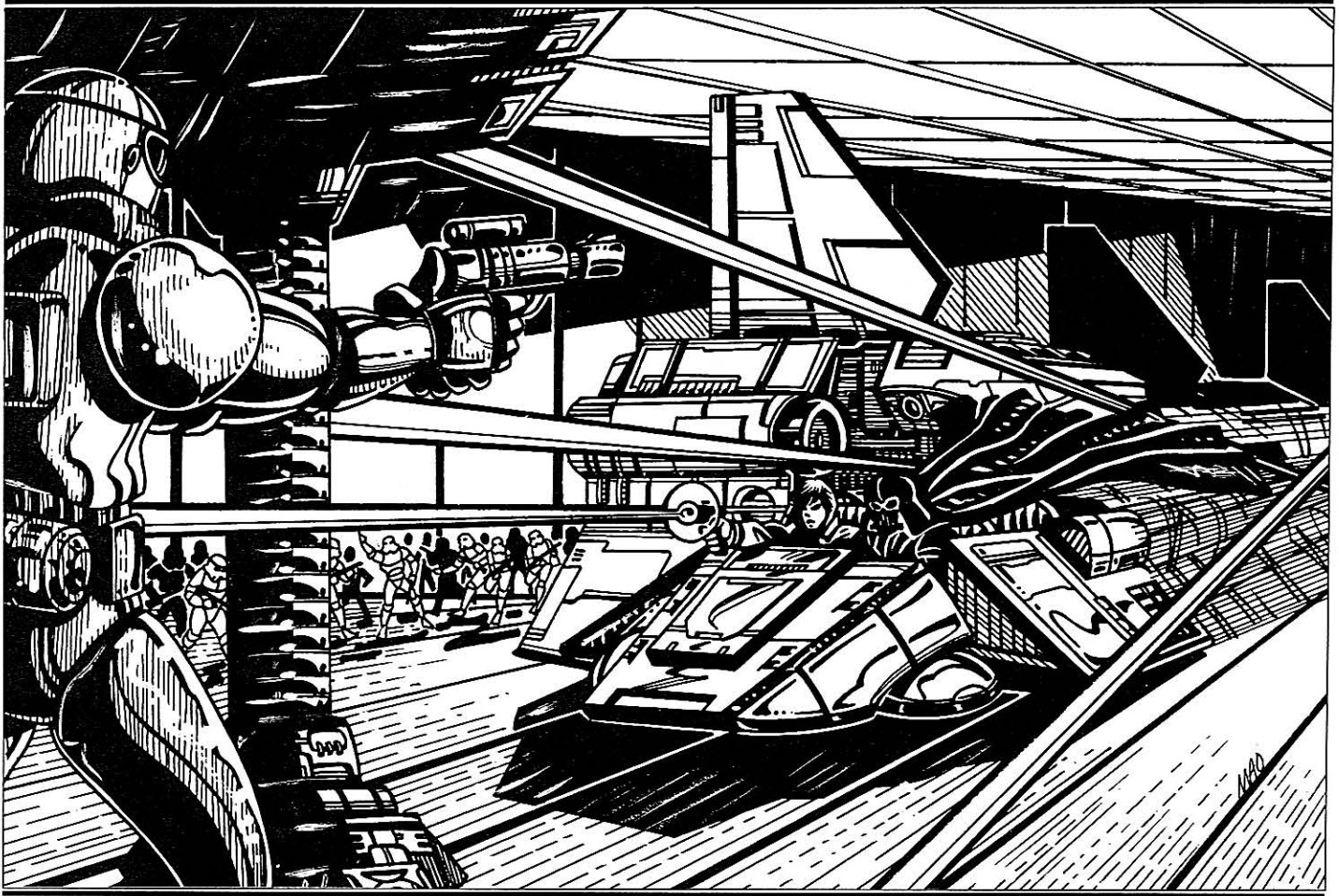
"Of course not," Parnell says evenly. "I see your shuttle is ready, Lord Vader." Without responding, Erling moves the repulsor cart toward the shuttle. They have traveled no more than two meters when Parnell says, "Lord Vader, you're going to the wrong craft." He points to a closer shuttle. "This is yours, isn't it?"

"Accelerate!" Luke orders, snatching his lightsaber from Erling's belt. Parnell's test was more subtle than they realized!

Erling opens the throttle wide. The cart leaps toward the shuttle Parnell ordered prepared for launch. The general's guards fire. The bolts sizzle past the cart and crump into shuttle number two's side. Erling ducks behind shuttle number one. He continues toward number six on the other side of the row, sheltered from the troopers' fire.

At number six, the single stormtrooper Parnell sent to prepare it stands between them and the lowered entrance ramp. The crew is nowhere in sight. Erling points the cart straight at him and accelerates. The trooper holds his ground for a few moments, hitting the cart with two bolts. Erling does not slow, and the cart knocks the trooper ten meters through the air. He bounces off the shuttle and slumps to the floor.

They unload Artoo and run up the entrance ramp. By the time Parnell's stormtroopers reach the shuttle, Luke has already secured all hatches and sits in the cockpit. He activates the energy shields and their bolts ricochet harmlessly into the bay. Luke punches the sublight drive, then waves to Parnell as it warms up. The general ignores Luke and rants at his bodyguards. His threats will do no good; blaster bolts cannot penetrate a spacecraft's heavy shields.



Luke retracts the landing gear. When he turns to wave goodbye to Parnell one last time, the general has fallen to his knees. He holds his throat and sways unsteadily, as if choking. It almost looks like some unseen being is crushing his windpipe.

A large figure in black stands at the bay entrance, his right hand extended as if it holds a large rod. Even through the shields and the hull of the ship, Luke feels the heat of Vader's anger. He turns the shuttle toward the atmosphere and accelerates into Tol Ado's black clouds.

Ten turbulent minutes later, they break out of the clouds. Thirty double-winged balls circle overhead, and Luke sees the firepoints of more TIE drives coming from all sides.

"We're cut off!" Luke exclaims. "We'll have to dive back into the clouds." What he doesn't say is that the TIEs can probably track them electronically, then jump them when they try to leave again. Unless he can think of a plan while they're in the atmosphere, they might as well fight it out now.

"Can't we break through?" Erling asks.

The TIEs overhead dive. Sixty laser cannons flash and a dozen bolts strike home. The cockpit lights dim as the shields dissipate the damage into space.

"Sure," Luke answers. "Our shields are good for ten seconds."

"That's all we need," Erling says.

"Are you crazy? It'll take four or five minutes to complete hyperspace calculations. Until then, we're sitting ducks."

"I can give us coordinates in two seconds, if you can get us out of this gravity well."

"No way!" Luke snaps. "A blind jump is surer death than this."

"It won't be blind."

"How can you do that?" Luke asks.

"I can. You must trust me."

Another volley of TIE fire jolts the shuttle. This time, the cockpit lights stay off for a full second.

- If Luke dives back into the clouds, turn to section 145.
- If Luke breaks through, turn to section 150.

## 148

Luke turns toward the command launch station.

"Are you mad?" Erling hisses.

"Trust me," Luke echoes. Erling will soon eat his flippant dismissal of the Force and Jedi ways. Although he does not close his eyes, Luke turns his attention inward. Nothing happens. He takes three deep breaths and relaxes, searching for the inner calm that serves as a conduit for the Force. Something tickles the base of his brainstem. Good—it's coming.

"This isn't going to work," Erling says.

"Be quiet and it will!" Under his breath, Luke curses Erling for interrupting his meditation. A swell of aggravation rolls through his body, swamping his tranquility. The tingle in his mind fades as quickly as it came. "Ben—help me!" he whispers.

"Authorization code?"

They have reached the doors. "We don't need an authorization code," Luke says, trying to keep the desperation out of his voice. He fingers his lightsaber, just in case.

"Everybody needs authorization codes."

"This one looks like a prisoner," says the second guard.

Luke throws the repulsor cart into reverse. He leaps out of the driver's seat, simultaneously activating his lightsaber. "Get out of here, Erling!"

The surprised guard raises his blaster to parry Luke's blow. The energy blade slices through it like a hot knife through hydrogenated animal fats. A white flash blinds Luke, then an explosion hurls him into the far wall. He crumples to the floor, his vision already fading.

• Turn to section 134.

149

"This one," Luke says, leading the way to the ship the Calamarian entered. A few minutes later, Artoo joins them inside the barge. The excitement outside is just beginning to die, as the Imperial technicians correct the glitch Artoo introduced into the bay's operation program. Luke sneaks back into the cavernous emptiness of the barge, eventually reaching a hundred crates that have been secured for transit.

"Must be a return load," Gideon speculates.

Luke agrees. None of the other crates are secured. He leads the way between the rows and takes a seat. It seems to take forever for the barge doors to echo shut. As soon as it launches, Luke sneaks out of the conglomeration of return crates. The only things inside the cargo hold are the crates he and his companions used as a hiding place.

Luke had hoped to find the Calamarian in the cargo area, but he is either in the crew quarters, or tucked securely inside one of the crates. Despite his curiosity about why a Calamarian is so chummy with an Imperial governor, Luke resists the temptation to search the interior of the crates. Breaking the seals would draw too much attention at the other end of the journey.

Several hours later, the barge decelerates. Luke and the others resume their hiding places. When the crew comes aboard to unload the crates, Luke and his companions simply follow them off the barge. The officer in charge of the barge does not even look up as they pass. A few minutes later, they disappear into the crowded transfer facility and arrange their recovery of Gideon's scow. They have escaped Tol Ado!

\* \* \* \*

Back at Rebel Base, General Dodonna does not seem pleased with Luke's decision to infiltrate Tol Ado, but he cannot object too strenuously. Mon Mothma herself is coming to debrief him. Two days later, Dodonna

summons Luke to his office. Inside, Mon Mothma awaits him—along with a pale-skinned Calamarian! The Calamarian's eyes betray his recognition of Luke. Luke drops his hand to his lightsaber, but does not activate it—yet.

"Mon Mothma, this is the young pilot who penetrated Tol Ado," General Dodonna says.

Mon Mothma stands. "How very nice to meet you, Luke," she says. "This is my aide, Oro. A very important operation was recently compromised in the Sil'Lume system. Perhaps you can help us understand the reason."

"I'm sure I can," Luke says. "Tell me, Oro, how did you like Tol Ado?"

Mon Mothma's face shows her confusion, but Oro reaches for his blaster. He is too slow. Luke has already activated his lightsaber and now points the humming blade at the Calamarian's throat. "Don't make me soil the general's office," he threatens.

Comprehension dawns in Mon Mothma's eyes. "Oro?" she gasps.

"This may explain many things," Dodonna says.

*An End.*

150

"I hope you're right about this!" Luke says. He accelerates straight at the TIEs.

Artoo whistles a strident objection.

"Just get us past those bugs," Erling says. He feeds instructions to the navigation computer.

Luke's maneuver takes the Imperial pilots by surprise. They do not even fire until the shuttle is almost upon them. When they finally gather their wits, the effect is devastating. Ten energy bolts explode on the forward shield, and 20 more flash nearby. The storm knocks the shuttle in six opposite directions at once—something Luke would have considered impossible until he experienced it.

Damage control warnings flare like sparks out of a volcano. Erling casually reads off a damage report: "Shields overloaded, life support reduced to 20%, sensor antennas destroyed, turbo-laser cannons disabled—"

"We have turbos?" Luke exclaims.

"Not any more—shall I continue?"

"What's the point?" Luke asks. "Once they turn on our tail, we're done."

"Then you'd better go to hyperspace."

"If we're ready!" Luke doesn't wait for Erling's response. A moment later, the stars ahead turn red, then blur into doppler-shifted streaks. For the moment, they are safe.

"Now, before we hit a quasar or get sucked into a black hole, tell me why we didn't have to compute a course."

"In a minute," Erling says. "But first, I must say something important."

"What's more important than this? We could be tons of cosmic dust before we realize we're dead."

"Trust me—we'll live. But seeing what you did with the Force back there—"

"What? Nearly getting us killed trying to show off?" Erling chuckles. "No, sensing Darth Vader. In that moment, I understood many things that have confused me my whole life."

"You're not the only one that learned a lesson down there," Luke says. He is thinking of his lonely cell in the Deathblock.

"The Force really exists, doesn't it?"

Luke nods. "It's there. You can't summon it on demand, but it is there when you need it."

"I understand," Erling says. "Finally, I understand."

"What?"

"My father. He fought beside yours in the Clone Wars. I was young enough to think it was all a glorious game. But when he came back, all the joy had left him. He was a sad man—not broken, but the weight of the galaxy rested on his shoulders. We didn't understand—at least Mother and I didn't. We thought peace bored him.

"So when war came to us, we blamed him. The Empire started hunting Jedi—I'm sure you know that part. He left his ancestral asteroid, but that didn't stop the Imperials from harassing us. They came at odd intervals, searching the house and threatening us with imprisonment. Mother begged them to leave us alone, but they told her they would return until they caught him. It was then that Dena and I learned to hate Imperials. But I learned to hate someone else, too—my father. I blamed him for our troubles; I was too young to understand what he fought, and why his Jedi 'magic' couldn't make the Imperials disappear.

"Anyway, he returned to visit us once, and I told him what I thought. He didn't leave. When the Imperials returned, he fought them—and won. Days later, Darth Vader came."

"That explains a lot," Luke says.

"Yes—but it doesn't excuse it. I can't make up for the pain I caused my father, nor for the lives of your friends."

Luke starts to tell Erling about the message chip he found, but decides to hold his tongue. He still doesn't know why Mon Mothma considers Erling so important. Until he does, it would be foolish to reveal what little he knows. Instead, he says, "I think you just reconciled with your father."

Erling wipes a tear from his cheek. "Thanks. But I owe you an apology, too. When I told you about your father, I tried to hurt you. You see, my father respected Anakin Skywalker above all other Jedi. When things turned bad, I expected your father to show up and make everything better again. Of course, he didn't—so I tried to even the score by hurting you."

"He was probably already dead," Luke says.

"I'm sure he was—or he would have come, I know. Can you forgive me for profaning your father's memory?"

"I already have," Luke says. "Now, you owe me an explanation—" Before he can finish his sentence, however, the shuttle decelerates out of hyperspace. A tiny oblong asteroid hangs in the front viewport. "Ire Eleazari's! How?"

Erling nods. "I'll explain. But please hurry, I would like to see my sister."

Luke takes the shuttle into the tunnel guarding Ire's home. They quickly slip into a pair of vacsuits, then go to the airlock. When the interior door opens, they are looking down the barrels of two blaster rifles. Ire Eleazari holds one, and Dena Tredway, now dressed and standing on her own two feet, holds the other. Dena's green eyes are cold with menace, and her graceful jaw is clenched with determination.

"Take those helmets off," she orders. "And I'd better recognize one of you!"

Luke and Erling obediently open their suits. As soon as Dena sees Erling's face, she sets her rifle aside and throws her arms around him. "You're safe!"

Ire Eleazari also lowers his weapon. "I am happy to see you again," he whispers to Luke. "You have done a good thing."

Erling returns Dena's hug warmly, then says, "May I present Anakin's Skywalker's son." He gestures toward Luke.

Dena turns to Luke, her eyes warm with affection. "We've already met," she says. "And I'm delighted to say that even when I don't have a concussion, I think you're more handsome than your father was. I hope you can think of a way I can show my appreciation for all you've done."

Ire rolls his eyes, and Luke blushes. "There is one small thing," he says.

"Name it," she purrs.

"Can you tell me how Erling selected our jump coordinates? There were 30 TIEs on our tail and we were moments from death. Then he pulls a set of coordinates out of thin air, and here we are! And now, he won't tell me how he did it!"

Dena laughs and lays a warm hand on Luke's arm. "That's because he doesn't know," she says. "My family has always had a knack for knowing coordinates—any coordinates—and he's the best of us all."

"I just visualize where I want to go," Erling clarifies, "and then I know how to get there. Don't ask me to explain—I can't."

"You can't explain the Force," Luke replies.

"The Force? Do you really think so?"

His sister nods. "I have been calling it 'instinctive astrogation,' but it must be the Force."

Luke shrugs. "It's the only explanation I know. I don't suppose you could use your talent to help me find a new world for the Rebel Base?"

"As a matter of fact," Dena says, regarding Luke with new interest, "he can. We've been working on a little project—"

"With Mon Mothma!" Luke deduces.

"We have?" Erling asks. Dena's chin drops in surprise.

"I found the message chip," Luke explains.

"Then you know why Erling is so valuable. He can find every planet, moon, and stray rock in over a thousand systems—charted or not—including Imperial installations!"

"But I thought we were expanding operations!" Erling objects, comprehension slowing dawning over his face. "Have I been working for the Rebellion all along?" He almost seems angry.



"I'm sorry," Dena says. "Using a Droid was too risky, but who would figure a human databank?"

"She couldn't tell you," Ire says in his stereo-like voice. "There was too great a chance—"

"That I'd do something stupid!" Erling finishes. Dena drops her eyes, afraid she has angered her brother. Instead of yelling, he chuckles and says, "I was urging passive resistance because the Rebellion wouldn't commission me. By the dark sun, I've been dense! No wonder you kept it secret, Dena. And who can blame Mon Mothma for not wanting me?"

"There'll be a place for both you and your sister in Command Intelligence," Luke says. "I can safely testify to your judgment." As an afterthought, he turns to Ire Eleazari. "And I'm sure we can find a place for a good doctor," he says.

"Thank you," Ire says. "But my penance is not yet complete."

"Penance?" Luke echoes, his curiosity overcoming his good manners.

"Ire was banished from his herd for 30 seasons, but it was Oosea—" Dena starts to explain, then meets the Ithorian's gaze.

Ire picks up the story. "Oosea betrays the herd and traffics with the Imperials. He must be stopped; exposed for what he is. The whole herd suffers." Abruptly silent, Ire looks as if he is unused to discussing such personal matters. Luke is impressed that the doctor trusts him enough to explain.

"Someday, you will see the traitor Oosea leaving Tol Ado," Dena says. "Until then, may the Force be with you."

"And with you all," Ire responds.

Dena takes Luke by the arm. "I will see you at the main base, won't I?" she asks.

*The End*

"We'd better get off-planet, fast!"

Erling turns down the corridor and goes to the launch station. The stormtroopers look distinctly uncomfortable when they motion him to stop. "Authorization code?"

Erling points a black-gloved index finger at the speaker. "You have all the authorization you need."

The guard glances at his companion. "We didn't see you come in, Lord Vader."

"Prepare a shuttle for launch. I have limited time."

Luke feels physically ill; whatever the danger is, it is moving closer.

The stormtroopers hesitate. "Now!" Erling commands.

"Yes, Lord." They step aside and open the doors.

Governor-General Sebastian Parnell stands in front of them!

"How odd, Lord Vader, to see you here—when I just left you in my office!"

Even as Luke leaps from the cart, his lightsaber swinging up into a defensive position, he realizes there is no chance of escape. There are too many guards, and no avenues open for retreat, not this time.

Parnell's words ring out: "Unmask that imposter—I want them alive," and Erling Tredway is toppled by the concentric rings of a blaster set to stun.

Luke parries the first bolts aimed at him, his senses working on reflex, but he cannot guard everywhere at once—abruptly, he feels himself falling into the black void of unconsciousness, his strained body numb, his protesting mind frozen in a soundless cry.

*When he awakens, Luke will have plenty of time as Tol Ado's star prisoner to contemplate his failed rescue attempt—and the probable whereabouts of Erling Tredway. Return to section one and try again.*

# STAR WARS®

## Jedi's Honor

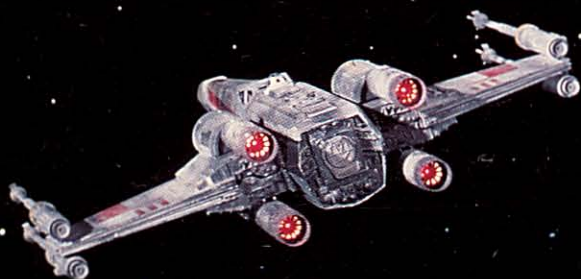
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