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Starring Han Solo™

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set in the *Star Wars* galaxy.

Scoundrel's Luck



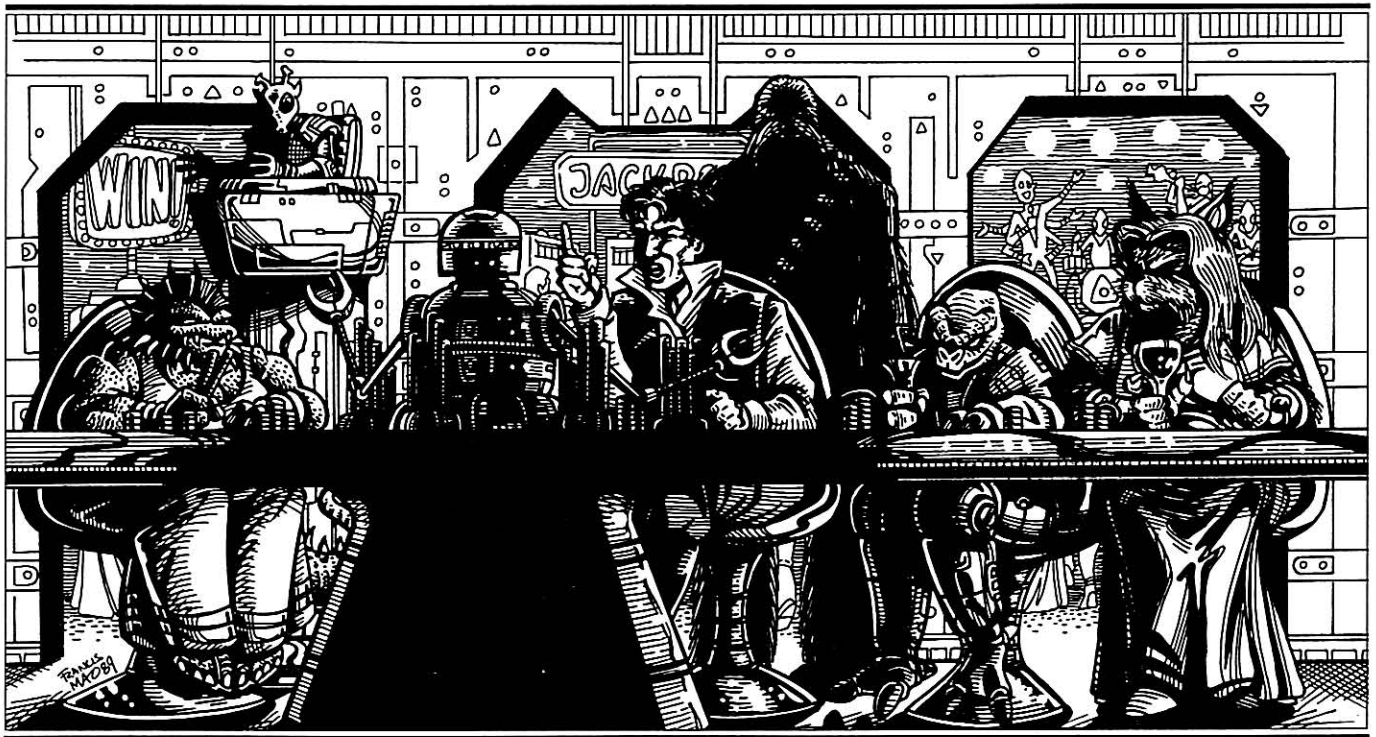
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Princess Leia Organa™ has been kidnapped! It's up to Han Solo to rescue her — again! With Chewbacca™, the *Millennium Falcon*™, and a good blaster at his side, Han must win a race across the galaxy to save Leia!

STAR WARS®

Scoundrel's Luck

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.

Scoundrel's Luck allows you to test yourself with them. Join Han Solo and his Wookiee copilot Chewbacca as they race across the galaxy in the *Millennium Falcon*. Can you rescue Leia from her mysterious kidnapper? Can you outmaneuver the TIE fighter pilots on Han's tail?

Scoundrel's Luck 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'll be faced with a choice: How should Han bet the remaining credits of his reward? 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 Han would do? What do you think he *should* do? You have all the information Han does, and you have to decide — is it worth the risk? Can he accomplish his goal? Will the choice bring him closer to freeing Leia?

Scoundrel's Luck 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 decisions — tough choices to make. And if you choose incorrectly ...

But who said saving the galaxy was easy?

1

"That makes sixteen, gamblers. Sixteen is the number. Payoff is now five-to-one." The fan-tan Droid's head slowly rotates in a complete circle, its electronic photoreceptors evaluating each gambler's facial expression to determine if he, she, or it wants to wager. Gleaming silver and black, the Droid's absolutely motionless body contrasts oddly with the revolving head, giving Han Solo the unsettling impression that it has broken its neck and failed to notice.

The Droid's gaze stops at a Togorian female dressed in a tawdry evening gown. Her slit pupils are contracted too much for the dim lighting of the smoky casino, and her bat-like ears poke through her silky hair at uneven angles. She stands wedged between two Altorian lizards that look even worse.

"Place your bet, madame," the Droid suggests. Servomotors whine quietly as it swivels its trunk section around to face her.

"I'll buy five sticks and lay another fifty credits on the one," she purrs.

"But that's what he wants!" Han snaps.

His protest comes too late. The Droid has already extended an arm and collected the Togorian's wager. As the Droid resumes its scan of the crowded fan-tan table, a panel in the surface opens. A glass of bubbling red ooze rises through the opening, then glides into place in front of the Togorian. Her empty glass returns and drops out of sight.

"Thanks, sweetie," the Togorian says to the now inattentive Droid.

"You see?" Han complains, turning to face Chewbacca. "That's what I hate about mechanical dealers. No principles."

"Aaaooorrrgh," comments Chewie.

"Don't worry," Han responds. "I'll double our bet at four-to-one."

Chewbacca moans.

"Trust me!" Han insists. He turns back to face the table, not feeling as confident as he hopes he looks. Despite Chewbacca's objections, their stake for this gambling junket was the 20,000 credits they earned for rescuing the Princess Leia from the Death Star. Han hopes to parlay the reward into the 225,000 credits they need to pay off Jabba the Hutt.

So far, Dame Fortune has not smiled on Han. He lost at sabacc, which is his favorite game, and one he always wins. Not easily discouraged, he tried the crack-loo tables and also lost there. He even lost at pitch-and-toss! Down to the last of their credits, Han has decided to try the high-payoff fan-tan table. If he cannot win back their stake at fan-tan, Han figures he might as well take the *Millennium Falcon* and flee to the other side of the galaxy. His odds are better to win on the first fan-tan draw and turn his luck around, than to escape Jabba's bounty hunters for long.

The Droid collects the last wager and removes 12 sticks from the quiver hidden in the center of the table. "Twenty-eight is the number, friends. That draw makes twenty-eight. The odds are four-to-one."

Han counts out three-hundred credits in wagering tokens. While he waits for the Droid's photoreceptors to focus on his face, something pinches the back of his left leg. He quickly turns around, but Chewbacca is the only creature within two steps of his backside.

An expression of annoyed disbelief on his face, Han looks to the player on his left. There stands a female Khoan; Han grimaces. Barely as tall as a human, the Khoan weighs perhaps twice as much as a Wookiee. As far as Han can tell, she is typical of her race: a mountain of yellow-skinned blubber with a spiked dorsal fin on her back. Bony protrusions fan away from her face and down her head to form a spiked collar about her

throat. Han cannot believe that she finds him more attractive than he finds her—Khoan imagine themselves the fairest of all intergalactic races.

"Eyes off, mugwump," the Khoan gurgles in her native language.

Han returns his attention to the fan-tan table. The Droid's gaze has already passed his position. "Hey!" he calls. "What about my bet?"

The Droid does not even stop. "I'm sorry; your face was turned."

"Look, short-circuit—"

At that, the Droid's head freezes. Even though a durasteel face cannot change expression, Han would swear the dealer's features show anger. "You know the rules, sir. I cannot backtrack to take a bet. It would be unfair to other players."

"You skipped me!" Han insists. "Is that fair?"

"Sir, your head was turned—"

"Your programming's crooked, Droid!" A murmur arises around the table. Han angrily begins collecting his tokens. But his outburst has attracted the attention of a sentient pit-boss. Although unsure of the creature's origin, Han knows it belongs to the same race as Jabba's bounty hunter—Greedo, the one he killed back in Mos Eisley. Bulbous, dull-faceted eyes look out of the bipedal humanoid's pea-green face. A ridge of short spines crests its high skull. Its nostrils and mouth hang on the bottom side of a tapir-like snout.

It addresses the Droid through an electronic translator. "Is something wrong here, Geo Onesix?" The Droid explains what has occurred, exaggerating its own efforts to catch Han's attention only slightly. After listening carefully to the Droid's explanation, all the while eyeing Han suspiciously, the pit-boss addresses the smuggler. "Would you still care to place your bet, sir?" Its mouth twists into an ugly grin revealing a dozen yellowed incisors.

"Yes," Han answers, resuming his seat. "As long as no one objects." He pushes his wager forward without waiting for protests. The Droid resumes its duties without further comment and Han breathes a secret sigh of relief. One missed bet would destroy his sure-fire fan-tan system.

Despite his inner satisfaction at winning the argument, Han feels far from pleased. At the moment, he wishes that he had never come to Ord Mantell. Han blames this whole misguided trip on Princess Leia and her affinity for lost causes.

After helping Luke destroy the Death Star, Han foolishly let Leia talk him into assisting the Alliance yet again. At General Dodonna's orders, all available personnel started searching for Darth Vader's disabled starfighter a few days after the battle of Yavin. Dodonna had learned that the Empire still believed the Dark Lord to be alive but had not yet recovered him. Anxious to further capitalize on the Rebel victory, Dodonna wanted to capture or destroy Vader before the Imperials rescued him.

So, Han and Chewbacca had spent the past month searching for Vader's missing starfighter with young Luke Skywalker and Princess Leia. It was a difficult month, and not only because they spent most of it dodging three Star Destroyers—and their full complements of TIEs, shuttles and auxiliary craft! Although Han and Luke got along well enough, Han's relation-

ship with Leia perplexed him—at best. She sometimes seemed fond of him, and other times she acted as though he were freshly emerged Shadorian slime-larva.

Han remains as uncertain about his own feelings for Leia. True, she is an attractive young woman with plenty of spirit. But she is also a pretentious aristocrat who forces her beliefs upon those who would be her friends. Han considers having survived a month aboard the *Falcon* with Leia more of an accomplishment than having avoided the Imperial fleet.

But Han does not think that the others found the trip any more enjoyable. More than once Leia seemed speechless with frustration. She often remained withdrawn for hours after Han voiced an especially cutting put-down. The days of fruitless searching strained even Luke's school-boy optimism.

Finally, after roving Star Destroyers claimed the bulk of two patrols, General Dodonna called off the search. The *Falcon*'s crew readily agreed when Han suggested stopping at the gambling world of Ord Mantell for a little recreation. Unfortunately, their leave has so far proven less relaxing than the search for Vader.

A day into their stay, Dodonna ordered Luke to join his wing in the search for a new base site. After seeing Luke off, Han wanted to stop at the Fifteen Moons Casino. Leia, preferring more elegant entertainment, objected angrily. She finally settled the argument by returning to the *Falcon* alone. Han hopes Leia is having better luck than he—even though he would still have his reward if she had not insisted that he join the Alliance's search.

The Droid collects the last gambler's wager, then reaches into the quiver to withdraw the sticks. "Place your final bets, sportsbeings," it announces. "This is the last wager of the series." A chorus of groans echoes around the table.

"Your timing's as rotten as your personality," Han growls, eyeing the table. He has a difficult choice to make now. He can bet on the one, which is likely to win, but has a small payoff. Or he can bet on the three, a longshot with a large payoff.

- If Han bets on the "three," turn to section 10.
- If Han bets on the "one," turn to section 23.

2

Chewbacca rolls off Han and they both scramble away from the pile of crates. The room is darker than deep space; not even the pinprick of a distant star disturbs the gloom. Han can see nothing: not a wall, not the ceiling, not even the floor upon which he stands. It feels as immense and endless as the galaxy, though in truth it may only be the size of one of the *Falcon*'s storage bins.

The steady thrum of heavy machinery reverberates around and through them. The air smells of mildew and something else—something more putrid.

Chewie groans a question.

"The planetary environmental control facility," Han answers, "whatever that is."

"Aaaooogh?"

"Bigger than a power converter," The Corellian snaps. "How do I know?"

Something stirs the pile of crates. Both Han and his co-pilot jump. "Find the blaster!" insists Han. "We need a blaster!"

The crates stir again.

Dropping to his knees, the pilot runs his hands over the floor in great sweeps. He touches something cold, soft, and scaly. It does not move. When Han withdraws his hand, a foul-smelling slime clings to his fingers.

"I'm going to be sick," he says, trying to clean his hand on the clammy floor.

The crates shift even more.

Han scrambles away and bumps into a large furry object. Chewbacca roars. A light flashes beneath the crates.

Instinctively, Han covers his eyes as the light sends blinding bursts of pain through his optic nerves.

Something whirs and the crates stir again. This time, they continue to rustle. Whatever lies beneath them is coming out.

"The Droid!" Han shouts, diving in the direction of the noise. Again a light flashes and sharp pain lances through his head. The Droid is using its artificial lumination attachment to disorient the smugglers. Han also suspects that the Droid's photoreceptors are more adept during light flashes than his own eyes.

The Droid flashes its light again. This time, it flares further away and in a different direction. The flash clearly reveals the Droid's silhouette. Han also gets the impression that the Droid is moving down a high corridor.

"Come on, Chewie!" Han yells, running in the same direction the Droid has fled—he hopes. Chewbacca growls to let Han know he is following.

Han strikes a wall with his right shoulder. Hoping that the wall runs along the corridor, Han lays a guiding hand on its cold surface and continues.

A moment later, the Droid flashes its light again and Han knows they are on its trail. Three flashes and perhaps fifty steps later, the wall ends. Their corridor intersects a much larger one. A loud rumble fills the darkness directly ahead.

Chewbacca crashes into Han's back, pushing him into the junction. Hot wind blows from the right, carrying the stench of sulfur-fueled fire.

"Aaaah!" the Droid screams. It flashes its light as it topples forward into a trench. Han moves cautiously toward the drop off he can no longer see. The rumble grows almost deafening. Although his eyes tell him nothing, Han senses movement—incredibly fast movement—below.

"Uggh!"

Han looks to the right. A conveyor belt laden with rocks carries the Droid, its light now switched permanently on, deeper into the darkness. The fall onto the belt has apparently injured the Droid, for it has extended several appendages. It waves them in the air in a futile attempt to right itself. Han estimates the belt's speed to be approximately 40 kilometers per hour.

- If Han jumps onto the conveyor belt, turn to section 24.
- If Han abandons the Droid, turn to section 11.

3

Han looks from the Gamorrean bodyguards to Chewbacca, to Cabet Lom, then back to Chewbacca. He knows the massive green-skinned toughs are always itching for a fight, and he is too fond of his own skin to risk it in a pointless confrontation. While Chewie's expression hasn't changed, the Corellian knows his Wookiee partner agrees—they have better things to do.

Pocketing the hundred credits slowly, Han nods almost imperceptibly to Chewie.

"If you're going to be huffy, we'll just be stepping outside. Such a pleasure doing business, Lom. I hope it never happens again."

The two smugglers make it out the door without any further trouble; none of the Gamorreans follow once they have left.

- Turn to section 27.

4

The rocks clack and Han jumps. He lands uncertainly and steadies himself against a boulder. The boulder shifts and grinds against another stone, trapping him between them. Han's breath flees his body and a sharp pain lances his torso. He has landed during the grind phase. His body aches as though a Shadorian slime crab has snagged him in its pincers. He does not doubt that he has broken a rib—or two or three!

Han sinks to his knees and remains motionless for several moments. The time seems more like hours in the impenetrable darkness. As each second passes, the rumbling belt carries him further into the gloom, and the ache in his side grows worse. Again and again, man-sized boulders crack against each other, then roughly nudge him, sometimes smashing a finger or pinching an arm. He almost wishes the landing had battered him unconscious.

Only the thought of what lies at the end of the belt rouses Han. He guesses the belt's final destination to be an immense furnace or a huge rock grinder. Either way, it will do him no good. The pilot stands uncertainly. A hot breeze strikes his face. As the belt whisks him deeper into the formless dark, he grows vaguely aware of unseen protrusions whistling past his head. The temperature has grown uncomfortably warm.

A faint light silhouettes a huge boulder ten meters ahead. Even as he watches, the light fades.

"Don't shut down!" Han hollers, but even a Droid would never hear his voice above the belt's terrific rumble. He cautiously inches forward. Pain shoots through his torso each time he steadies himself against an unseen boulder.

Though his legs buckle with every step, Han eventually works his way past a dozen boulders and stands above the tiny Droid. He uses the Droid's lumination appendage to inspect it. Wedged between two boulders, the Droid is terribly and irreparably battered. Six crooked and twisted appendages extend full length

from its body. Each lies trapped beneath a boulder or bent back toward the body where no joint exists. The Droid looks like a crushed and long dead Sivorian wood spider.

Its body, trapped as it is between two immense rocks, has suffered a hundred pinches and punctures. Han leans closer to inspect it. The Droid has a monogram etched into its body: "For the esteemed C.L. May we do business soon, B.R."

A croak escapes the Droid's sonic propagation apparatus. It is barely audible above the rumble of the belt and the clatter of the boulders.

"It's curtains. . .It's curtains. . .It's curtains. . ."

"Thanks," Han mumbles.

A steady roar starts growling louder than the belt's rumble. When Han peers over a boulder toward the sound, he cries out in surprise.

The belt ends fifty meters ahead and empties into a deep pit. The pit does not alarm Han as much as does the reason he sees it—great white and yellow flames flicker high above its edge.

Ignoring the protests in his torso, Han scrambles to the top of a boulder and leaps away from the belt. He lands in the dark corridor and rolls over his injured side. His screams echo even louder than the belt's roar.

The belt dumps the Droid into the pit and the flames briefly flash blue.

"That'll purge your circuits," Han mutters.

Chewbacca roars somewhere in the distance and Han calls to the Wookiee as loudly as he can.

Four painful hours later, they limp into the light of Ord Mantell's blue sun. The tunnel opens into an immense, robotic coal yard. "Fossil fuels!" Han comments. "No wonder Ord Mantell is such a desert."

"Uuughh," Chewbacca agrees, brushing a thick coat of black dust from his fur.

"Yeah," Han says. "Let's get back to the *Falcon*."

• Turn to section 5.

5

Han and Chewie approach the spaceport cautiously, heading for launch station 2349, where they have berthed the *Falcon*. It is one of a long series of concrete-lined craters used as docks for small starships visiting Ord Mantell.

The area shows no outward signs of anything unusual nearby—but Han long ago learned not to trust appearances. He studies the immediate vicinity thoroughly before entering his berth.

The station to his freighter's port side holds a small pleasure yacht. Through the yacht's vista-view port, the smuggler sees an overdressed Altorian lizard watching two Twi'lek females perform an erotic dance. The Twi'lek females wrap their prehensile skull tentacles around each other suggestively.

"You'd think he'd darken the porthole," Han murmurs.

To the *Falcon*'s starboard side, a Lantillian freighter, almost as beat-up as Han's vessel, rests. Its portholes remain darkened and the freighter shows no sign of

current occupancy. It has been that way since they berthed their ship. "Okay, Chewbacca, let's go," Han orders.

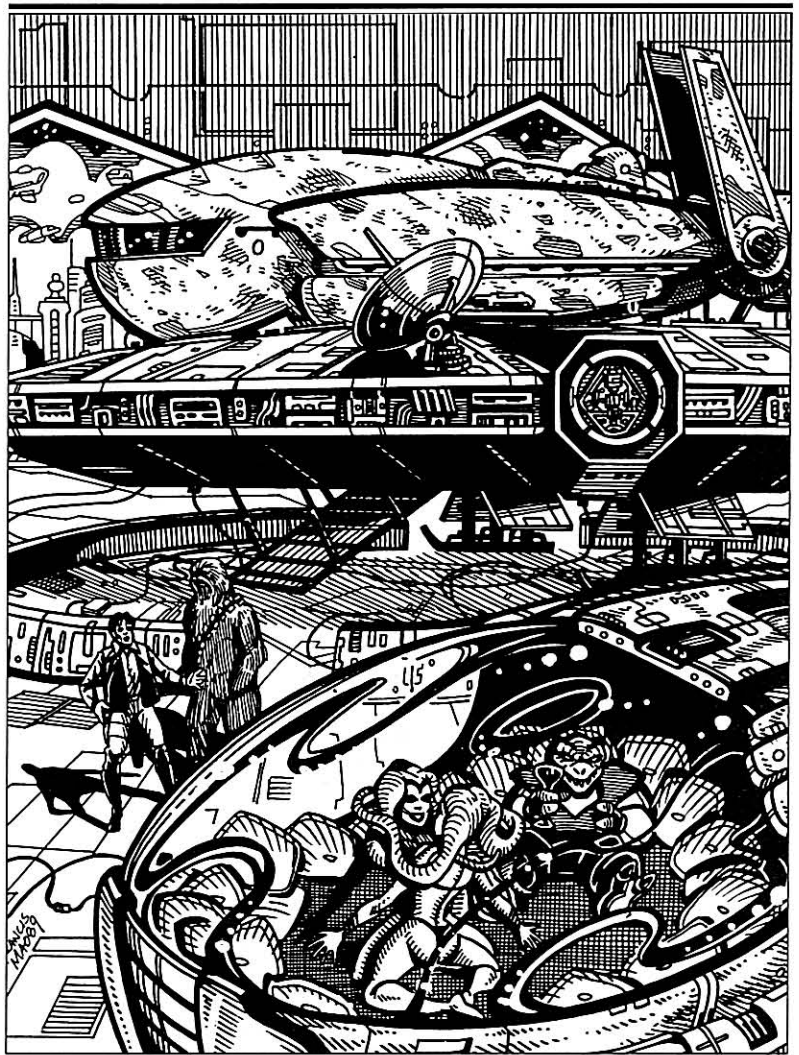
The ship's entrance ramp rests ajar. Han knows from his own experience that someone pressed the "close" key, but did not take the time to make sure the ramp retracted fully. Leia is aware of the idiosyncrasy.

Someone has entered the *Millennium Falcon* without permission! He feels vulnerable and threatened. Feeling vulnerable and threatened makes him angry. He lowers the ramp and they board, ready for trouble.

Although the *Falcon* shows signs of a brief struggle, the only obvious missing element is Leia. A thorough search reveals that someone has taken a small bag of her gear.

Han looks around the lounge area, not really seeing the familiar objects in front of him. "I might know someone who knows our challenger," he muses. "But seeing her will take a few hours." Do they have the time to waste? He considers, weighing the events of the day.

- If Han and Chewbacca leave for Mos Eisley immediately, turn to section 27.
- If they contact Han's acquaintance, turn to section 12.



6

The *Falcon's* shots hit the shuttle hull but do no crippling damage. Han pulls into a loop and comes in for another pass. The TIE fighters stay on his tail, peppering the *Falcon* with near-hits.

"Uggooh," Chewbacca warns.

"The shields are overloading? How long do we have?"

Chewbacca growls a response.

"Who knows?" Han snorts. "What do you mean by that? Can we overload the generator?"

Chewbacca shrugs. "Aanourroogh."

"I know it's risky. So is being shot at." He moves his finger to the missile trigger. Concussion missiles are ideal for a stationary target like the shuttle, but if they miss or glance off the shuttle's armor, their targeting mechanisms might lock onto the corvette. If he uses the concussion missiles, it might be worth another pass without overloading the shield generators. On the other hand, the shields could fail at any moment—and without the shields, all the concussion missiles in the galaxy will do him no good.

- If Han makes another pass without overloading the shields or firing the missiles, turn to section 31.
- If Han fires the concussion missiles, turn to section 39.
- If Han overloads the shield generators but does not fire the concussion missiles, turn to section 22.

7

Han pushes the *Falcon's* sublight drive beyond specification and makes a corkscrew run for Mon Torri's outer ring. The flight computer shows several silhouettes separating from the *Eradicator*, but the area within a kilometer of the *Falcon* is ominously clear of enemy fighters. Han notes, however, that the corvette the Imperials were attacking has also fled toward Mon Torri's rings.

"That corvette's trying to use us for cover," Han reports. "But that's not what we need to—"

Ahead of the *Falcon*, empty space itself lights up with the brilliance of a small sun. The freighter lurches as if she has hit a wall. The *Falcon* erratically resumes her dive for Mon Torri while Han shakes his head clear.

"Concussion missiles!" he gasps at last. "What did we do to them?"

"Arroggh!" Chewbacca growls, pointing at the flight computer. A dozen H-shaped silhouettes are now separating from the *Eradicator*.

"More TIE fighters," Han observes. "That's a relief."

A moment later, they enter Mon Torri's outer ring. As Han hoped, the ring is easily thick enough to conceal the *Falcon*—about a kilometer and a half. It consists mostly of pebble-sized rock and ice which occasionally slips past the weakened shields to skitter across the *Falcon's* hull with irritating, high-pitched squeals. Unfortunately, there are also enough large chunks to keep Han busy dodging.

Although Han does not relish what the debris is doing to his ship, the pebbles will clog the *Eradicator's* tractor beams with tons of useless rock and ice. The *Falcon's* spit-shined finish seems a reasonable trade-off for eluding a Star Destroyer.

The first TIE fighters arrive thirty seconds later. They do not enter the ring. Instead, they remain above and below and take pot-shots at the *Falcon*. Han breathes a sigh of relief. "They just want to pin us in here until we hit something!"

Chewbacca growls a question.

"What's so good about that," Han answers smugly, "is that we can stay in here until they find something better to hunt. You don't expect the best smuggler this side of Shador to crash into an orbiting iceberg."

As if to prove him wrong, a dozen boulders appear in front of the cockpit. Han jerks the controls with maniacal precision, hoping as much as attempting to dodge the largest of the rocks. His efforts do not completely succeed; a man-sized chunk of ice bounces off the forward hull.

The *Falcon's* power fails immediately. The drive cuts out and the internal life-support system fails.

"Chewie?" Han yells, alarmed. "What happened?"

"Urrgh, yooooogh!" the Wookiee snaps.

"Who was hot-rodding?" Han replies.

Chewbacca ignores him and goes aft. He begins rummaging around in the dark. The *Falcon* continues to drift, ice and rock now bouncing off the hull with painful regularity. Han says nothing as Chewbacca pounds and growls, then growls and pounds. Finally, there is loud thump and power returns.

"You're a wizard, Chewbacca," Han says.

"Annoggh, uurggh."

"What do you mean you don't know how long it'll last?"

Han dodges another man-sized rock, then studies his flight computer. The TIE fighters and destroyer are so close now that the screen shows one large wedge. He sees no sign of the corvette, but it could be any one of the thousands of small blips in the ring. Han looks overhead. Beyond the ring's debris, a great white mass of metal fills the horizon. Han cannot see the edge of the destroyer in any direction.

"How'd that get there?"

Turbolaser bolts strike rock and ice all around the *Falcon*. Within a matter of seconds, Han estimates, there will be a very big gap in Mon Torri's outer ring. "Hold on, Chewbacca!" Han warns. "I'm taking us down."

Han drops the *Falcon* out of the ring and accelerates. His move takes the Imperials by surprise, buying enough time to reach Mon Torri's atmosphere before the TIE fighters can jump him. The destroyer, Han knows, is an old one which can skim the outer layers of a planetary atmosphere, but he has to gamble the *Eradicator's* captain will not want to risk his ship crossing the rings in hot pursuit.

A moment later, a bank of high clouds engulf the *Falcon*. Chewbacca climbs into the upper laser turret to keep a visual watch for pursuers. The planet's rugged terrain confuses the *Falcon's* flight computer; Han hopes the same thing will happen to Imperial equipment. The *Falcon* flashes out of the cloud bank and Chewbacca reports only two TIE fighters follow. The corvette has also dropped out of Mon Torri's rings and now parallels the *Falcon's* descent.

Han looks for a mountain valley in which he can lose his pursuers, but the *Falcon* still tops at least one cloud layer. Han dives, praying there are no high peaks hidden in the bank. Two seconds later, the *Falcon*

drops out of the clouds. She flies less than a hundred meters above the floor of a wide, deep valley. Snow and coniferous trees line the valley. A long river of ice fills its bottom.

Two explosions spray steam and rock high into the sky from the valley's left wall. Chewbacca reports they have lost the TIE fighters. Hugging the valley walls, Han rises to the top of a ridge and slips into the next valley. As he attempts this maneuver a second time, the *Falcon's* power cuts out. "Chewie, I thought you fixed that!"

Chewbacca growls in response. A moment later, the *Falcon* plows into a deep carpet of snow.

* * * * *

Han does not know how long he has been unconscious. When he awakes, he has blurry vision, but not too blurry to make out the forms of a stormtrooper and an Imperial officer standing over him. He reaches for his blaster pistol. The effort causes so much pain that he drops his hand back to his side.

The stormtrooper makes no move to raise his own weapon. Instead, the officer says, "Please, do not worry. I am Sodarra, captain of this company." The man motions vaguely toward the back of the *Falcon*. "We are deserters who desire your aid."

"Stormtroopers don't desert," Han moans.

"And Star Destroyers do not attack Imperial courier corvettes, which I am sure you witnessed. One of us must be mistaken."

Han rubs his throbbing head.

"I took the liberty of using your ship's medical equipment. Your headache should fade in a few moments."

"Chewbacca?" Han asks, suddenly concerned for his friend's welfare.

"If you refer to a rather large Wookiee, then he, too, will be fine. He should regain consciousness any moment."

Han stands, despite the pain it causes him. Sodarra is a short, stocky man with vaguely oriental features. True to the Captain's word, Chewbacca rests in the opposite bunk.

"I trust you will take a few desperate passengers?" Captain Sodarra asks. "I happen to know that the *Millennium Falcon* is a 'free-freighter.' We have already taken the liberty of securing our cargo."

"It doesn't look like I've got much choice."

Sodarra smiles politely. "But you are mistaken. I will understand if you must abandon us here."

Han studies Sodarra. The Imperial captain looks him straight in the eye. "I decide who I abandon and who I rescue." Han walks over to Chewbacca. The Wookiee breathes evenly and deeply. "Right now, you're on my good side."

Sodarra smiles. "Good. I would have let you sleep longer, but a squad of blizzard force snowtroopers approaches."

"Any walkers?" Han asks, forgetting his headache.

"No," Sodarra answers. "It is a reconnaissance unit."

Chewbacca stirs. "How long have we got?" Han asks.

"Just long enough to awaken your friend and deploy our forces."

• Turn to section 61.

8

Berrille Ada keeps an office across the speederway from Mama's.

Berrille Ada hangs in the corner of its office—from a heavy silk web. A man-sized arachnid, Berrille is black in color and slick in texture, glistening wetly. It speaks by clicking its mandibles together sharply; Han gathers that the key to the language lies in the length of the pauses between clacks. Luckily, Berrille usually does business with smugglers that do not comprehend its language. A beautiful human translator sits at a desk in the middle of the room.

"Berrille Ada says that outfitters who discuss the affairs of clients soon have an empty web," the translator interprets.

"Outfitters that help kidnap my friends don't usually have a web for long," Han answers. "Tell Berrille Ada that."

The translator's face pales.

"Say it!" Han insists, fingering the butt of his blaster pistol.

The translator makes a few clicking noises. Berrille Ada scurries across the ceiling and stops directly above Han. It clicks its mandibles non-stop and watches Han. Han thinks he detects both anger and fear in at least two of the arachnid's eight eyes.

"Berrille Ada insists you leave immediately," the translator says. "Please do," she adds. "You're about to be bitten. Berrille Ada had nothing to do with your missing friend."

"Thanks," Han says. He leaves, never dropping his gaze from Berrille Ada's eye stalks.

• Turn to section 27.

9

"There's a time to fight, and there's a time to—"

A stream of energy bolts flash past the *Falcon's* cockpit. Han involuntarily closes his eyes.

"Aroogh!"

"That's right—it's time to hide," Han says. Even as he opens his eyes, he is swinging the ship toward Mon Torri's colorful rings.

More TIE fire blossoms in front of the *Falcon*. Han starts to target the laser cannons, then pauses. If he hopes to hit anything, he will have to fly a fairly steady course. That will make the *Falcon* an easy target. Instead of asking for damage, he can rely on his piloting skill to evade the TIE fire until he reaches Mon Torri's rings.

• If Han returns the TIE fire, turn to section 115.

• If Han tries to evade fire, turn to section 79.

10

"The winning number is three. There are three sticks left," the Droid reports.

Han lets out a whoop of joy. "Can I gamble or can I gamble, Chewie?"

Something pinches Han high on his left leg. He swings around rapidly. Again, no one stands behind him except Chewbacca, who is roaring in glee. Several small aliens cringe in terror nearby; apparently, they have never seen a Wookiee win anything before.

Han turns back to the table. Wagering tokens worth 5,700 credits stand stacked in front of the Droid.

"I suppose you would like to claim your winnings," says the Droid. "Or would you care to let it ride?"

"Send it over here," Han orders. "Even I don't let that much ride."

The Droid extends a croupier's stick and pushes the tokens to Han. It mutters, "I thought as much."

Han feels another pinch on his left leg. This time, he immediately turns to the Khoan on his left. "Look lady, and I use the term loosely—"

"Down here, chump," interrupts a coarse voice. It comes from a narrow, cylindrical Droid standing less than a meter tall. The diameter of the polished metal body is only about twenty-five centimeters; it has extended a single arm with a plier-like appendage at the end. "Listen up. Alfreda Goot wants to race, understand? The first one to the Dockside Cafe in Mos Eisley wins."

Han looks from the Droid to Chewbacca, then back to the Droid again. "Get this trash can out of here."

Chewbacca lunges for the Droid, but it easily avoids his grasp and darts between the massive thighs of the Khoan. Chewie wisely does not pursue it further. The Khoan eyes Chewbacca and Han menacingly, then studies the Droid with an expression approaching maternal protectiveness.

"Pardon us, ma'am. Belong to you?" Han asks.

Although she shakes her head, the Khoan does not move away from the Droid.

"She said you'd want to know the stakes," the Droid says. It extends an arm from beneath the Khoan's skirts and drops something on the floor. "The Dockside Cafe in Mos Eisley. Got that?"

By the time Han picks up the object, the Droid has already sped off into the crowded casino.

"Oooouugh?" the Wookiee asks.

"Leia's signet!" Han answers. He does not know whether to be angered or concerned. That the Princess is in trouble he has no doubt, for she would never part with her signet willingly. But how much trouble? And what kind? Han briefly considers leaving Leia to save herself. After all, he reasons, if she had stuck with them, no Alfreda Goot person would have abducted her. But, for some sentimental reason Han does not wish to probe further, he cannot abandon Leia to her mysterious kidnapper. "There goes our winning streak," he complains. "This had better be serious."

Han and Chewbacca now have 6,500 credits remaining from their reward. This is enough to pay all incidental expenses they incur trying to rescue Leia; it is not necessary to keep track of their funds during the adventure.

- If Han tries to follow the Droid, turn to section 17.
- If Han returns to the Millennium Falcon immediately, turn to section 5.

11

Han studies the blackness below. He sees nothing. Every second, the conveyor belt whizzes several tons of rock past. He hears the rocks bouncing and jostling against each other. He feels the belt's tremendous power vibrating the ground upon which he stands. He imagines he even smells the earthy scent the rocks release as they smash each other into tiny pieces. But he sees nothing.

Han turns away from the struggling Droid. He does not fancy being fed to whatever it is that creates the hot wind.

A few moments later, he and Chewbacca find a wall on the left side of the corridor. They start walking with the hot wind at their backs. Four tension-filled hours later, they emerge from the corridor into the light of Ord Mantell's blue sun. The tunnel opens into an immense, robotic coal yard.

"Fossil fuels!" Han comments. "No wonder Ord Mantell is so barren."

Chewbacca utters a disgusted reply and brushes a thick coating of black dust from his fur.

"Yeah," Han says, "Lets get back to the *Falcon*."

- Turn to section 5.

12

Blaster pistol strapped firmly to his hip, Han heads for the seamy side of Ord Mantell. Chewbacca carries his bowcaster. Where they are going, unarmed beings attract more attention than armed ones.

The pilot asks the hired speeder to drop them in front of Mama's, Ord Mantell's version of a smuggler's guild. Fog shrouds the night, as it always does near Mama's. Han feels jumpy and tense; strange things come out of the fog in this neighborhood. To both sides of Mama's, signs advertising similar establishments create misty red, green, and blue halos every ten meters. Laughter rings somewhere deep in the streets, but it is a sinister sort—hardly joyous.

Two Gamorrean mates stand beneath the blue light of Mama's sign. They look toward Han and Chewbacca expectantly, drool dripping from their sharp tusks. Chewie rumbles under his breath about the green hog-like mercenaries. Alertly, one swings his massive, horned head around to observe the spacers' approach. His companion tenses his heavy body, but makes no overt move. When the two smugglers ignore them, the Gamorreans do not hinder the pair's passage.

Inside, smugglers of every size and description patiently converse and await contracts. Two barmaids, one a Twi'lek and the other a Togorian, serve drinks. A holographic entertainment console plays the latest music shorts. The bartender keeps the volume at a very precise level: loud enough to prevent eavesdropping, but not so loud that conversationalists must shout.

As Han steps through the doorway, a camera drops from the ceiling and inspects first his face, then Chewbacca's. When he moves to the bar, the human bartender greets him. "Han Solo!" he says. "It's been

what," the bartender's eyes drop behind the counter, "four years standard? How's your ship, the—" his eyes drop again, "*Millennium Falcon*?"

Han leans over the bar. As he suspected, the man is consulting an artificial memory. The memory uses a camera to scan Han's face, then displays his data file on a small screen behind the bar.

"Nice setup," comments Han. "But you need some practice."

The man shrugs. "It's another of Mama's scams. Says it increases return business."

"I need to talk to Mama," Han says.

The man's eyes drop to the screen. "I see that you know the way."

Nodding, the Corellian gives the man 100 credits. Then he works his way through the crowded bar. Seated behind a spacious gray desk in a dark room, Mama barely looks up as Han and Chewie enter. She belongs to a race Han cannot name and has never encountered except in this room. Her immense hairless head rests atop a tiny bipedal body. She carries a good fifth of her body weight in her skull. Her large black eyes never close or blink, and her temples throb as if the act of thinking requires physical exercise.

After Han explains his problem, Mama nods. "Seventy percent probability: your challenger is an unknown smuggler hoping to beat the *Millennium Falcon* and make a name for herself. Recommendation: proceed to Mos Eisley with all haste. Contingent probabilities: 80% that she has already left Ord Mantell; 75% that she will return your friend unharmed."

"And if she's not a rookie?" Han asks. "What then?"

"Imperial trap: 15%, ransom demand: 10%, unknowable: 5%. Recommendation for further investigation: contact these four outfitters: Hondo Bador, Cabet Lom, Nevid d'Hon, and Berrille Ada. Each has recently outfitted a new starship. Concluded."

"Thanks," the pilot says, turning to Chewbacca. "We have time to meet only one, otherwise we'll lose the race for sure."

The Wookiee considers, then rumbles a name.

• If Han contacts:	Turn to section:
Hondo Bador	16
Cabet Lom	20
Nevid d'Hon	25
Berrille Ada	8

• If Han returns to the *Millennium Falcon* immediately, turn to section 27.

13

Han allows the rocks to grind for a moment, then jumps. He lands in a crouch just as they fall silent. After groping about for a instant, he takes shelter behind a nearby boulder. Soon, he determines that similar boulders surround him. They crack and smash against each other as the rumbling belt carries them deeper into the formless dark. He will have to be careful to avoid being smashed. Han feels uncomfortably warm.

As he stands, Han grows aware of vague, unseen protrusions whistling past his head as the belt whisks him forward. A faint light silhouettes a boulder ten meters ahead. Even as he watches, the light fades.

"Don't shut down!" Han hollers.

"Who's that?" demands the Droid's weak voice.

Han does not answer. Instead, he cautiously inches his way forward. Though his legs buckle with each step, the pilot eventually works his way down the belt's uncertain surface and stands above the tiny Droid. It uses its lumination appendage to inspect Han.

"What do you want, Mac?"

"To get you out of here," Han says, "if you'll get that light out of my eyes. How badly are you damaged?"

"I'm a goner." The Droid turns the light on itself. It lies wedged between two boulders. It had extended six appendages from its body in an attempt to right itself. Each appendage is now twisted or bent back toward its body in a useless knot. Its body, trapped as it is between two immense rocks, has suffered a hundred pinches and punctures.

Han tries to push one of the boulders away. He cannot budge it. When he gives up at last, sweat is rolling down his brow in waves. The temperature has grown hotter.

"Forget it, fella. I've got an energy leak."

"Great," Han says. "So tell me where Leia is."

The Droid's light fades. "I don't know. Some dame got an outfit from the boss; the message was part of the deal."

"An outfit?" Han asks.

"You know, a 'free-freighter.' A fast one, too."

The belt bounces, nearly knocking Han from his feet. The rocks trapping the Droid shift, pinching its body even more. The Droid lets out a series of pops and whistles. "You'd better blow this joint," it says. Static nearly obscures its voice beyond understanding.



Above the belt's rumble, Han now hears a steady roar. It issues from directly ahead. He peers over a boulder. The belt ends fifty meters ahead and empties its cargo into a deep pit. The pit does not alarm Han as much as the reason he can see it—great white and yellow flames flicker high above its edge.

Han turns back to the Droid. "Who's your owner?"

"It's curtains for us," the Droid responds. "It's curtains. . . It's curtains. . . It's curtains. . ."

Han knows the Droid will answer no more questions. He searches its body and discovers an etching which reads, "For the esteemed C.L. May we do business soon, B.R."

Without further delay, Han scrambles to the top of a boulder and leaps away from the belt. He lands on the dark walkway and rolls several times.

Han watches the belt dump the Droid into the pit. The flames flash blue, and then fire swallows the metal body. The smuggler starts back up the corridor. Within twenty meters he once again gropes his way through absolute darkness.

Finally, Chewbacca calls out ahead. He has waited at the juncture of the halls, still facing the conveyor belt. "Over here, Chewie!" Han calls. "Let's get out of here."

Four dark hours later, they emerge from the corridor into the light of Ord Mantell's blue sun. The tunnel opens into an immense robotic coal yard. "Fossil fuels!" Han comments. "No wonder Ord Mantell is so barren."

Chewbacca utters a disgusted groan and brushes a thick coat of black dust from his fur.

"Yeah," Han says. "Let's get back to the *Falcon*."

- Turn to section 5.

14

The TIE fighters approach head-on. The looseness of the TIE formation worries Han. They can easily flank him and catch the *Falcon* in a crossfire. Han slows and begins targeting, selecting the port side TIE as the primary target, the center as the secondary, and the starboard as the tertiary. He hopes the *Falcon's* appearance will lull the TIE pilots into a false sense of security.

The TIE laser cannons blaze at long range. As the dangerous red bolts flare and die ahead of the cockpit, Han smiles. The Imperial pilots are firing blindly. Either they are approaching the encounter with overconfidence or they are rookies. Blind firing does nothing but waste time a pilot should spend targeting.

The TIEs close to medium range, their laser cannons still flashing wildly. Han presses the trigger and the *Falcon's* weapons flare. Four streaks of blue light stream toward the first TIE. Han sees them miss narrowly, enveloping the TIE's cockpit in sparks and static electrical bolts. By the time he turns his attention to the second TIE, the laser cannons have fired again. The bolts strike a glancing blow, tearing off the top third of the second fighter's solar panel. The ship spins away into space, then explodes a moment later.

When the third pilot sees the *Falcon's* effectiveness, he changes tactics. He ducks beneath the *Falcon's* belly, where he faces only one set of weapons. As Han re-targets the belly gun well, two hits jolt the freighter.

Han curses and triggers the belly turret. The *Falcon* trembles twice more. Damage warnings light Chewbacca's panel.

"Gamble your money away," Han growls, mimicking the last words Leia said to him. "Trivial vices are not my idea of fun!" He triggers the belly turret again. The TIE flashes out from beneath the *Falcon* trailing green flame, which quickly dies as the pilot does some impromptu damage control. "She's going to pay for every bit of this damage."

Chewbacca growls a question.

"I'll tell you why!" Han exclaims. "Because if she had stuck with us like I said, we wouldn't be here, that's why!"

The two TIE fighters regroup for another pass. Han knows they have learned to respect his dilapidated-appearing freighter. Glancing over at Chewbacca's damage control panel, Han also respects them.

- If Han continues battling both TIEs, turn to section 59.
- If Han concentrates his fire on one TIE fighter, turn to section 35.

15

Striking toward the shuttle in a series of corkscrew turns, Han feels relatively safe from a direct hit. The Imperial gunners are less likely to hit the *Falcon* than he is to fly into one of their shots. Unfortunately for Han, the Imperial gunnery officer quickly realizes this and adjusts his tactics accordingly.

Chewbacca remains silent, but Han can feel the Wookiee's tension as the shuttle lays down a barrage of fire just outside of Han's point blank range. To strike the blow he intends, Han will now have to fly through a wall of energy. Even the *Falcon's* shields are not powerful enough to withstand the massed firepower of the shuttle. Han reluctantly fires a wild volley, then turns away and pushes the sublight drive to specification. He has to move away from the shuttle's powerful weapons and think of a new strategy. The *Falcon* has more holes in her than a suborbital hopper caught in a meteor shower.

The Imperials have put up a stubborn fight so far. The battle has ravaged more than just the *Falcon*. Han's guns have battered, scorched, and even breached the shuttle hull in several places. Yet, the spacetroopers refuse to flee! Why?

One glance at the *Falcon's* flight computer tells Han the answer. The *Eradicator* closes fast from one direction, and the other three TIE fighters approach from the other. The spacetroopers are awaiting reinforcements!

- Turn to section 30.

16

Hondo Bador proves easy to find. The bartender knows the address—or rather, the artificial memory knows the address. And like all good smuggling suppliers, Hondo is always available—especially at night.

Han and Chewbacca sit across an expensive natural wood desk from the ample Sullustan. His mouse-like ears twitch nervously as he talks, and his immense round eyes never leave Han's face.

"Yes, I outfitted a 'free-freighter' recently, but it wasn't for this Alfreda Goot. My client was a male human; his interest ran more to cargo capacity and stealth than speed. He said he intended to ply his trade on the rim worlds, where the Empire won't harass him. Does that answer your questions?"

Han nods. "I'll look you up sometime," he says. "But right now, I've got to catch someone else."

"It would be a pleasure to serve the *Millennium Falcon*."

• Turn to section 27.

17

"Collect our money!" Han yells, pointing to the wagering tokens he has left on the fan-tan table. "I'll get the Droid." He speaks too late; Chewbacca has already bounded away. Han can barely see the tiny Droid, which weaves and bobs through the crowded casino as though it runs a maze. The Wookiee looks more like a crop processor cutting a swath through an agrifield. "Okay, I'll get the money," Han says, simultaneously watching Chewie's head and stuffing wagering tokens into his pockets.

By the time Han can follow, his co-pilot is thirty steps ahead, but the smuggler catches up easily. The Wookiee, forced to dodge surprised casino patrons and watch the fleeing Droid at the same time, has not moved rapidly. With the advantage of the wide path Chewbacca has created, Han covers two meters for every one of the Wookiee's. As he runs, Han automatically reaches to his hip for his blaster pistol. Nothing hangs there—casinos on Ord Mantell, even sleazy ones, do not allow weapons past their doors.

After plowing a few steps at Chewbacca's side, the Corellian understands why his mysterious challenger sent a half-sized Droid to deliver the message. It dodges through the crowd almost without hindrance. In fact, most patrons do not even notice its passage, save for a faint, knee-high whirl. Han and Chewie, despite their urgent demands to clear a path, meet a wall of bewildered and angry gamblers.

The Droid turns down a narrow corridor between two crowded rows of crack-loo tables. The gamblers stand wedged appendage to appendage, each creature's attention fixed on its table. Han groans; he and Chewbacca will never force their way through that crowd. He catches a glimpse of a silver body darting between a pair of scaly legs.

Chewbacca growls.

"Me, too," says Han. "What can we do?"

Twenty meters ahead, something gives a shrill whistle. A heavy body falls to the floor. The crowd ripples as astonished beings watch the Droid pass. This narrower corridor is too crowded for even the Droid to sneak through unnoticed. The ripple suddenly focuses its attention beneath the right-hand row of tables.

"Why didn't I think of that?" Han comments. He leaps onto the surface of the nearest crack-loo table and

grins. A clear path stretches ahead of him all the way to the doors. He runs, every three steps leaping from one table to another. The distance between him and the telling ripple in the crowd slowly shrinks. Han remains oblivious to the angry shouts of startled patrons and the incomprehensible, mechanical curses of surprised croupier Droids. Several times, he stumbles on wagering tokens or stomps an unwatched tentacle and almost falls.

The normal casino murmur rises to an outraged roar. Han pauses long enough to glance behind him. Not to be outdone, Chewbacca leaps from table to table along the left-hand row of crack-loo tables. The Wookiee's great weight topples each table as he passes. The creatures nearby fight claw and fang over spilled wagering tokens.

Reaching the end of the row at last, Han leaps off the table. Two uniformed security guards, their blasters drawn, stand in front of him. "Which way did the ashcan go?" Han demands.

The expression on the security guards' faces changes from determination to bewilderment. The smuggler's commanding tone has given them doubts about just who they should grab. Their puzzled eyes search the immediate area as if they have missed an obvious threat.

"Great," Han snorts. "Just great. Now what am I supposed to do?"

Chewbacca arrives at the end of his row and points beneath the table behind Han. The Droid has cut a thirty-centimeter hole in a floor vent beneath the table.

"Where's that lead?" Han demands of the crowd of spectators that has gathered.

"The planetary environmental control facility," responds the first guard.

Han snatches the man's blaster. "I'll see that you get this back," he says. Leaning under the crack-loo table, he fires one shot at the grate. Amid shrieks and rustlings, the crowd bustles backwards. When the smoke clears, Han sees a gap easily large enough for a man to fit through.

"What are you doing?" the bewildered guard demands. "Who are you guys?" His voice now carries a suspicious edge.

Han does not reply. Instead, he quickly slides under the table and lowers himself through the grate. A long chute of cool metal runs down into an inky blackness. Low-pitched thrums rumble up the chute. With a deep breath, Han drops.

Darkness quickly envelops him. As he descends, the chute grows steeper and he gains speed. A thin layer of dry dust acts as a lubricant when Han presses his hands against the chute walls. He can generate little friction.

The rumbling grows louder. Some sort of machinery—very large machinery—creates the sound. All at once, the chute's bottom wall disappears and Han drops away.

For the thousandth time, the Corellian curses himself for acting before thinking. For all he knows, the chute leads to a geothermal pit. In that case, he will drop into a pool of scalding liquid—if he is lucky, it will be boiling water. Or the chute might lead to an immense fusion reactor. If so, he'll never know it—he will vaporize before striking anything.

19

Instead, he crashes onto a disarrayed pile of plasteel crates which were once a stack. He has no way of determining how far he has fallen, but it is far enough to bruise him and not far enough to kill him. With some satisfaction, he notes that he still holds the guard's blaster. Han lies still in the absolute darkness, listening to the distant roar of heavy machinery rumble up an unseen corridor on his right. He feels uncertain as to what he should do next.

The roar of a frightened Wookiee gives him a hint. "Chewie, don't come down here!" he calls. The roar grows louder. "Chewbacca, that's not a suggestion!"

Han scrambles, but he moves too slowly. What seems like a thousand kilos of fur lands square on his back. The impact knocks Han to the floor. The blaster flies out of his hand and clatters away into the darkness. Motionless, the smuggler tries to force air back into his lungs.

Chewbacca grates a comment.

"I'm glad I could be there for you, pal," Han gasps. "Now, if you don't mind. . ."

A huge furry hand on his chest stops the pilot's clattering attempts to rise.

"Rrrrungh."

"I don't hear—"

Chewie's hand lifts to cover his mouth.

- If Han listens for the Droid, turn to section 2.
- If Han searches for the Droid, turn to section 28.

18

No sense saving power when there are TIEs to be fought—Han punches the triggers on both quad laser cannons. Blue flashes of energy spurt past the rapidly dodging TIE fighters and dissipate in empty space.

"Those guys are almost as good as I am!" Han exclaims. At the end of the pass, he accelerates to buy time.

Chewbacca utters a suggestion.

"They aren't that good," Han responds. "I can take these recruits with a dozen breaches in our hull!"

"Aaargh!" Chewbacca growls.

"Really? That many?" Han quickly checks the damage display. It glitters like a casino on Ord Mantell. "That's nothing serious!"

Han returns his attention to his opponents. The TIE fighters have turned and again approach the *Falcon*. This time they show more caution. The Imperial pilots have apparently learned some respect for Han, which is not to his benefit. Part of the *Falcon's* advantage lies in inspiring opponents to overconfidence.

Han pauses before committing to a maneuver. He wants to stand off and fight the TIEs from maximum range, but he knows they will use their superior speed to close on the shieldless *Falcon*. Their speed also rules out outrunning them. His choices are now limited to fleeing for the shelter of Mon Torri's rings or facing the TIEs in a desperate toe-to-toe slugfest.

- If Han fights the TIEs, turn to section 31.
- If Han flees, turn to section 30.

Long before they have closed to maximum range, the TIEs begin firing with rapidity and no regard for targeting. Their lack of aim creates a maze of energy bolts between them and the *Falcon*. Han shakes his head in bewilderment. What are they doing?

Finally, he thinks he understands. "Rookies!" he shouts gleefully.

The rapid-fire maneuver is a panic defense. Young pilots instinctively use it to keep experienced opponents at a safe distance. The tactic seldom works.

Han reverses the *Falcon's* direction and flees. The inexperienced Imperial pilots will surely think they have intimidated him with their wild fire. When he judges he has bought enough time, Han turns to face the TIEs. He targets on the center fighter, ignoring the on-rushing barrage. He does not fire. Instead, he plots the courses of the second and third fighters, then feeds the data to the targeting computer.

By the time Han presses the trigger, TIE laser cannon streaks blossom all around the cockpit. Han does not worry. The TIEs are firing blindly.

The *Falcon's* laser cannons flare and four streams of blue energy converge on the first fighter. It dissolves into a streak of glittering refuse. The laser cannons flash again and the second fighter erupts in a ball of orange flame. The cannons blaze a third time—and find nothing.

After witnessing the fate of his companions, the remaining Imperial pilot has changed tactics. He drops the TIE into a spinning dive and flees for safety. His guns remain idle as he streaks past the *Falcon*. Perhaps he hopes Han will not bother him if he does not fire.

He is wrong. Han loops the *Falcon* and follows. It might be safe to let the fighter go, but it is safer to pursue. TIE fighters move faster than the *Falcon*; Han does not want this one to come back on his tail.

The *Falcon's* laser cannons blaze. The laser bursts flash so frequently they merge into a single beam. Still the TIE, weaving and darting like a panicked insect, avoids the deadly touch of the blue light. The range increases and Han cannot push the *Falcon* any faster.

Then the TIE pilot cuts to the left, hoping to shake his pursuer. That is a mistake; the *Falcon* trails so far behind that Han has plenty of time to react. He cuts the corner and closes the distance in the blink of an eye. A moment later, the *Falcon's* laser cannons strike. A 500 meter strip of flame lights the vast blackness.

Han grins and drops his glance to check on the destroyer. What he sees changes his smile to a frown. The *Eradicator* has accelerated and now closes fast. Within seconds, it will reach effective firing range.

"Star Destroyers can't move that fast!" he exclaims.

Chewbacca groans.

"I know how far back I followed the last TIE," Han responds, "and it wasn't this far." He turns the *Falcon* away and begins plotting a hyperdrive course to the Aldo Spachian System.

The next instant, a storm of light erupts ahead. The Star Destroyer has opened up at maximum range. Like the TIE fighters, it fires blindly.

"Look what Leia's gotten us into now!" Han exclaims, shocked by the premature shot. "What's wrong with those guys, anyway?"

Chewbacca groans a tentative theory.

"Yeah, it's almost like they just want to scare us—" Han's expression turns to one of sudden insight. "That's it, Chewbacca! That's why the TIEs attacked like rookies—they wanted to keep us from breaking away! But what's important enough to lose three TIE fighters over?"

Chewbacca activates the visual enhancer. He focuses it on the corvette the Imperials are boarding. "Aeough," he reports.

"An Imperial courier corvette?" Han responds. "Why would a Star Destroyer board an Imperial courier?"

The destroyer fires again and another storm of light flashes ahead. "Whatever the reason," Han observes, "they don't want any witnesses."

Han estimates they have thirty seconds to wait before the nav computer completes hyperdrive calculations.

- *If Han tries to escape into hyperspace, turn to section 69.*
- *If Han tries to escape into Mon Torri's rings, turn to section 7.*

20

Cabet Lom keeps his home, and his office, in a luxurious penthouse atop the Pink Sky Casino. Han and Chewbacca have actually been forced to make an appointment to see the Twi'lek.

Cabet Lom now stands at an expansive window studying the street scene below. Outside the window, a million lights glitter. The pinpoint lights vary more in size and color than the thickest starfield in the galaxy core. Occasional streaks of brilliant light announce the arrival or departure of more of the billions of tourists visiting Ord Mantell each standard year. Repulsor lift airbuses and taxis twist their way between the towering casinos like tiny insects hovering about bipedal life-forms on a still summer's day.

Cabet Lom's skull tentacles rest across his shoulders as though they are pets. Han guesses he means this gesture to convey confidence or smugness. Han merely finds it amusing.

"Yes, it is true that I recently outfitted a 'free-freighter.' It is even true that I did so for a female. That much I tell you without fee, Solo. But not once have you brought your precious *Millennium Falcon* to my company for services. Why should I give you more?"

The Twi'lek faces Han, his hand extended palm up. "We are not friends and I see no reason to pretend otherwise. If you want information from me, you must pay for it."

Disgusted by the Twi'lek's greed, Han reaches into his pocket and withdraws 100 credits. Judging from Cabet Lom's apartment, he hardly needs the money.

When Han offers the bribe, the Twi'lek laughs. "You will have to do better than that, Solo," he says. "I know why you need this information. It is easily worth 30 times the amount to you."

"Three thousand credits?" Han exclaims.

Chewbacca bellows his indignation and Cabet Lom's skull tentacles slip from his shoulders. It requires a

moment for the Twi'lek to compose himself again. His expression shows resentment. He now holds his tentacles wrapped around the sides of his body.

"Considering your reputation," Cabet Lom spits, "I might reduce my price to 2,500 credits, but nothing less. Pay it, or leave!"

With Lom's last words, four Gamorrean bodyguards enter the room. Han hears more of the porcine mercenaries approaching—too many to fight. He has to think fast—retreat, pay up or bluff?

- *If Han refuses to meet Cabet Lom's price, turn to section 3.*
- *If Han agrees to the price, turn to section 37.*
- *If Han tries to con Cabet Lom, turn to section 33.*

21

The shuttle laser cannons flare. A violent jerk tells Han the *Falcon* has suffered a hit. He returns fire, but cannot see any results.

"Wait until I get my hands on Leia!" Han growls.

Chewbacca bellows in alarm.

"What do you mean, if I get the chance?" Han demands.

The Wookiee points to a life-support alarm indicator. The cabin pressure is falling! "Can you stop it?" Han asks, turning away from the shuttle.

Two more laser bursts strike aft. Something creaks ominously and the whistle of air rushing into vacuum follows.

"Oooogh, oooaunh," Chewbacca answers.

"What kind of tech are you?" Han asks. "A little leak like that."

Another hit jolts the *Falcon*. The whistle turns to a scream. A breeze rushes past Han's face toward a hole somewhere in the back of the *Falcon*. Han jumps up to leave the cockpit. "We'd better get into our vacuum suits."

He rushes for the airlock, where he keeps the suits stowed. Already, he feels dizzy from the loss of air. Chewbacca follows, wheezing heavily. A chill has crept into the *Falcon's* cabin.

Han opens the airlock and withdraws Chewbacca's suit from the overhead compartment, then tosses it to the Wookiee. His hearing has grown faint, and he finds it difficult to bend his fingers in the cold. He turns back to the locker and pulls out his own suit. It requires all of his concentration to step into the pant legs.

The growing wind in the *Falcon* is making it impossible to stand. The Corellian gives up trying and falls to the floor. As he slowly rolls aft, he struggles to slip his arms into the suit sleeves.

Chewie, mostly zipped into his suit, crawls toward Han. The pilot smiles his thanks, then his vision fades. He feels as though he is falling from a great height.

"Wait until I see Leia!" he hisses.

Will Chewie manage to get Han into his vac-suit? Will the Imperials investigate the holed freighter? Whether the smugglers manage to repair the Falcon enough to limp into port, or the Imperials capture them, Han and Chewie have lost the race, and reached the end of this adventure. Return to section one and try again.

22

"If we overload the shield generators, we might blow a hole in our hull. Big deal," Han says. "If we don't, the Imperials will do it for us."

Chewbacca groans and overloads the generators.

Han accelerates for another pass at the shuttle. As they approach, the shuttle lays a heavy barrage in front of the *Falcon*. The Imperial gunners seem more interested in keeping the *Falcon* at a distance than in destroying her. The TIEs continue pounding her tail, causing Chewbacca to mutter veiled warnings about shield generator explosions.

Han struggles to target his weapons through the shuttle's barrage, but to little avail. The energy wall created by the Imperial weapons blinds both his physical and mechanical targeting views. Han fires anyway, hoping a wild shot will find a weak link in the shuttle's armor.

When no explosion follows, Han pushes the *Falcon's* sublight drive to specification and flees combat. He has to get away from the enemy guns and think of a new strategy—his old one is not working! The *Millennium Falcon* has more holes in her than an over-mined asteroid, yet the enemy continues to stand-off and take pot-shots. Why do they refuse a decisive engagement?

One glance at the *Falcon's* flight computer gives Han the answer. The *Eradicator* approaches fast from one side, and the other three TIE fighters approach from the other. The Imperials are awaiting reinforcements!

• Turn to section 30.

23

"The number is three, gamblers. There are three sticks left in the quiver!" the Droid announces.

"That's it," Han says, not turning to face Chewbacca. "We're getting down to the last of it." Something again pinches Han, but he ignores it. He is in no mood to play flirting games—especially with a rancid Khoan.

Chewbacca bellows his frustration. A circle four meters in diameter clears around Chewie as humans and aliens scramble for cover. Apparently, the patrons of this establishment do not often see Wookiees lose.

Finally facing his co-pilot, Han promises, "I'll make it up to you. But don't get us thrown out of here."

Chewbacca growls a question.

"Yeah, I'm staying," Han answers. He begins counting what little remains of their reward. "How many credits do you have?"

"Ooorrrr ughh!"

"If that's what you think, why don't you find another ship?" the pilot demands. Chewie's last comment has hurt—perhaps too much. "Who has a gambling problem, anyway?"

Something pinches Han again. This time, he turns immediately to accuse the Khoan. "Look, that's my leg. Leave it—"

"Down here, chump," interrupts a coarse voice. It comes from a narrow, cylindrical Droid less than a meter tall. From the twenty-five centimeter diameter

polished durasteel body, it has extended a single arm with a plier-like appendage at the end. "Listen up. Alfreda Goot wants to race, see? The first one to the Dockside Cafe in Mos Eisley wins."

Han looks at the Droid with an expression of bewilderment. "Are you some kind of ashtray?" he asks.

The Droid backs up half a meter, its stubby locomotors squeaking on the polished floor. "The Dockside Cafe in Mos Eisley, understand?" It bumps into Chewbacca's leg. Spinning around, the Droid tilts until it looks like a drydock crane, and appraises the Wookiee with its photoreceptors. Chewie looks as though he will smash the little machine.

"No, I don't understand," Han says, squatting down to talk to the Droid. "And I'm not doing it."

The Droid returns its attention to Han. "She said you'd want to know the stakes." It extends an arm and drops an object to the floor. By the time Han picks it up, the Droid has sped away into the crowded casino.

"Ooouugh?" Chewbacca asks.

"Leia's signet!" Han answers. He does not know whether to be angered or concerned. That the Princess is in trouble he has no doubt, for she would never part with her signet willingly. But how much trouble? And what kind? Han briefly considers leaving Leia to rescue herself. After all, he reasons, if she had stuck with them, this Alfreda Goot, whoever she is, would not have abducted her. But, for some sentimental reason even Han cannot understand, he will not abandon Leia to her mysterious kidnapper. "We'll never get even now," he complains, eyeing the small stack of their last wagering tokens. "This had better be serious."

Han and Chewbacca have only 800 credits remaining from their reward money. In order to conserve his funds, Han will not spend more than 400 credits at once; for the rest of the adventure, do not pursue any choice requiring an expenditure of more than 400 credits.

- If Han tries to follow the Droid, turn to section 17.
- If Han immediately returns to the *Millennium Falcon*, turn to section 5.

24

Han studies the blackness below. He sees nothing. Every second, the conveyor belt whizzes several tons of rock past. He hears the rocks bouncing and jostling against each other. He feels the belt's tremendous power vibrating the ground upon which he stands. He even smells the earthy scent the rocks release as they smash each other to bits. But he sees nothing.

If he jumps and misses the belt, the massive pulley system that drives it could drag him into its works. It would grind him up like so much pea stone. If he jumps and does not miss the belt, any one of a thousand boulders could crush him. The belt will deposit the remains in whatever creates the hot wind blowing up the corridor.

But if he does not jump, he will certainly never see the Droid again. And that could mean never seeing Leia again.

As he stands above the growling belt, Han notices a rhythm to the crashing of the rocks. After the boulders

crack together, they grind against each other for two seconds. Then, about a second, they remain quiet. Han guesses it will take a second or so to jump down to the belt.

- If Han jumps when the rocks remain quiet, turn to section 29.
- If Han jumps when the rocks strike each other, turn to section 4.
- If Han jumps when the rocks grind against each other, turn to section 13.

25

When Han inquires after Nevid d'Hon, the bartender points to an Altorian bird sitting alone at a corner table.

The Altorian sips a disgusting looking green mush through a long straw. The bird has a large, hooked beak, golden eyes, and a feathery skull-covering that sweeps away from its downy face. Nevid d'Hon has the look of a cold-blooded predator, an impression Han knows to be accurate. Altorian birds still hunt their sentient planet-mates, Altorian lizards, for food and sport. Needless to say, the relationship between the two Altorian races is not congenial.

When Han asks if Nevid d'Hon has recently outfitted a "free-freighter" for Alfreda Goot, the outfitter regards Han coolly. Finally, in its own screeching language, it asks, "Who wants to know?"

"Han Solo, captain of the *Millennium Falcon*," Han informs him. He hopes his reputation will carry some clout with d'Hon.

"If I had outfitted the woman, I'd tell you I had not," the Altorian answers. His eyes show no interest in Han's identity. "My client's business is his—or her—own."

Han drops his hand to his blaster pistol. "Somebody kidnapped a friend of mine," he says coldly. "That makes it my business."

Nevid d'Hon regards Han with heated eyes. "If you sought my client, you would be dead now, Solo." He nods to two Gamorrean bodyguards at the next table. "Fortunately, you seek someone else."

"Thanks," Han says, backing cautiously away.

- Turn to section 27.

26

With his shields angled aft, Han prefers to attack his forward target from maximum range. The *Falcon* and the TIE fighter trade energy bolts as they approach each other. Two shots burst atop the *Falcon* and the entire ship trembles. Damage warnings light Chewbacca's control panel. An instant later, the TIE has zipped behind the *Falcon* and is once again no more than a pinpoint on Han's flight computer. Han drops the *Falcon* into a tight outside reverse and emerges from the maneuver on the TIE's tail.

Han glimpses the other Imperial fighter starting a loop just beneath his cockpit. It ends its maneuver tight on the *Falcon*'s tail.

"And I was afraid we'd lost you," Han comments. Chewbacca growls and makes a thrust adjustment. The Wookiee barely notices the battle raging around him. He is intent upon squeezing every available erg of energy from the sublight drive. But it isn't helping. The *Falcon*'s speed is falling, despite the wide-open throttle!

"What's wrong, Chewbacca?"

"Ooorroogh, uuugh?" Chewbacca moans.

"Of course I noticed," Han replies. "Even on half-power, we might make it to Mon Torri's rings. In there, the slower you go, the better."

Chewbacca groans an objection.

"You think staying to fight is going to give you shop time?" Han asks in astonishment.

The Wookiee punches in the auto-repair, and two of the drive telltales subside into 'caution' status. Chewie's look says it's the best they can hope for from the cockpit.

- If Han stays to fight, turn to section 31.
- If Han flees for Mon Torri's rings, turn to section 7.

27

After paying their berthing fees, Han and Chewbacca batten down the ship. Within minutes, Ord Mantell hangs below the *Millennium Falcon*'s portholes. Swirls of pink clouds over seventy percent of the planet hide its yellow soil from view. Where the surface shows through, it glistens with the lights of a million casinos. Dark, placid seas reflect the warm glow of its fifteen moons. Ord Mantell truly deserves its reputation as the Heart of the Bright Jewel.

Han turns his attention to plotting their course out of the enormous Bright Jewel System Cluster. No matter how he charts it, his options remain limited. The fact that he has to make Tatooine narrows his choices. He will have to exit hyperspace at least four times along the way to plot new coordinates; one of those exits will have to come before he enters the Aldo Spachian Comet. Only a fool would fly through a comet in hyperspace; not even a fool would brave a hyperspace journey through the enormous gravity wells hanging to either side of the Aldo Spachian Comet.

His only real decision lies in whether or not he should take a shortcut close to the planet Mon Torri. The shortcut might save Han as much as a week of travel time. The nav computer lists Mon Torri as an undeveloped, mountainous planet. That means there will be little commerce nearby. It also means help will be a long time coming if he runs into trouble.

Chewbacca growls.

"Not now," Han says, keeping his eyes focused on the nav computer.

"Ooouugh!" Chewbacca insists.

"What's so important?" Han asks, looking up. He sees the streak of a small ship entering hyperspace. "Did you get a good look at it?" Han asks.

Chewie moans a negative answer. He tried, unsuccessfully, to track the ship on the *Falcon*'s flight computer.

"It looked like it headed for the Mon Torri shortcut," Han says, "but it might not have been Alfreda. What do you think?"



Chewbacca grumbles a long answer. "Who cares?" Han snaps. "Leia got herself into this mess. If she gets killed, it's her own fault." The Wookiee grunts. "Yes it is," Han insists. "If she had stuck with us like I said, then Alfreda Goot wouldn't have kidnapped her."

- If Han takes the Mon Torri shortcut, turn to section 54.
- If he takes the safer route, turn to section 65.

28

Han pushes the Wookiee's hand away. "You should have thought of that before you came hollering down the chute like a wounded Bantha."

Chewbacca rolls off Han and they both scramble away from the crate pile. The room is darker than deep space; there is not even the light of a distant star. Han can see nothing: not a wall, not the ceiling, not even the floor upon which he stands. It feels as immense and endless as the galaxy, though in truth it may be no larger than one of the *Falcon's* storage bins.

The steady thrum of heavy machinery reverberates around and through them. The air smells of mildew and something else—something more putrid.

Chewbacca rumbles a question.

"The planetary environmental control facility," Han answers, "whatever that is."

"Aaaooogh?"

"Bigger than a power converter," Han snaps. "How do I know?" He kicks one of the crates. "We've got three things to find in this basement: the blaster, that Droid, and a way out."

Han drops to his knees and runs his hands over the floor in great sweeps. He touches something cold, soft, and scaly. It does not move. When he withdraws his hand, a foul-smelling slime clings to his fingers.

"I'm going to be sick," he says, trying to clean his hand on the clammy floor. From across the room, Chewbacca also utters a disgusted groan. "I wonder what those things belong to?" the pilot asks.

Han continues to search the floor. After his first three encounters with the soft scaly things, he gives up trying to keep his hands clean. What they are, he cannot imagine.

At length, he finds the blaster. Neither he nor Chewbacca detect any sign of the Droid, however. Han assumes it fled immediately after dropping into the room—probably with the benefit of built-in artificial lumination. Finally, the Corellian works his way to a wall. He has no way to determine which wall it is, for in the darkness he cannot tell directions.

Han calls Chewie, then lays a hand on the wall and begins to follow it. The thrums grow louder as they move forward. Whether the wall leads someplace the spacers want to go, he does not know.

Fifty steps later, the wall ends. A rhythmic rumble issues from somewhere directly ahead. He ventures a step forward. A steady hot wind blows from the right. Han turns to the left and starts walking.

"Mooougnnh?" demands Chewbacca.

"I have no idea," he answers. "But if this is a planetary environmental control facility, that way—," Han gestures in the direction he has not chosen, striking Chewbacca accidentally, "must lead to the furnace." Within a few steps, the Corellian finds a wall to guide them.

Four hours later, they emerge, exhausted and covered with grime, from a tunnel leading into the ground. A huge conveyor belt carries chunks of black rock into the tunnel.

"Fossil fuel!" Han exclaims. "No wonder Ord Mantell is so barren. Let's get back to the *Falcon*."

- Turn to section 5.

29

Han jumps after the rocks fall quiet. As he lands, the belt jerks and a boulder smacks him. He stumbles against another cold stone. It shifts and traps his right leg against the first boulder. Something pops and a sharp pain lances his shinbone. Han falls; as his head touches the belt, another boulder shifts against it with a sharp crack.

The clattering of the rocks and the conveyor belt's roar grows faint in his ears. Through the gathering gauze in his thoughts, he realizes that he has injured himself seriously.

“Chewie?” he calls. He does not know whether his friend can hear him above the belt’s roar; his own hearing has failed completely. He vaguely recalls that each vibration carries him deeper into darkness . . .

Will Chewie find Han before the Corellian reaches the end of the belt? Can they afford the medicines to make him well? Whatever happens, Han has lost the race—and ended this adventure. Return to section one and try again.

30

“That’s it!” Han says, dropping the *Falcon* into a wild corkscrew spin.

Chewbacca groans a question.

“We’re not abandoning the corvette,” Han explains. “We’re splitting Imperial fire.” As if confirming Han’s assertion, four energy bolts flash past the cockpit. “And that’s more than we’ll be doing if we take another hit.”

Han checks his instruments. The Star Destroyer approaches fast. It will soon reach tractor beam range. Han guesses that only the fear of hitting its own ships prevents the *Eradicator* from firing its turbolasers—it has already passed maximum battery range.

“We’d better duck into Mon Torri’s rings,” Han says.

The grumbling reply Chewie makes puts his friend’s dander up.

“You’d rather tackle a Star Destroyer?”

“Mauuurghh!”

“Don’t ask me. This isn’t my mess!” Han snaps. “But I’ll tell you, this is the last time Han Solo rescues Princess Leia.”

• Turn to section 7.

31

The TIE cannons flash. The *Falcon* lurches again with the hit.

“Wait until I get my hands on Leia!” Han growls.

Chewbacca roars and points to a life-support alarm. The *Falcon*’s cabin is losing pressure!

Tightly, the pilot asks, “Can you stop it?”

Two more energy bolts strike somewhere in the rear. An ominous creak echoes up the access corridor.

Another hit jolts the *Falcon*. Air begins to whistle into the vacuum of space. Han jumps to his feet. “We’d better plug that hole.”

Already feeling dizzy from the loss of air, the Corellian scrambles for the bulkhead door. Chewbacca follows, wheezing heavily. A chill has crept into the *Falcon*’s cabin.

Han opens the bulkhead door and rushes into the main corridor. A small tornado rages in the main cabin. Equipment and debris of every type flies toward a hole in the topside hull. The air current lifts Han and pulls him toward the breach.

A hairy hand grasps his ankle. Han glances down. Chewbacca has anchored himself to the bulkhead door with one powerful hand, and latched onto Han with the other. If the Wookiee grows tired or faints, and

it is only a matter of time until the lack of air knocks him out, Han will fly through the hole.

“What do we do now?” Han yells.

The Chewie shrugs, almost losing his grip. “Maurrogh!”

“How come I always have to come up with the ingenious plans?”

*How long can Chewie hold on? What plan will Han devise to save himself and his beloved freighter? Whether they limp home at sublight speeds, or patch the *Falcon* together in deep space, or get picked up by the *Eradicator* and slapped in an Imperial brig is another story. This adventure has reached an end; return to section one and try again.*

32

With his shields angled forward, Han flies straight at the TIE. Despite the pilot’s frantic dodges, the *Falcon*’s laser cannons strike the fighter’s cockpit with four bluish bolts. An orange fireball fills space where the TIE was an instant before. Han pulls the *Falcon* up hard and loops. He ends the maneuver directly behind the TIE which has been pounding his tail.

“Got you now!” Han crows. He presses the trigger and the *Falcon*’s laser cannons flash. The energy bolts open their deadly blossoms in empty space.

The Imperial pilot is looping tight. Han did not expect the maneuver and cannot follow. Instead, he circles and approaches head on. By the time the *Falcon* finishes her maneuver, the TIE pilot is already in position. His laser cannons flare, churning the emptiness before Han’s cockpit into a red storm.

Han grips the controls tightly. Flying straight at the TIEs’ blazing cannons is suicidal. He can try to dip beneath the TIE, then come up for a belly-shot. This tactic pits his piloting skill against the TIE’s superior mobility; if he is a better pilot than the Imperial, he will destroy it. If not, he and Chewbacca might get an opportunity to test the *Falcon*’s escape pods. His other option is to bank ninety degrees and force the TIE into a tight turn. This will make it more difficult for both craft to target, but will protect the *Falcon* from a devastating close attack.

• If Han tries for the belly shot, turn to section 53.

• If Han banks ninety degrees, turn to section 34.

33

Han looks from the Gamorrean bodyguards to Chewbacca, to Cabet Lom, then back to Chewbacca. “I told you Twi’leks were tough dealers,” he says.

He is buying time to think of a plan. There are two kinds of bluffs—promises and threats. To which will Cabet Lom respond, he wonders? How much does the Twi’lek trust his Gamorrean bodyguards, and how tough does he consider himself? Han has no doubt that the Twi’lek is greedy, but is he a fool as well?

• If Han threatens Cabet Lom, turn to section 52.

• If Han promises Cabet Lom more money later, turn to section 60.

34

Han presents the *Falcon's* flank to the TIE and concentrates on keeping it presented. For nearly two minutes, the TIE darts in and out, harassing the *Falcon* with near-misses. The TIE keeps Han so busy piloting the *Falcon* and dodging laser cannon bursts that he cannot find the time to target properly on his enemy.

Chewbacca's damage control display glitters like a casino on Ord Mantell. Each light demands his immediate attention. Han doubts that the TIE can be in better shape—he has also landed several near-misses, which have to be taking their toll on the unshielded craft.

As Han brings the *Falcon* around to face another pass, the TIE surprises him by retreating out of range. Its silhouette fades to a fireprick, then to a pinpoint. Within moments, it shows only on the flight computer.

"We scared him off, Chewie!" Han exclaims.

As if correcting him, the vast blackness ahead blossoms into a storm of turbolaser blasts. Han drops his gaze; his head aches as though he has just witnessed a star going nova. When his vision clears, Han wishes that he had—the flight computer shows the *Eradicator* has just reached maximum firing range!

"Eeeeroogh," Chewbacca suggests.

"Good idea," Han agrees. "I've always wanted to explore a good set of planetary rings."

• Turn to section 7.

35

Han targets on the double-winged ball at the TIE formation's right end. He hopes to eliminate one of his opponents and even the odds. It is a risky move; by ignoring the other pilot, he is inviting it to make a point-blank attack.

As the TIEs approach, their laser cannons again lay a squall of destruction in front of the *Falcon*. Han snorts. Are the Imperial pilots trying to frighten him to death? He holds his course dead center as they close.

When the *Falcon* reaches medium range, Han swings it hard to port. He presses the trigger and the freighter's laser cannons blaze. His target dodges, then returns fire.

The other TIE disappears into the laser torn vastness. It will show on his tail at any moment. Han can use his shields to protect the *Falcon's* aft or fore. He can also split their protection, but the TIEs might penetrate the weakened fields.

- If Han splits the shields' protection, turn to section 31.
- If Han uses the shields to protect the *Falcon's* fore, turn to section 32.
- If Han uses the shields to protect the *Falcon's* aft, turn to section 26.

36

Ignoring the two TIE fighters, Han opens the sublight drive to the maximum. The maneuver takes the Imperial pilots by surprise. Two seconds later, the *Falcon* reaches firing range.

The spacetrooper shuttle hangs against Mon Torri's white disc like a stubby insect floating in a cup of Altorian milk-ale. Its black body forms an ideal target-silhouette.

Han opens fire with everything the *Falcon* carries. He hopes to cripple the shuttle before the spacetroopers begin boarding operations. Once Imperials have actually boarded the corvette, he and Chewbacca will have no chance to rescue the crew. Spacetroopers are the best-trained and most heavily armed of the Emperor's stormtroopers. Han's blaster pistol, or even Chewbacca's bowcaster, will prove little use against miniature proton torpedo hurlers or suit-mounted blaster cannons.

The shuttle returns fire with two banks of laser cannons. Only the fact that the shuttle sits dead in space gives Han a chance of success. Most spacetrooper shuttles carry enough armament to battle a squadron of X-wing fighters.

Four energy bolts flash past the cockpit from the rear, reminding Han of the TIE fighters behind him. "We'd better make good use of our shields," Han observes, "or we'll be spaceslag quicker than you can say protoplasm." He faces a crucial decision. He can tell Chewbacca to angle the shields forward to protect them from the shuttle, backward to protect them from the pursuing TIEs, or split them to provide some protection from both enemies. Although the shuttle boasts heavier weapons than the TIEs, it does not appear to be focusing its entire attention on the *Falcon*. Han wonders if it is sufficiently occupied for him to land his sucker punch.

Chewbacca gasps.

"Imperial markings on the corvette?" Han responds. "Somebody must have stolen it from the Empire."

- If Han angles the shields backward, turn to section 31.
- If Han angles the shields forward, turn to section 39.
- If Han splits the shields' protection, turn to section 6.
- If Han abandons the corvette and flees, turn to section 30.

37

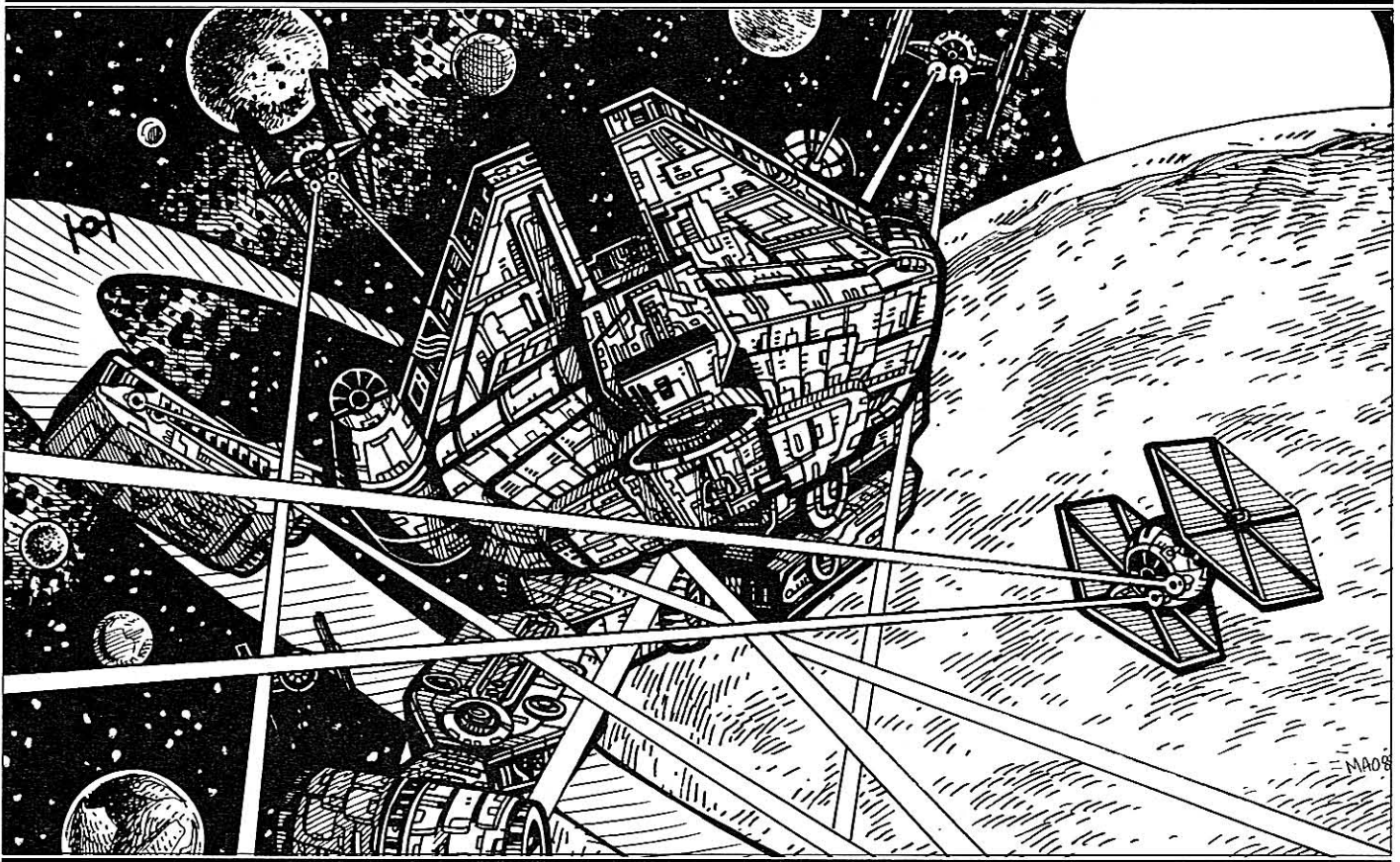
The Gamorrean bodyguards step close to Han, their battle-axes held ready. Four more of the porcine creatures enter the room. Chewbacca roars and raises his bowcaster to fire.

Han holds out a restraining hand. "We'll pay."

Cabet Lom smiles, but he does not wave the guards away. "The money first, Solo."

Eyeing the Twi'lek with undisguised disdain, Han counts out 2,500 credits. "Call me if you need cargo moved the fast way," Han says. "I'll give you a real deal."

Cabet Lom takes the money and laughs. "I'm sure you would, Solo. Now, your information."



"Two days ago, an anthropoid female bought my fastest ship, along with provisions for a four week run. She returned later—a dozen hours before you approached my secretary for an appointment—and asked that I deliver a small packet to you. This, my Droid accomplished."

"Two days ago?" Han echoes. "That's when we arrived. What did she look like?"

"Difficult to say—"

"Talk, Lom!" Han says, fingering his blaster handle. The Gamorreans squeal, excited by the possibility of combat.

"Yes, kill me before I finish, Solo," Cabet Lom says, smiling patronizingly. "How will that help you? I withhold nothing. She wore optical sun-shields which prevented me from seeing her eyes. I believe she also wore artificial red hair, for it was piled high atop her head and hung far down her back. It is possible that, if she had clipped her whiskers, the woman might have been a Togorian posing as a human, or a human posing as an anthropoid."

Chewbacca rumbles a question.

"Who knows?" Han answers. "I don't know any Togorian smugglers."

"Or it is even possible," Cabet Lom pauses to stroke his skull-tentacles, "that she was a Twi'lek hiding her features beneath a great wig. I cannot say; as you know, in our business, questions are unwelcome."

"What does her ship look like?" Han asks.

"She could have renamed it anything," Cabet Lom answers. "But it has distinctive lines. Think of a pear-fruit; quite narrow in the fore, and quite broad in the

base. And now, I have told you all I know. There is no need to doubt my word in this matter. For this much money, I would not lie—even to you, Solo."

Briefly, the Corellian considers trying to recover his money, but the situation is too precarious. And he did get information—now if he can use it well enough to be worth the price. He and Chewie leave without further comment.

• Turn to section 27.

38

When the salvo fades, Han accelerates. If he can streak out of range before the next one, they can jump into hyperspace and the *Falcon* will be free.

"Can't you give me any more power?" Han demands.

Chewbacca points to the sublight drive output monitors. The display reads one hundred and twenty-one percent.

"Just asking," Han comments. He has already counted three seconds, and they are not even half-way across the destroyer's firing range. He reflects that he probably should have started accelerating during the last salvo.

A turbolaser bolt opens above the *Falcon*, then another flares to starboard. The *Eradicator* has caught them in the middle of her firing pattern!

Han does not attempt to dodge. Against a smaller foe, maneuvering might help. But against a destroyer's blanketing fire, Han can do nothing but hope.

Unfortunately, Han has run out of luck. A blaster burst strikes the starboard side. Emergency alarms ring even as air rushes out of the ship. The controls die in Han's hands and the *Falcon* somersaults away.

Han looks at Chewbacca. "Can you fix it?" he asks.

The Wookiee opens his mouth and lets out a long, mournful chuckle.

Where in space will the Falcon be when she stops tumbling? Will Han and Chewie be able to repair the breach? Resourceful as our heroes are, they will survive the crisis—but that's another story. Return to section one and try again.

39

The *Falcon's* shots penetrate the shuttle hull near the sublight drive. It erupts into an orange ball so large Han has to pull into a steep vertical turn to avoid the flame.

Behind him, the TIE fighters cut the corner and close the range. Han spins the *Falcon* on her vertical axis to minimize the target area and bring both laser cannons to bear. The pilot begins feeding instructions into the targeting computer, even before he has completely decided what he wants to do. He can turn the *Falcon* toward one of the TIEs and angle the shields forward, hoping to destroy one of his opponents quickly. Or he can continue presenting them a side shot. Although the *Falcon* does not receive maximum benefit from her shields this way, she does present a smaller target area. He also has more firing options. He can ignore one fighter and concentrate both guns on the closer TIE, or he can split his fire evenly between his two attackers.

- If Han continues to present a side-shot to the TIEs and targets on the closest, turn to section 31.
- If Han continues to present a side-shot to the TIEs, and targets on both of them, turn to section 62.
- If Han turns toward one of the TIEs, turn to section 56.

40

"I guess you're right—any enemy of the Empire is probably a friend of mine," Han says, steering the *Falcon* toward the corvette. "Shields forward, Chewbacca." Although he worries about falling behind in the race against Alfreda, Han does not think it will take long to chase off the TIEs. Besides, it might be more than a coincidence that he has stumbled across the boarding action.

The *Millennium Falcon* streaks toward combat almost before the Imperials realize her pilot intends to fight. As the distance between the *Falcon* and the TIEs shrinks to laser range, Han concentrates upon his options. He can feint to port and target both sets of laser cannons on that craft at maximum range, then on the other after destroying the first. Or he can risk holding his fire until the TIEs reach close range, then target on both of them at once. It's a flashier, but more foolhardy tactic—by not firing, Han can see how the

TIE pilots respond, but he is in effect bragging that he considers the two Imperials harmless enough to let them under his guard.

The two fighters turn to meet the *Falcon* at the last minute; the shuttle continues trading shots with the corvette. The Imperial pilots have left him one more option. Han can fly straight at them, hoping to split their formation and forcing them to leave the shuttle vulnerable.

- If Han targets on a single TIE at maximum range, turn to section 46.
- If Han holds his fire until the TIEs reach close range, turn to section 44.
- If Han tries to split the Imperial formation, turn to section 51.

41

Wait a moment.

"Is there any cover within a hundred meters of here?" Han asks the lookout.

"Not much. A few sinkholes."

"That's enough," Han says. "Do you have an extra blaster rifle?" he asks Captain Sodarra.

"What are you thinking?"

"Chewbacca and I'll hide out on the glacier. After they pass, we'll pick off the communications officer from the rear."

Sodarra hesitates. "Stormtroopers are better trained—"

"You haven't seen me and Chewie in action," Han counters.

Sodarra does not yield easily. "If you are injured, we will all be stranded."

"Then you'd better make sure I don't get hit!" Han says.

Captain Sodarra starts to threaten Han, but catches himself in time. "I'll send my best marksman."

"I'm not asking your permission," Han says stubbornly. Sodarra's comments make sense from a tactical point of view. His stormtroopers probably can handle the ambush as well as Han, and no one else can fly the *Falcon*. But, despite Sodarra's reassuring mannerisms, Han does not completely trust the ex-Imperial. He has heard too many stories of Imperial double-crosses to stand with stormtroopers, deserters or not, in battle.

"How do I know you won't betray us?" Sodarra finally asks.

"You've got to trust somebody," Han says, a sarcastic sneer on his lips. "And you've got my ship."

Sodarra returns a grim smile. "Lieutenant Birdloe! Secure a blaster rifle for Captain Solo."

Half-an-hour later, the squad of snowtroopers disappears into the moraine trench. Han and Chewbacca rush out onto the glacier to find sinkholes.

After a frigid hour-and-a-half, the snowtroopers pass Han's hiding place. The unit marches spread out over half a kilometer. Han brushes the camouflaging snow from his hood and raises his head. The officer, who carries a blaster pistol in addition to his armor and a long-range communications pack, walks in the center of the formation and just a few steps behind. He is

perhaps fifty meters from Han's hiding place and seventy meters from Chewbacca's.

The point trooper stops suddenly, then turns as if he is speaking to the officer through his suit radio. Han knows he has seen the furrow! Han weighs his options. He can fire on the officer immediately, but he is far from certain he can hit the officer at a range of fifty meters. Or he can leap from his hiding place and rush the officer. He can probably close to point blank range before the snowtroopers notice him, but he will be left in the open when the officer's men return fire.

- If Han rushes the officer, turn to section 64.
- If Han fires from his hiding place, turn to section 50.

42

"If you want something done right, you'd better do it yourself," Han mutters. He fires.

Two blue bolts streak from Han's blaster rifle and strike the officer square in the chest. A thousand electronic components spray into the chill air as the snowtrooper drops. Chewbacca fires his bowcaster and the point-guard also falls. The third man stands frozen in shock for nearly a full second. He, too, falls without firing a shot.

In the next instant, Imperial blaster fire rains down around Han and Chewbacca. They withdraw beneath the *Falcon*, unable to return the squad's heavy salvo. The two smugglers must now rely upon Sodarra's deserters to save their lives.

That help is a long time in coming. Han and Chewbacca huddle beneath the *Falcon* as blaster bolts zing off the hull or fizzle into the walls of their tiny ice cave. Through the cave mouth, Han sees snowtrooper feet approaching at a run. He continues to fire his blaster, but his aim is too severely restricted to hit anything.

"Maybe we shouldn't have trusted Sodarra," Han says. "He has a sneaky face."

"Hooruugh."

"Really? We all look the same to you?"

Several blaster bolts lace across the cave mouth from opposite directions, forming a grid of death within a meter of Han's nose. The Imperials have reached the *Falcon's* tail. They will be firing directly down the tunnel any moment. Han curses himself for not digging a second exit, but there was no time. Never has he imagined he would die hiding beneath the *Falcon's* belly in a frozen worm-hole. Han braces the blaster rifle to fire at the entrance.

And then the battle sounds cease. After ten seconds, Han and Chewbacca crawl to the cave entrance. Sodarra and his men stand behind the Imperials. A few of the deserters already search for survivors.

"What took so long?" Han calls.

"I was thinking of resuming command," Sodarra replies evenly. Han chokes on rage and fingers his blaster trigger. When Sodarra sees the anger in Han's expression, he adds, "It was a joke, Captain Solo."

Han does not laugh. Sodarra does not strike him as a man who enjoys practical jokes.

- Turn to section 72.



43

As the *Falcon's* laser cannons flash, the shuttle's airlock opens. A dozen stormtroopers in bulky self-contained battle suits exit the stubby craft. They ignore the *Falcon's* blazing weapons and circle toward the corvette. Their propulsion jets create pinpoints of light which stand out against the shuttle's black silhouette.

"Now!" Han mutters, "we've got to hit it now!" He releases the concussion missiles. As if responding to his order, two firepricks streak away from the *Falcon*. A moment later, they strike the shuttle hull near the sublight drive. The Imperial craft erupts into an orange ball so large Han has to pull up sharply to avoid it.

When he loops back to survey the wreckage, nothing remains except an expanding cloud of debris. Two specks which could be spacetroopers drift toward Mon Torri.

- Turn to section 80.

44

Quickly, the *Falcon* zig-zags toward the TIE fighters. With the modified freighter's firepower and forward-angled shields, she more than matches the two small craft. The distance shrinks rapidly, yet Han holds his

fire. The *Falcon* packs a surprising punch. With patience, he might destroy the two fighters before their pilots realize what is hitting them.

At long range, the TIE laser cannons flash. Han smiles; they will have to get closer to penetrate the shields. He targets on the two TIEs. Any second now—

The TIEs split! One goes to starboard and the other slips to port. Their pilots have not fallen for Han's trap—in fact, they have laid a trap of their own.

"Even shields!" Han calls, turning to follow the port side TIE.

The warning comes too late. As he swings to attack the port side TIE, the other closes in behind them. The *Falcon* lurches violently. The TIE has found its mark.

Chewbacca yells.

"Shields down?" Han screams. "That can't be!"

Two more violent lurches convince Han that Chewbacca is telling the truth.

- *If Han continues battling the TIE fighters, turn to section 58.*
- *If Han flees, turn to section 30.*

45

Han swings the *Falcon* around to face the three TIE fighters behind him. He does not want to get trapped between them and a Star Destroyer.

"Shields forward, Chewie!" he orders.

The three TIE fighters approach carelessly. Han knows his best tactic will be to gain way steadily and target carefully. Unfortunately, that will take time, giving the *Eradicator* an opportunity to close from his rear. On the other hand, he can accelerate toward the TIEs at maximum speed, hoping his boldness will surprise them long enough to land a few devastating shots. Or, he can feign intimidation when the battle begins and fades away from the TIEs, pretending to forget about the Star Destroyer. This will allow him an opportunity to use his superior range, and perhaps also lull the Imperials into a false sense of security. This plan risks being forced into the Star Destroyer's range, however.

- *If Han feigns intimidation when the battle begins, turn to section 19.*
- *If Han accelerates toward the TIEs at maximum speed, turn to section 49.*
- *If Han approaches steadily and targets carefully, turn to section 14.*

46

The *Falcon* and the TIEs approach with terrifying swiftness. Han fires the laser cannons as soon as the computer locks onto the first ship. Both TIEs' weapons answer a millisecond later. A field of energy bursts blossoms around the three craft like a meadow of wildflowers, but somehow the beauty of the scene inspires an emotion more akin to terror than awe.

The *Falcon's* lasers find their first target. An orange ball of flame spews a thousand glittering metal shards into the emptiness of space. Han quickly re-targets and

concentrates all lasers on the remaining fighter. So close has the TIE come that Han sees its pilot frantically adjusting his own target selector.

Two laser bolts bloom directly ahead, temporarily blinding Han. Realizing that his maneuvers have become predictable, Han jerks the *Falcon* into a series of vertical rolls. He continues firing, hoping that he will not collide with the Imperial pilot before his vision clears.

Chewbacca roars triumphantly, and Han knows that their lasers have struck home. He banks the *Falcon* away and circles wide.

A few moments later, the speckles in Han's eyes fade. He turns his attention to the corvette. The stormtrooper shuttle has knocked out the corvette's lasers and attached itself via tractor beam. The zero-g stormtroopers will leave the shuttle any moment and begin working on the corvette.

Chewbacca snarls an exclamation.

"You're kidding!" Han answers. "Imperial markings? Somebody must of stolen that corvette!" He drops his attention to the flight computer. "We've got about eight minutes before the *Eradicator* and the other fighters show."

- *If Han attacks the armed shuttle, turn to section 63.*
- *If Han abandons the corvette and flees, turn to section 30.*

47

Han and the TIEs begin trading energy bolts at maximum distance, but the enemy fighters circle away before reaching point blank range. Several damage control warnings demand Chewbacca's immediate attention. Han forces the damage from his mind and turns his thoughts to the Imperials.

The TIEs, now distinguishable from stars only by their movement, circle to regroup yet again. They try to force Han back toward the *Eradicator* and avoid a decisive tangle themselves. They want merely to hold the *Falcon* until the *Eradicator* arrives to clean up the mess. Han does not intend to wait for big brother. Ignoring Chewbacca's protests, Han accelerates beyond specification and corkscrews toward the two fighters.

Two laser bursts flower over the *Falcon* and she lurches heavily. Four blue energy bolts answer the attack as Han fires the *Falcon's* weapons. A fireball erupts in the distance.

"We got one!" Han yells.

Chewbacca groans in response.

"What do you mean it won't do us any good?"

"Gggroogh," Chewbacca explains.

"So what if they hit the ion drive?" Han asks. "It takes more than that to stop the *Falcon*." In answer, the *Falcon* decelerates to half its velocity. Han checks his instruments, then reluctantly admits, "But not to slow it down." Han's stomach sinks. They are in trouble now and he knows it. He has only a few options, and he isn't sure any of them will save the *Falcon*. First, he can run for the shelter of Mon Torri's rings; if he is lucky, he will reach them before the TIEs blast the ship into nothingness. Second, he can attack the TIE head-on. This will

work only if he manages a quick kill, for it will not take long for the Imperial pilot to recognize his opponent's handicap. Third, he can present his flank to the TIE, making the *Falcon* a narrower target while allowing him to train both laser banks on the Imperial starfighter.

- If Han runs for Mon Torri's rings, turn to section 9.
- If Han attacks head-on, turn to section 115.
- If Han presents his flank to the TIE, turn to section 34.

48

Han opens the drives to maximum, pulling up hard into the path of the TIE fighter targeting on his top side. The two starships hurtle toward each other. Surprise at the bold maneuver seems to have frozen the Imperial pilot, who stops firing but fails to initiate evasive action. The lower TIE follows blindly behind the *Falcon*, still blasting red bolts around the Corellian freighter.

Grimly, Han holds his course. The range between his vessel and the forward TIE closes startlingly fast. And as it closes, the chances of their dying, either from a point-blank laser blast or from a head-on collision, increase.

At last, the Imperial fighter wavers, then slews upward, narrowly avoiding a ship-to-ship crash—and climbing straight into an oncoming laser bolt from his fellow pilot.

Han crows as the TIE flashes blindingly white and expands into a ball of flame. The closeness of the explosion rocks the *Millennium Falcon* badly.

Chewie interrupts the smuggler's gaiety with a hurried damage report.

"Who cares?" Han replies. "Why do we need flux stabilizers, power converters, cooling systems, and—what else?"

"Ssoogh arrroghh."

"Not the sensor array!" Han exclaims. "Now, that makes me mad." He pushes the *Falcon* into a belly loop that brings him face-to-face with his remaining attacker. Not bothering with the targeting computer, Han directs the gunwells manually and opens fire. The surprised Imperial releases a few shots in return, but they go far wide of the *Falcon*.

A moment later, the TIE erupts into a ball of fire. "That sensor array cost us 5,000 credits, fella," Han explains to the fast-fading flames.

- Turn to section 80.

49

The *Falcon* approaches the fighters head-on. With the *Falcon's* modified weaponry and forward-angled shields, it is an even match for three TIEs. As the range closes, Han forces himself to hold his fire. He wants to surprise the Imperials with the *Falcon's* firepower.

The TIE laser cannons blaze at maximum range. Bolts of red light flash around the cockpit and die without contact. Han smiles. The TIE pilots fire blindly, as if they are rookies. He calmly selects his first target and designates the secondary. Any second now . . .

The TIEs scatter! One veers to port, one slips to starboard, and the third continues head-on. They will catch the *Falcon* in a deadly crossfire!

"Even shields!" Han calls, struggling to adjust the targeting computer to the new situation.

His warning comes too late. The *Falcon* lurches. At least one TIE has found its mark.

"Aaaggh orruuughh!" Chewbacca yells.

"Shields down?" Han screams. "That can't be!"

Two more violent lurches convince Han. He presses the trigger and the *Falcon's* laser cannons blaze angrily. Han does not see if they strike anything; he is too busy considering his options to spend valuable seconds looking for damaged TIEs. No matter how he looks at the situation, Han realizes that without her shields the *Falcon* has problems. He can flee for the shelter of Mon Torri's rings, but the TIEs will pursue and take a few shots at him. His other choice is to stay and hope that he destroys the TIEs before they destroy him.

- If Han continues battling the fighters, turn to section 115.
- If Han flees for Mon Torri's rings, turn to section 9.

50

Han steadies the blaster rifle on a clump of ice, then squeezes off two shots. Two blue bolts streak from the weapon's barrel and strike to the officer's right. He drops to the snow and rolls. When he stops, he holds his blaster pistol in his hand. Almost before he realizes what is happening, the officer has squeezed off a shot and Han has a burn along his left shoulder.

Scarcely a moment later, the remaining troopers turn to face the rear-attack. Their blaster bolts melt snow just inches from Han's face. Small clouds of steam and flying ice crystals sting his eyes. Han ducks back into his sinkhole, not daring to show any of his body to the snowtroopers' deadly aim. Where is Sodarra?

Energy spurts whiz over his hole in a continuous stream. Han hopes Chewbacca has fared better than he.

A blur of white appears at the top of the hole. Han fires. The white form crashes onto him. Waves of agony shoot through his wounded shoulder. Han clubs the snowtrooper with his blaster, but the man does not respond. The first shot did the job.

The smuggler rolls the body off just in time to see another white form appear. Before Han can bring his weapon to bear, the second trooper drops limply into the hole and smashes into him. Painfully, the Corellian works his gun arm and head out from under the dead trooper. A blaster hole has been burned in the back of the snowtrooper's armor. Han can not roll the body off—his sinkhole is too crowded for him to move.

A minute later, Captain Sodarra appears at the top of the hole. "There you are, Captain Solo. You may come out now."

"Imperial officers aren't too bright, are they?" Han responds, pushing weakly at the dead snowtrooper with his good arm. "Get someone to pull me out of this coffin before I bleed to death."



Sodarra's face does not change expression. He turns away and gives an order, then says, "I am sorry, Captain Solo. We held our fire too long. Perhaps your injury could have been avoided."

Han grimaces. "Maybe. How'd we do?"

"They relayed a message to their base. The radio is still intact."

• Turn to section 92.

51

Han approaches the TIE fighters head-on at full speed. With the *Falcon's* firepower and forward-angled shields, she more than matches the two small craft. As the distance shrinks, Han itches to trigger the laser cannons. He hopes to keep the Imperial pilots too busy dodging his fire to target accurately. If the Imperial pilots are inexperienced, he might sneak past the two TIE fighters before their pilots realize what he intends to do. And if he is lucky, he just might destroy them as he passes.

The TIE laser cannons flash at maximum range. Han smiles; they will have to get closer to penetrate the shields. He targets on the port side TIE. Any second now—

Han fires! The energy bolts flare and flower, obscuring both his physical and mechanical view of the TIEs. Han wonders if he has hit them both. A moment later,

two winged balls streak out of the laser bursts, their own weapons still blooming. Han curses his bad aim and begins a series of corkscrew turns.

Han's shots do force the Imperial pilots to re-evaluate their opponent. The TIEs split, hoping to lure the *Falcon* into following one of them. "Even shields!" Han orders, steering a course directly between the fighters. Two seconds later, the TIEs have reached close range. Both craft attack from the *Falcon's* flanks, catching her in a deadly crossfire. A few bolts penetrate the shields; Han winces. That will mean several hours of repair!

He targets the closest TIE and opens fire. The laser cannons flash at the starboard TIE—once again, they find only empty space.

But when Han looks forward, he smiles, the outside shots forgotten. The TIEs have left him a clear run toward the shuttle and the besieged corvette. Though the *Falcon* isn't as fast as the TIEs, she is pointed in the right direction and they are not! Of course, while the Imperial escorts cannot stop him from firing at the shuttle, they can pepper his tail if he does.

- If Han attacks the shuttle, turn to section 36.
- If Han abandons the corvette and flees, turn to section 30.

52

"Twi'leks also smell bad," Han says, drawing his blaster and training it on Cabet Lom in one swift motion. The Gamorrean bodyguards squeal in excitement and move to attack. Chewbacca roars, then draws his bowcaster—effectively stalling the Gamorrean charge for a moment.

"If you know how much this information means to us," Han says, "then you also know we won't mind blowing you into tiny pieces to get it."

"You wouldn't dare!" the Twi'lek hisses.

Han squeezes his trigger and a blaster bolt destroys Cabet Lom's desk. The Gamorreans shuffle forward, but Chewbacca steps to meet them and cold-cocks the leader.

"Try us," Han says.

Cabet Lom studies his squad of bodyguards. Despite their leader's unconsciousness, they remain ready to attack. "You will never leave the room alive."

Han fires again, this time destroying half of an expensive, natural wood couch. The Twi'lek is scared. "So? Would you?"

After a long pause, Lom says, "You win, Solo. But if you ever step foot on Ord Mantell again—"

"What?" Han demands. "If you had what it took to kill me, you wouldn't be scared to death now. Just talk."

Cabet Lom carefully adjusts his skull tentacles, wrapping them protectively around his shoulders. "Two days ago, an anthropoid female bought my fastest ship, along with provisions for a four week run. She returned later—a few hours before you approached my secretary—and asked that I deliver a small packet to you. This, my Droid accomplished."

"Two days ago?" Han echoes. "That's when we arrived. What does she look like?"

“Difficult to say—”

Han shoves his blaster under the Twi'lek's throat.

“Yes, kill me before I finish, Solo,” the Twi'lek spits.

“I will not protect her at my own expense. She wore optical sun-shields which prevented me from seeing her eyes. She also has long red hair which hung far down her back. It could have been artificial, for it was also mounded high on her head. It is possible that, had she clipped her whiskers, the woman might have been a Togorian posing as a human. Or, she might have been a human posing as an anthropoid. Her disguise was simple but effective.”

“What does her ship look like?” Han demands.

“She could have renamed it anything,” Cabet Lom answers. “But it has distinctive lines. Think of a pear-fruit; quite narrow in the fore, and quite broad in the base. I have told you all I know. With my life at stake, I will not lie—even to you, Solo.”

Seeing nothing further to be gained, Han and Chewie withdraw cautiously from the room. Although they watch for tails, they are not followed after they leave.

• Turn to section 27.

53

The pause lasts a tense second. Then the *Falcon's* laser cannons flare and four energy bolts lash out. A millisecond later, an orange streak brightens the emptiness of space.

“Is that shooting or what!” Han exclaims.

In answer, the vast darkness ahead of the *Falcon's* cockpit lights as if a small sun has gone nova. Han drops his gaze to the flight computer. It shows no TIEs within a thousand kilometers, but the *Eradicator* has reached maximum effective range and is blanketing several cubic kilometers of space with turbolaser fire. Han wishes that a star had gone nova—he can deal with that!

“Errruugh,” suggests Chewbacca.

“Hiding's not a bad idea,” Han agrees.

• Turn to section 7.

54

“We'd better take the shortcut,” Han says. “I hope Leia appreciates what we're doing to clean up her mess.”

He enters the instructions into the nav computer. A few minutes later, the *Millennium Falcon* activates her hyperdrive. As they accelerate, the stars in the forward viewport assume a red tinge, then blur into brilliant streaks. The ship has entered hyperspace.

“I'm worn out,” Han says. “Time for a nap.” He punches the automatic pilot and leaves the cockpit. Chewbacca, also exhausted, groans and abandons his seat.

For the next four days, Han and Chewbacca do little but sleep, work on the *Falcon*, and ask each other who Alfreda Goot might be. Try as they may, however,

neither smuggler can hazard a guess as to Alfreda's identity. She is an unknown quantity—and, like all good gamblers, Han dislikes unknown quantities.

Late on the fourth day, as Han and Chewie are listing all the female smugglers they know for the fiftieth time, the hyperdrive cut-out alarm sounds. Han scurries into the cockpit. They are approaching Mon Torri. If he has miscalculated their course, the hyperdrive cut-out has activated because it detects the planet's gravity well in their path, in which case they will be lucky to escape with their lives.

After checking the nav computer, however, the Corellian breathes a sigh of relief. The sensors have detected several small wells, and dropped out because of their proximity. The larger gravity well of the planet still lies 10,000 kilometers ahead.

“Nothing to worry about, Chewie,” Han calls. “It looks like it's just some asteroids and a rogue moon.”

The *Falcon* decelerates and enters real space. There is a momentary flicker in all the ship's systems as the freighter automatically hooks in a new power cell to replace the one it has just drained. Han switches his attention to the flight computer, preparing to take manual control of the freighter.

Chewbacca groans, his face glued to the viewport.

“What is it?” Han continues plotting asteroid locations. “Hey, that moon's accelerating!” he mutters. “And there are three more asteroids behind us!”

“Uuugggh!” Chewbacca roars.

“I'll be there in a bit,” Han returns impatiently. The numbers flashing across his screen don't make sense, so the Corellian glances at the sensor's holdisplay. “Wait a—who's ever seen a triangular moon?”

The Wookiee's response is instantaneous and deafening. Han looks out the viewport.

It takes a moment to find the tiny pinpoints of light which have excited Chewbacca. When he does, Han also gasps in alarm. Two pinpoints circle a larger fireprick. Every few seconds, bright light needles stab at the larger gleam. A still-larger lightpoint comes into view, also firing at the beleaguered gleam.

Han turns his attention to the flight computer. Now the numbers make sense. “It looks like two TIE fighters and a combat shuttle attacking a single corvette,” he reports. “It must be an Imperial boarding action.”

Mon Torri, its snowy surface brilliantly reflecting the light of its distant yellow sun, hangs to starboard. Seven rings, each a different color of the rainbow, encircle the great orb. “The corvette must have been running for Mon Torri's rings,” Han concludes. “What are Imperials doing here? This sector is supposed to be deserted!”

A low warning rumbles in the Wookiee's throat.

“You're right. This is no time for questions.” Han studies his instruments. “The three asteroids behind us are TIE fighters, too. And that moon—it's a Star Destroyer! What did Leia get us into?”

Chewbacca moans miserably.

The radio receiver crackles. “Attention, Corellian freighter: prepare for boarding. The Star Destroyer *Eradicator* approaches; resistance is futile!”

“How did he get a fix on us so fast?” Han asks.

Mumbling, Chewie points to the subspace transmitter. The activation switch is stuck open.

"I thought you fixed that!" Han exclaims, slapping the malfunctioning activator to the "closed" position. He also closes the receiving channels, and then studies the rear sensor screen a moment longer. "It's not as bad as I thought," he says eventually. "We can probably polish off those three TIEs behind us before the *Eradicator* gets here."

"Aaoogh?" Chewbacca asks.

"You're right," Han grumbles, shifting his attention forward. "Maybe we should rescue the corvette." He returns to his instruments and does a couple of quick calculations. "The TIEs on our tail won't catch up for a few minutes, and the *Eradicator* isn't much closer to the corvette than she is to us."

Han hesitates. A few minutes isn't much time to destroy two TIE fighters, an armed shuttle, rescue the corvette's crew, and then escape. If something goes wrong with the forward attack, he will be trapped between the approaching *Eradicator* and the three TIE fighters. On the other hand, no matter what he does, he has to fight—either the three TIEs on his tail, or the two TIEs and the Imperial shuttle ahead.

Han and Chewbacca drain one power cell from the Falcon's batteries of power cells and power cores during the hyperspace jump. Keep track of the number of power cells they use during the adventure.

- If Han helps the corvette, turn to section 40.
- If Han engages the three TIE fighters on his tail, turn to section 45.

55

"No casualties."

"No casualties at all?" The colonel's face betrays surprise at Han's report. "Well done, then," he adds. "You'll receive a commendation, Lieutenant—forgive me, I forget your name."

"No commendation necessary, sir," Han responds nervously. "I'd better go now, sir. Our com-pack is about to malfunction." He kicks the set over, then shoots it with his blaster pistol. "Who needs your lousy medals, anyway," Han says to the now silent com-pack.

"Were I commanding the enemy task force," Sodarra comments, ignoring the outburst, "I would assign a walker company to investigate the squad's report."

Han nods. "How long?"

Sodarra studies the valley walls. "In this terrain, who can know? Six hours at least. Perhaps as much as two days." Sodarra turns to his aide. "Lieutenant Birdloe, take three men up on the ridge to serve as a watching post."

"As you order," Birdloe responds. He turns away to gather his group. Sodarra assigns the rest of the deserters to burial details.

"Chewbacca and I'll fix the *Falcon* so we can get off this hailstone," Han says.

After thirty minutes of work, Chewbacca reports that they have a cracked hyperdrive actuation diode. Assuming Sodarra's deserters will help, Chewbacca feels he can repair everything else within a day. But without a new diode, the *Falcon* will never enter hyperspace again.

"We'll have to steal one from the Imperials," Han says. "I'll see if Sodarra can help."

But the deserter captain is less than enthusiastic. "Pickets will be posted—it's a hostile landing. You would not get within kilometers of the craft."

"And you'd prefer to travel sublight?"

Shortly after Han breaks the news about the diode to Sodarra, a high pitched whine echoes up the valley. Everyone has grown used to the occasional thunder of cracking and falling glacial ice, but this is an eerie new sound. Even Chewbacca stops working and reaches for his weapon. Han at first believes the keening to be the plaintive wail of some giant ice creature. But a few seconds of increasing volume and steady pitch convince him it is some sort of repulsor drive.

"Captain Solo," calls one of Sodarra's deserters. "A woman hails you over the emergency channel."

Han shrugs in response to Sodarra's unspoken question and runs for the *Falcon*. When he reaches the vidscreen, he is dumb-founded. Leia is the woman calling him.

Han opens a transmission channel. "Leia!"

"Han? You're alive! We saw you go down—"

"Are you safe?"

"Of course; being kidnapped is no big deal," she says sarcastically. "I haven't been injured, if that's what you mean. But we've got bigger problems than my abduction. How did you manage to cross a Star Destroyer?"

"I didn't do it," Han responds. "The credit is all yours, Princess."

"MINE?" Leia screams.

"Every time I turn my back—"

"Somebody tries to vibro-knife it! You're a dangerous man to know, Han Solo."

"You should have stuck with us like I said—"

"Sleazy floorshows aren't my style," Leia says.

"And rescuing Princesses isn't mine. This is the last—"

The transmission goes dead.

"Leia?"

No answer, just static.

"Leia?"

More static.

"LEIA!"

The video display returns. Instead of Leia, it shows a small, gray helmet with a full face guard. Long red hair cascades from beneath the helmet. "We meet at last, Solo." The voice comes through an electronic translator.

Han activates the artificial memory to record the conversation. "Are you Alfreda Goot? What do you want with Leia?"

"I am Alfreda and I will ask the questions. First, what is the condition of the *Millennium Falcon*?"

"We're grounded, so I guess our little race is off."

"Permanently, unless I choose to aid you. A company of stormtroopers and a walker move toward your position as we speak."

Han says nothing.

"Normally, they would reach you before my help. But the terrain on this planet is difficult, at best. You have perhaps a day and a half; the walker must travel down one glacial valley and back up the one you occupy. What do you require to repair the *Falcon*?"

"Why are you helping us?" Han demands.

"My interest is to beat the *Falcon* to Mos Eisley—not to destroy it."

"Yeah, well I'd like to talk about our destination—"

"Mos Eisley," Alfreda insists.

"That's a problem for me," Han continues. "A little misunderstanding with Jabba the Hut. You do know who Jabba is, don't you?"

Alfreda appears unimpressed. "Mos Eisley, Solo—or you'll never see your princess alive again. Now, what do you require to repair the *Falcon*?"

Alfreda promises to return the next day with the diode. Although Han trusts the woman less than he trusts Sodarra, he has little choice except to rely upon her word.

Shortly after the transmission ends, Captain Sodarra climbs into the freighter's buried cockpit.

"The strange noise was a space yacht—quite an ugly space yacht."

"Know it?" Han asks hopefully.

"No. It was shaped like a pear-fruit; broad on the bottom and narrow on the top. I assume the transmission came from the yacht?"

Han nods. He replays the portion of the conversation he has recorded and tells the story of Leia's kidnapping. Sodarra listens to Han's account without emotion.

At last, Sodarra says, "A strange incident. Leia is the senator from Alderaan?"

"Know her?"

"The Emperor's agents have placed a high price on her head."

"Don't even think of collecting," Han warns.

Sodarra smiles. "You forget. I also have a price on my head."

"Speaking of which, what's the big deal about your cargo?"

Sodarra hesitates. "I can trust your discretion?"

"Absolutely," Han replies.

"My men and I were to transport the prototype of a new compact cloaking device to the secret Imperial Production Laboratories on Rigoron. We decided to sell it to Ploovo-two-for-one instead. Unfortunately, we are unused to such scum; he double-crossed us and prepared an Imperial ambush. We have been looking for a safe port ever since."

Han whistles. "That took guts."

Sodarra nods. "Perhaps you could help us. We would gladly show our appreciation with a full share."

"Maybe I could—but I have a race to win," Han says. "And the price would be five full shares."

"Three," Sodarra counters. "And we will help you win your race."

"Four."

"Done."

Han smiles warmly as they shake hands. He would have settled for three.

Han and Chewbacca spend the next thirty-six hours working on the *Falcon*. Although some of the repairs are not pretty, they will hold until the ship reaches better facilities.

When his mind is not fully occupied with a mechanical problem, Han puzzles over Alfreda Goot's true identity. She acts as though she knows him well, and he certainly finds it strange that she has risked an encounter with an Imperial Star Destroyer to aid him. There is the fact, too, that Leia did not seem worried

about her own safety when they spoke. Although Han cannot deduce Alfreda's identity yet, he begins to fear less for Leia. As his fear for her subsides, his anger increases. The whole screwy race has the feeling of a practical joke gone sour.

As Han and Chewbacca are putting the finishing touches on the power flux coupling which was damaged in Mon Torri's rings, Alfreda's ship descends from the overcast sky. It hovers twenty meters above the glacier and opens a hatch. A small brown package falls out and strikes the snow, then the yacht is gone.

"Thanks a lot!" Han yells after it.

"Your gratitude may be premature," Sodarra warns. "Birdloe sent a message. The walker is only two hours away."

"Plenty of time," Han says, turning to Chewbacca. "Right?"

By the time Han and Chewbacca have finished installing the diode, Lieutenant Birdloe has returned with his patrol. The walker, he reports, is just over the valley's edge, perhaps a kilometer away. The installation has taken just over two hours and fifteen minutes. Han is already firing up the freighter's engines as the last man boards.

The *Falcon*'s mighty drives gleam to life, creating a fair-sized lake in its crash furrow. A moment later, it bursts from the snow. Four laser flashes zip past the cockpit. Han spins the ship around. She is face-to-face with a walker! He has a millisecond to react.

- If Han fires the laser cannons, turn to section 68.
- If Han tells Chewbacca to raise the forward shields, turn to section 82.

56

The TIE fighters split, one going for the top of the *Falcon* and one going for the bottom—a risky tactic, but one that might bring quick results. Imperial energy bursts light the blackness in front of the cockpit.

Han pulls up hard, training his weapons on the TIE going for his top. The *Falcon*'s laser cannons flare once and a brilliant, orange-red ball flowers in front of the *Falcon*.

A violent lurch informs Han that the other TIE has found his mark. Three lights on Chewbacca's damage control panel sparkle into activity.

Chewbacca groans a long report.

"Who cares?" Han replies. "Why do we need flux stabilizers, power converters, cooling systems, and—what else?"

"Sssoogh arrrogh."

"Not the sensor array!" Han exclaims. "Now, that makes me mad." He pushes the *Falcon* into a belly loop that brings him face-to-face with his attacker. Not bothering with the targeting computer, Han directs the gunwells manually and opens fire. The surprised Imperial releases a few shots in return, but they go far wide of the *Falcon*.

A moment later, the TIE erupts into a ball of fire. "That sensor array cost us 5,000 credits, fella," Han explains to the fast-fading flames.

- Turn to section 80.



57

"Here's what we'll do—" Han says.

"I give the orders here," Sodarra interrupts.

"Who says?" Han demands. "I'm the captain of the ship, I give the orders."

"These are my stormtroopers—"

"They're deserters, and as long as they expect passage on my ship, they're my deserters," Han interrupts.

Sodarra glares at Han for a moment. Then his face softens as if he finally understands that desertion has deprived him of the Empire's authority. He responds, "I forget myself."

"Now that the chain of command is clear," Han continues, "we'll bury you and your troopers in the side of the furrow about two hundred meters away. Chewbacca and I will defend the *Falcon* from inside. When the squad comes down the furrow, we let 'em have it at point-blank range!"

"Your plan has many shortcomings, commander," Sodarra responds bitterly. "Most importantly, how do we prevent them from reporting our position before we attack?"

"Human nature," Han says. "Nobody wants to look stupid by reporting before he's sure of what he's found—especially in the Imperial army. He'll wait until he sees what's inside."

"The odds are—"

"Never tell me the odds," Han says. "If you're that worried about it, have a marksman plug the officer first thing. But don't hit the radio—we might have to fake a report."

Sodarra still looks uncomfortable. Finally, he asks, "How do I know you won't betray us?"

Han smiles. "You've got to trust somebody," he says sarcastically. Han has separated himself and Chewbacca because he does not completely trust Sodarra. Although the man has charming mannerisms, he is an ex-Imperial. Han has heard too many stories about Imperial double-crosses to stand with stormtroopers—deserters or not—in battle. "We're not going anywhere," Han adds, nodding to the *Falcon*.

"Very well," Sodarra answers. "Lieutenant Birdloe! Captain Solo is giving the orders—for now."

Han prepares his ambush. Sodarra and his stormtroopers conceal themselves in the furrow walls a hundred and fifty meters away from the *Falcon*. Han and Chewbacca hide in the snow beneath the *Falcon's* tail. Han carries a borrowed blaster rifle.

Two freezing hours later, the Imperial squad comes down the furrow. The officer and an assistant follow a point-guard. All three wear standard snowtrooper armor. The officer carries a long range communications pack and a blaster pistol. When they see the *Falcon's* tail, the officer orders a halt and prepares to speak into the long range transmitter.

Han fingers the trigger of the blaster rifle. The officer stands partially shielded behind his assistant. It will be a difficult shot. Han wonders if it would be wiser to remain quiet and allow one of Sodarra's stormtroopers to fire first.

• If Han fires, turn to section 42.

• If Han holds his fire, turn to section 87.

58

Han drops into a corkscrew turn that carries him away from the TIEs. Both Imperial pilots decelerate, then follow. They must be pushing their sublight drives beyond specification to catch the *Falcon*.

When Han judges the TIE fighters have reached their maximum velocity, he says, "Hold on, Chewbacca! We're going to take them head-on!"

"Ooooghun!" Chewbacca bellows angrily.

"I know the shields are down," Han replies. "That's no reason to get testy."

Already targeting the weapons, Han pulls up in a tight loop that leaves him facing both TIE fighters. The TIEs quickly answer the *Falcon's* maneuver with flashing laser cannons. Han pauses before triggering his own weapons. With a little luck, he might lure the TIEs into point-blank range by holding his fire. It is a risky maneuver, for the *Falcon* will have to withstand several shots from the TIEs before he attacks.

• If Han holds his fire, turn to section 31.

• If Han fires immediately, turn to section 18.

• If Han flees, turn to section 30.

59

The distant TIEs split, then approach for another pass. At this range, they resemble shooting stars. Determined not to give the Imperials an easy target, Han points the *Falcon* at the growing gleam on the right. As he thought, the TIEs intend to keep the *Falcon* from reaching open space. They shuffle their formation to cut him off.

Han selects the fighter on the left as the primary target and the fighter toward which he flies as the secondary target. Even though the TIEs outnumber him, Han feels he is in control of the situation. By driving toward the right fighter, Han has forced the Imperial pilots to commit to a maneuver. Now, he can use that maneuver against them.

Han swings the *Falcon* hard to starboard. The tardiness of the TIE response betrays the surprise of the Imperial pilots. Han pauses before triggering the laser cannons. Because the TIEs responded so slowly, he might risk holding his fire until they reach point-blank range. Doing so will almost guarantee the TIEs' destruction—if they don't recover and shoot him out of space first.

- If Han holds his fire, turn to section 53.
- If he fires immediately, turn to section 47.

60

"But Twi'leks are fair, too," Han says. He turns to address Cabet Lom. "If you know why we need this information so badly, then you also know that we have access to a great deal of money. We can't pay you 2,500 credits right now, but after we recover our lost 'cargo,' we'll pay 4,000."

The Twi'lek turns back to his window. "I have two problems with your proposal, Solo. First, I don't trust you; your payment record with Jabba the Hutt is not exemplary. Second, I'm not sure you will be pleased with your cargo's condition when you recover it. My bodyguards will show you the way out."

- Turn to section 27.

61

After donning a white parka, Han follows Sodarra outside. The *Falcon* lies completely buried in soft snow atop the glacier, but its crash has dug a long furrow which betrays its hidden resting place. Han's heart sinks. Beating Alfredda to Tatooine will be impossible now—if he can get there at all! He has to restrain himself from hitting Sodarra. Leia's life is in danger because the captain insisted upon bringing along his precious cargo. Han sticks his hands in his pockets and follows Sodarra along the furrow to a lookout's position.

The *Falcon* has crashed into the bottom of an immense glacial valley, perhaps twenty kilometers across. On both sides of the valley, steep, rocky ridges rise a kilometer or more into the cloudy, grey-white sky. To Han's left, the glacier continues fifteen kilometers up the valley before it turns sharply to the right and disappears behind a rocky gray cliff. To Han's right, the glacier runs another five or six kilometers, then abruptly drops away into a larger valley. Another icefield fills the larger valley, and beyond it another immense, escarpment rises to block the horizon. Here and there, gray-streaked peaks of vast proportion stick their crowns above the ridge.

A lonely, cold wind blows intermittently down the valley, carrying with it powdery puffs of whirling snow. As magnificent as the landscape is, its sparseness oppresses Han. Everything—the sky, the glacier, the valley walls—is dirty gray. The occasional hints of color are too pale to accurately be labeled blue. Where the mountains find a way to poke through their wintry blankets, they reveal only rock ranging in shade from white-gray to black-gray. Even the sharply pointed trees dotting the ridges seem no more than dark specks in the snow.

The infrequent moaning of wind is the only sound. If creatures live nearby, they will not reveal their presence audibly. The snowy blanket muffles all noise, lapping at the wind and spreading a forlorn hush up and down the valley. The solitude of their position suddenly troubles Han—if they cannot repair the *Falcon*, their only hope of rescue may lie in capture! At the moment, Han would welcome the companionship of even some kithless predator's hungry howl. At least that would prove something could survive in these barren wastes.

The lookout—one of the faceless stormtroopers belonging to Sodarra's 'company'—points at the valley's right wall, two kilometers distant. At first, Han sees only snow, the dark angles of trees, and gray outcroppings of stone. Eventually, a row of white lumps crosses in front of a gray outcropping.

"I count twelve, sir," the trooper reports. "They haven't seen us."

Han studies the kilometer-long furrow behind the *Falcon*. "But if they cross the valley, they won't miss this ditch."

Sodarra nods. "No doubt. We must destroy them before they report our location."

"They'll drop out of sight when they reach the glacier edge," the lookout reports. "The scouts reported a deep moraine trench along that whole wall. Perhaps we could deploy as they cross it?"

"Yes," Captain Sodarra responds.

Han interrupts with his opinion. He sees two likely positions, and he wants to remind the ex-Imperials who is in charge. Either he and Chewie can work around behind the approaching squad, or they can wait, hiding in the furrow and hoping the Imperials investigate up close before reporting.

- If Han suggests a rear attack, turn to section 41.
- If he recommends hiding in the furrow, turn to section 57.

62

The TIE fighters are closing fast on the freighter. "Those guys are almost as good as I am!" Han exclaims. He tips the *Falcon* over in a nose dive and reverses direction in less than 500 meters.

Chewbacca groans a suggestion.

"They aren't that good," Han growls. "I can take these greenhorns with a dozen breaches in our hull!"

"Aaargh!" Chewbacca says informatively.

"Really? That many?" Han quickly checks the damage display. It glitters like a casino on Ord Mantell. "That's nothing serious!" he says.

Han returns his attention to his opponents. The TIE fighters have reached firing range. They appear cautious, and do not immediately open fire. Han guesses they are maneuvering for good shots at the *Falcon*. The Imperial pilots have apparently learned some respect for Han, which does not make him happy. Part of the *Falcon's* advantage lies in inspiring overconfidence.

Han targets the top gunwell on the closest fighter, and the bottom gunwell on the other. The TIEs continue to close without firing. Han triggers the laser cannons, and the black vastness around the TIEs bursts into orange fire-clouds.

The TIEs remain untouched. The closest maneuvers for a top shot, and the other for a bottom shot. They still do not fire.

Han curses. They have trapped him in a crossfire. He can drive full power toward one fighter, hoping to unnerve the Imperial, but that will give the other a free shot at him. On the other hand, he can loop around trying to stay between them, again targeting on both TIEs.

- *If Han loops around and stays between the TIEs, turn to section 31.*
- *If Han drives toward one fighter, turn to section 48.*

63

Han turns toward the shuttle and opens the sublight drive to the maximum, hoping to jump the shuttle before its crew braces for his attack.

Two seconds later, the *Falcon* reaches firing range. The spacetrooper shuttle hangs against Mon Torri's cream-colored disc like a stubby insect floating in a cup of Altorian milk-ale. Its black body forms an ideal target-silhouette.

Han has to cripple the shuttle before the spacetroopers begin boarding operations. Once the Imperials have actually boarded the corvette, he will have no chance to rescue the crew. Spacetroopers are probably the best-trained and most heavily armed of the Emperor's stormtroopers. Han's blaster pistol, or even Chewbacca's bowcaster, will prove little use against miniature proton torpedo hurlers or suit-mounted blaster cannons.

Han holds his hand over the weapons console. The laser cannon targeting computers are already locked onto the shuttle, but he does not know whether he wants to fire the concussion missiles. The concussion

missiles are ideal for attacking a stationary target like the shuttle. But if they miss or are deflected by the shuttle's armor, their targeting systems might lock onto the corvette. A hit from a concussion missile will easily breach the flimsy craft's hull.

Of course, if he doesn't use the concussion missiles, he has no guarantee the laser cannons are powerful enough to breach the shuttle's shields.

The shuttle opens fire. Han observes red flashes from twin laser cannons and a bluish glimmer from a blaster battery; a hit from any one of the weapons will destroy the *Falcon*. The only reason he risks the attack is that the shuttle stands dead in space while he approaches on an erratic course. As the *Falcon* weaves through the shuttle's barrage, Chewie barks an urgent question.

"I wasn't! But now that you mention it . . ." Han contemplates a third option his co-pilot is dead-set against. Using the *Falcon's* maneuverability to dodge the shuttle's fire, he can attempt to sneak in close for a devastating point-blank attack with his laser cannons. If he manages to get close enough, it will work. If he doesn't—he prefers not to consider the number of pieces the *Falcon* will be blasted into.

- *If Han uses the concussion missiles, turn to section 43.*
- *If Han does not use the concussion missiles, turn to section 21.*
- *If Han tries to sneak in for a point-blank shot, turn to section 15.*

64

Han climbs from the sinkhole and charges toward the unsuspecting officer. None of the snowtroopers see him. When he reaches a range of fifteen meters, the pilot drops to the snow and squeezes off several shots. A blue bolt slices from his weapon's barrel and strikes the unsuspecting stormtrooper square in the field communications pack. The pack erupts into a spray of electronic component pieces, and the officer falls face-first into the snow.

Scarcely a moment later, the remaining troopers turn to face the rear-attack. Their blaster bolts melt snow just inches away from Han's face. Small clouds of superheated steam and flying ice-crystals sting his eyes. Han presses his body into the snow, as if he himself can melt into the glacier. He does not even dare to raise his head to aim. But Sodarra and his men continue to hold their fire.

Chewbacca rises out of his hiding place and fires two quick shots with his bowcaster. An Imperial trooper falls, but Han knows that he and the Wookiee cannot hold a squad of experienced troopers for long. Where is Sodarra?

Ignoring the danger, Han raises his head and fires half-a-dozen shots. Two more troopers drop to the snow. Their comrades immediately send a stream of blaster bolts in Han's direction. He has succeeded only in drawing more attention to himself. Blaster bolts whiz overhead in a continuous stream. Han expects to feel the sizzle of a hit any moment.

The anticipated injury never occurs. All at once, the Imperial fire slackens. He lifts his head in time to see the bodies of over half the squad fall to the snow. Sodarra's deserters stand behind the snowtroopers, pouring a rain of blaster bolts into the surprised squad's rear. The deserters fire again and the rest of the snowtroopers fall.

Ten seconds later, Han and Chewbacca find Sodarra. "What took so long?" Han demands angrily.

Sodarra shrugs. "I was wondering if Lieutenant Birdloe could fly the *Falcon*." Han, nearly choking on rage, fingers the trigger of his blaster rifle. Sodarra gently pushes the barrel away. "I decided he could not." He smiles expectantly. "It was a joke, Captain Solo."

Han does not laugh. Sodarra does not strike Han as the type of man who enjoys practical jokes.

• *Turn to section 72.*

65

"We can't risk the shortcut," Han says. "If we get delayed, Leia's kidnappers will shut her up—permanently."

The Corellian enters the coordinates for the Black Widow Nebula into the nav computer. A few minutes later, the *Millennium Falcon* activates its hyperdrive. In the forward viewport the stars turn red, then blur into brilliant, doppler-shifted streaks. The freighter has accelerated to hyperspace.

For the next ten standard days, Han and Chewbacca do little but sleep, work on the ship, and ask each other who Alfreda Goot might be. Try as they may, however, neither smuggler is closer to hazarding a guess as to Alfreda's identity. She is an unknown quantity—and, like all good gamblers, Han dislikes unknown quantities.

The *Falcon's* hyperdrive shuts down automatically when they reach the Black Widow Nebula. Han does not look forward to crossing the sector. In actuality, the Black Widow is not a nebula—it is a globule, a dense region of interstellar dust. This region is collapsing on itself and will one day form a star. Most astronomers believe that the seed of the star already burns deep within the globule's inky depths. Han agrees—the presence of a proto-star would explain the faint red luminescence from its murky core. It would also explain the powerful electromagnetic currents which foul all but the most basic astrogation instruments.

Han climbs into the pilot's seat, ready to take manual control. The Black Widow is an immense field of impenetrable, inky darkness ahead. It fills the horizon; Han cannot see its edge in any direction. He can make out the beginnings of the stringy "legs" which, from further away, give it the appearance of an arachnid. The only light escaping the globule is that of its red, fist-sized "heart."

The smuggler drops his attention to the flight computer. They are approaching the globule at an angle, which can be very dangerous. During their transit through the murky region, the *Falcon* will have to rely on gyroscopes to maintain a steady course. It is better

to enter the Black Widow at a perpendicular angle to minimize adjustments and decrease transit time. He makes the adjustment.

Chewbacca groans. "What's wrong?" Han asks, not lifting his attention from the flight computer vidscreen. It displays two wedges, one slightly larger than the other.

"Uuuugh!" Chewbacca roars.

Han looks.

A white leviathan lies dead ahead. It stands out against the nebula's inky blackness like one of the albino whale-drakes that haunt the impenetrable depths of the Sivorian seas. Over a kilometer long and boasting more mass than some asteroids, the giant bristles with heavy weapon emplacements and astrogation equipment. Had he not seen other monsters like this one, and one that was larger, Han would not have believed such a body could be man-made. It is a Super Star Destroyer, and he is already within tractor beam range!

Han drops his attention back to the flight computer. Its vidscreen clearly shows the second wedge accelerating toward the *Falcon* from its rear.

The *Falcon's* audio communications receiver crackles. "Attention, Corellian freighter: prepare to be boarded for customs inspection. In front of you is the Star Destroyer flagship *Executor*, behind you, the *Avenger*. Resistance is suicidal."

"How'd they get a fix on us so fast?" Han asks.

Chewbacca groans and points to the *Falcon's* transmission activator. Its switch is stuck open.

"I thought you fixed that!" Han exclaims, slapping the malfunctioning activator to the "closed" position.

"Aarrog!" Chewbacca warns.

"So who's accusing?" Han responds. "Should we run or stand by?" Han is unsure as to the wisest course. The ship carries no illegal cargo, so they will not be harassed unless the customs officer links the *Millennium Falcon* to the Death Star's destruction. On the other hand, even the Empire does not use Star Destroyers for routine Customs inspections.

Han checks his flight computer again. Both Star Destroyers are probing nearby with their tractor beams. Escape will be difficult, at best.

Han and Chewbacca drain two power cells from the Falcon's batteries during the journey to the Black Widow Nebula. Keep track of the number of power cells they use during the adventure.

• *If Han runs, turn to section 91.*

• *If Han stands by for boarding, turn to section 74.*

66

Han kicks the guard ahead of him in the lower back. Though the blow cannot injure the armored trooper, it surprises him. Then the Corellian grabs the blaster rifle and hits the trooper's helmet with its butt. The man staggers back in surprise. Han swings the rifle again and the trooper collapses.

Chewbacca simply clobbers his target with a huge fist. The victim's helmet dents and he drops.

Something strikes the pilot on the back of the head. He spins around to defend himself, but he already feels dizzy and nauseous.

"I don't care what the lieutenant says," the trooper comments, "next time I get this detail, I'm binding the prisoner's hands."

Han slumps the rest of the way to the floor.

How will Han and Chewbacca escape the Imperial Star Destroyer? They'll have to use more ingenuity next time. But for now, they have lost the race—and this adventure. Return to section one and try again.

67

The TIEs use a standard head-on approach. To Han's surprise, instead of opening fire at long range, the pilots maneuver to cut off his escape routes. The port side fighter swings high and to the left; the starboard fighter drops low and to the right.

"These guys aren't your standard TIE pilots," the smuggler mutters aloud.

"They are aces," Sodarra says calmly.

"You don't say!" Han snaps. The Imperial tactics testify to the pilots' experience. The coma's dust—even at a single grain per cubic centimeter—dissipates energy bolts at long range. By concentrating on maneuvering instead of wasting shots, the Imperials force the Corellian to make an unpleasant choice. He can execute only one or two simple maneuvers without challenging the twin suns' overlapping gravity wells.

"Even shields, Chewbacca! This is going to be tricky." Han dips the *Falcon's* starboard side, presenting the narrowest possible target. "Belly guns, target the portside fighter," he orders. "Top guns, target the starboard fighter."

The fighters turn to face the *Falcon's* vulnerable flanks, then streak inward like the closing mandibles of a Rigorian crab-ant. "Now!" Han yells. The freighter's laser cannons blaze and four blue bolts lance toward each Imperial fighter. The TIE cannons flare in the same instant, catching the freighter in a glittering web of crossfire.

The *Falcon* rocks violently and half-a-dozen damage warning lights flare on Chewbacca's panel. Han spins his vessel hard to port, hoping to shake the TIEs' targeting computers. An orange ball of flame that was once the port side TIE greets him.

"We got one!" Han yells.

Chewbacca barks a report.

"Great!" Han growls. "He's on our tail and the shields are stuck forward. We may as well be a target decoy." Out of the corner of his eye, the Corellian catches the braided tongues of color of an ionized gas tail.

- If Han tries to circle back to face the remaining TIE head-on, turn to section 84.
- If Han flees for the ionized gas tail, turn to section 71.

68

If nervous people feel butterflies in their stomachs, Han is feeling bats. The walker has appeared out of nowhere, like a void spider in pursuit of warm blood. But the walker is more dangerous.

Han wastes no time targeting. He simply aims the *Falcon's* twin gun wells forward and fires the laser cannons. Four blue bursts strike the walker—and bounce off its armor.

"I think I made a mistake," he mutters, turning away and accelerating.

The walker fires again. Two red laser bolts explode in the ship's belly. The *Falcon* bucks, knocking several deserters not yet strapped-in from their seats. The belly gun well damage control light flares.

Chewbacca snaps a complaint.

"I've been working just as hard," Han responds. "Don't blame me." He pulls the *Falcon* into a steep climb. They are already out of range.

"Ooouugharr?"

"How about him?" Han says, jerking his thumb toward Sodarra. "He's the one they want."

"Eeeoogh!"

"Okay, so it was my idea to pick him up. We've got to make a profit on this trip somehow. You can bet Leia isn't going to pay."

As they reach Mon Torri's upper atmosphere, the freighter's cabin begins to lose pressure. Lieutenant Birdloe is the one who identifies the cause: the walker's shots have penetrated the underbelly and burst two cells in the power core. Han circles at low altitude while Sodarra's men seal the leaking cells and plug the breach. Five minutes later, the *Falcon* leaves the atmosphere.

When they pass Mon Torri's rings, Han breathes a sigh of relief. The *Eradicator* is nowhere in sight. As the nav computer calculates the hyperspace course, Han and Chewbacca let Lieutenant Birdloe monitor the cockpit while they inspect the damage. There are actually two holes, each about the size of a man's head. Chewbacca will not be able to repair them until the vessel reaches a port.

Returning to the cockpit, Han takes the *Falcon* into hyperspace toward the Aldo Spachian Comet.

The walker's shot destroyed two cells from the Falcon's power core. Keep track of the number of power cells Han and Chewbacca use (or lose) during this adventure.

- Turn to section 117.

69

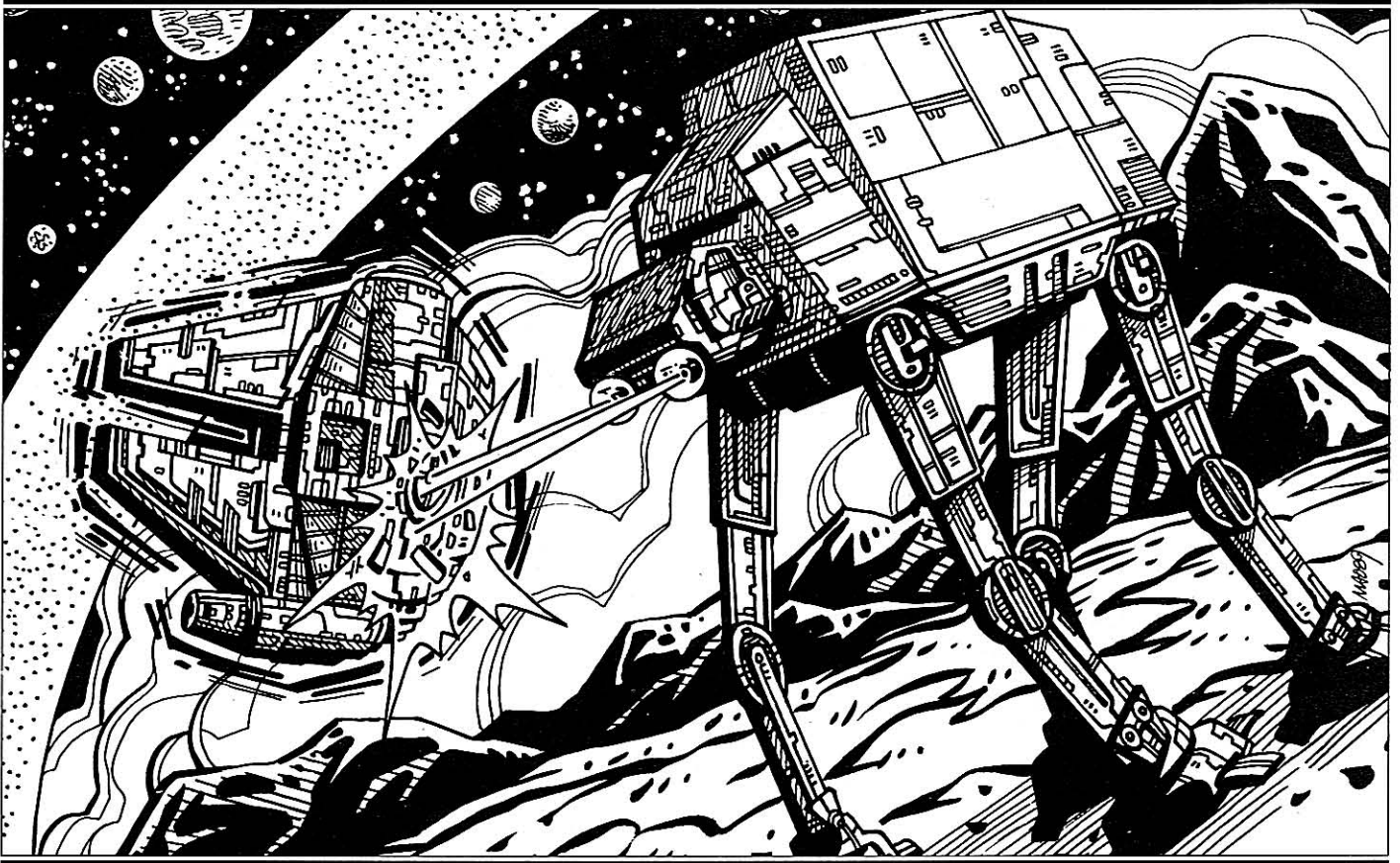
Han waits for the destroyer to fire again. "About one second long, and three seconds between salvos," Han observes. "It'll be close, but the *Falcon* should be able to make that distance in three seconds."

Chewbacca moans.

"Yeah, well I always cut it fine! And I didn't get us into this mess!"

"Arroggh?"

"I'm not going to watch you lose the Rebellion's money," Han growls, mimicking Leia's last comment



to him. "If she had stuck with us like I wanted, none of this would have happened."

The destroyer commences its firing pattern.

Although the pilot had glossed over Chewie's objection, he knows that the Wookiee is right—they are cutting it *very* close. He can add a split second's more leeway if he accelerates into the fading energy bursts. But he risks the turbulent after-effects of the spent bolts.

- If Han accelerates immediately, turn to section 75.
- If Han waits for the salvo to end, turn to section 38.

70

After a week of amusing themselves by working on the *Falcon* Han and Chewbacca are happy to drop to sublight speeds. The beauty of the Aldo Spachian Comet is legendary. Trapped between two stars of an otherwise unremarkable binary system, the comet is so spectacular that beings will risk death for a look. Any pilot wishing to pass close to the comet has to fly a tightrope between its two stars. Overcompensating to escape one star's gravitational attraction often means plunging into the other.

Han rechecks the course the nav computer has plotted. The quickest route to Tatooine runs right between the stars, through the comet's coma, a gaseous sphere 100,000 kilometers across. Buried some-

where inside the coma is a 10 kilometer chunk of dirty ice, rock, and metal which they will probably not see unless they hit it. Han briefly considers flying around the entire system. But Leia—or Alfreda—will no doubt risk the shortcut. Han does not intend to be outdone by a woman, whatever her name.

The comet currently hangs almost exactly between Aldo and Spach. Even from a distance of several tens of millions of kilometers, each star is the size of the *Falcon* and shines with an intensity that would dim a turbolaser blast by comparison.

Most comets have two tails, a straight one with a fiery appearance, and a glowing, slightly curved one. The Aldo Spachian Comet has four tails, two straight and two curved. The straight, fiery tails shoot a quarter million kilometers in opposite directions from the gaseous coma. They end in stubby, mushroom-like caps. Han knows that these tails consist of ionized gases dragged away from the comet by solar winds. He guesses that the unusual stubby tail caps are created when the solar wind of the opposite star forces the tail to curl back on itself.

The glowing, curved tails sweep away from the coma, also in opposite directions. They are made of dust particles so fine that the touch of starlight knocked them into space. Perhaps a half-million kilometers from the coma, each tail turns back in a great arch and tapers to a narrow point that ends abreast of the coma.

To the occasional brave-hearted tourist, the star-trapped comet is a natural phenomenon of supernatu-

ral beauty. To Han, who is braving the system's hazards, the comet is a sobering picture of the tumultuous forces he challenges.

The *Falcon's* emergency receiver channel sounds a chime alarm. "I thought this looked too easy," the smuggler mutters. He opens the emergency channel. The message is a simple SOS, apparently set to transmit automatically whenever a ship comes into range. Although Han tries to raise a sentient response, none comes.

"Where's that coming from?"

Chewbacca groans a disbelieving reply.

"I only know one fool who would crash-land on the comet nucleus," Han growls. "Leia!"

Chewie sighs.

"We ought to leave her there," Han says. "That would serve her right for racing me."

His comment elicits a nod from the co-pilot.

"If we had any sense, that's exactly what we'd do."

The Wookiee nods again.

Han studies the comet. What are the chances someone can survive a crash on it? With two suns this close, the Corellian guesses the temperature on the surface can melt iron. If the ship's hull has been breached, there will be no survivors. If the hull has remained intact, they can last only a matter of hours.

"I guess we don't have much sense."

Chewbacca growls his agreement. He has already locked onto the signal with the direction finder. Han shifts his attention to plotting the safest route.

What he sees on the flight computer vidscreen concerns him more than the danger posed by the twin suns. A large wedge has appeared 85,000 kilometers behind the *Falcon*. Two smaller silhouettes have separated from the large one. It can only be a Star Destroyer dispatching TIE fighters!

"They followed us!" Han yells. "How'd they do that?"

Chewbacca utters a question.

"Just one," Han says. "I don't know where the second destroyer is." The TIE fighters already streak toward the *Falcon*. The destroyer remains stationary; Han doubts it will move. Bringing a ship its size close to the tricky gravity wells of a binary system is sheer folly.

During the long hyperspace jump, Han and Chewbacca drain one power cell from the Falcon's batteries. Keep track of the number of power cells they use during this adventure.

- If Han fights the TIEs now, turn to section 94.
- If Han tries to answer the distress call before the TIEs catch him, turn to section 98.

71

Han accelerates for cover in the fiery gas tail. The TIE follows closely, its laser cannons blazing. Apparently, the maneuver alarms the Imperial pilot, for he stops trying to target and is firing wildly. An instant later, the *Falcon* slips into a bright green stream of gas.

The starboard TIE fighter darts beneath the freighter's belly in a desperation maneuver to cripple the drives. That is the wrong thing to do. The belly guns blaze steadily for two full seconds, creating a tempest of energy bursts. When it falls dormant, metal shards are all that remain of the TIE fighter.

Han circles slowly, then starts for the far side of the comet.

"Remarkable flying!" Sodarra says. "If Imperial pilots could fly like that—"

"We'd be dead," the Corellian says. "But they can't and we're alive." Sodarra looks hurt. Han quickly adds, "The flying wouldn't have meant a thing if your men weren't good gunners."

Captain Sodarra smiles warmly. "Coming from a pilot of your skill, that is high praise indeed."

Chewbacca adds a happy groan.

"He says he's glad he didn't have to shield against them," Han translates.

The *Falcon* leaves the coma. To the left and a little below, a fiery gas tail runs toward Aldo.

The ship trembles, then bucks, as it leaves the gravity plateau between the two stars. "I think we've lost that destroyer for good," Han says. "This g-field will tear it to pieces."

"Yes," agrees Sodarra. "It is remarkable that this scow held together." The smuggler is too busy fighting gravity wells to protest his ship's sturdiness.

Fifteen minutes later, they escape the warring gravity fields. Han activates the nav computer and tells it to chart a course for Tatooine. He and Chewbacca then go aft to run systems checks. Lieutenant Birdloe, the stormtrooper second-in-command to Sodarra, watches the helm.

Han is helping Chewie recalibrate a spatial flux dilation spectrometer when Birdloe calls over the intercom. Another ship, with a broad aft and narrow forequarters, is in the vicinity. It appears to be preparing to enter hyperspace for Tatooine.

The smuggler rushes to the cockpit and opens a communications channel. "Leia!"

No answer.

"We both know you can't fly a starship, not like I can. I'm not dodging any more Star Destroyers to prove it, and I'm sure as heck not going to Mos Eisley. Have you forgotten the price Jabba put on my head?"

There is no answer. "Perhaps her reception channels are closed," Sodarra suggests.

"They're open," the Corellian insists. "The race is off, Leia. I know who Alfreda Goot is, and I've got a deal to keep."

The receptor screen activates. It shows a small, gray helmet. Long red hair cascades from beneath it. A wicked laugh crackles through the helmet's electronic translator. "Who is Alfreda Goot, Solo?"

Han almost doubts his conclusion. Finally he says, "Leia Organa, Princess of Alderaan."

The helmeted figure laughs again. "Mos Eisley, Solo." The channel goes dead.

"She just activated her hyperdrive," Birdloe reports.

"Let her kill herself!" Han exclaims. A moment later, he turns to Sodarra. "Right?"

The Imperial nods. "There is no denial in her reply. Perhaps we should attend to our business?"

Han nods, but he does not erase Tatooine's coordinates from the nav computer. A minute later, he mutters, "No, the cloaking device will keep. I just might be wrong—for a change."

- Turn to section 76.

72

One of Sodarra's troopers approaches Han and Sodarra. With him is a wounded snowtrooper.

Sodarra's trooper addresses Han and Sodarra simultaneously. "According to the prisoner, his squad stumbled onto us. The main force, consisting of two blizzard force snowtrooper companies with two AT-AT walkers, does not yet know our location. His patrol is expected back in thirty-six hours. After that time, we can expect aerial reconnaissance. At the moment, Vellam is concentrating the aerial search near the main force, some two valleys and forty kilometers away."

"Very good, Lieutenant Birdloe," Sodarra says. "You may release the prisoner." How Sodarra tells one of his troopers from another, Han does not know. This one stands just shy of two meters tall. Other than that, he is merely an anonymous voice in white armor.

Birdloe points the man toward the far wall of the valley. "You may walk that way. Do not turn back while we occupy this valley."

The snowtrooper nods, as if in thanks, and starts walking across the ice field.

"Do you think that's smart?" Han asks.

"Of course," Sodarra responds. He nods to the lieutenant, who draws his blaster pistol and aims at the snowtrooper's back. Han gasps as Birdloe pulls the trigger. The bolt strikes the snowtrooper in his right leg. He falls screaming.

"Why'd you do that?" Han demands.

"Because it was smart," Sodarra replies. The prisoner starts dragging himself away.

Han moves forward to help the man, but Sodarra holds out a restraining hand. "He'll never survive out here with a leg wound!" Han objects.

"No, he won't," Lt. Birdloe says. He aims his blaster and fires again. This time, the bolt finishes the snowtrooper.

"That's cold-blooded murder!" Han spits. He turns to attack Birdloe, but Chewbacca quickly restrains him.

"Would you rather he reported our position?" Sodarra asks. "In any case, a traitor's life is of no consequence."

"Eeeoorgh!" Chewbacca growls, still restraining Han.

Han calms down immediately. "I thought you were deserters," he says to Sodarra.

"I meant a traitor to sentient freedom," Sodarra answers without a trace of embarrassment. "Old habits die hard, you know."

"I guess," Han responds warily.

• Turn to section 99.

73

Han and Chewbacca have been staring at nothing but filmy darkness for ten hours. It is an exercise in boredom and terror at the same time. It is boring because the journey requires constant attention and there is nothing to do—not even a pinpoint of light to watch. The nebula's heart has long since faded behind them, and its weak rays do nothing to light the blackness ahead.

It is terrorizing because the nebula's electromagnetic properties render the flight computer useless; Han is literally flying blind at near light-speed. If a star suddenly appears, he may or may not avoid it. But if a rogue planet or asteroid crosses his lightless path, the *Falcon* will simply crash. Probably, neither of the crew will even realize they have died. They will merely fade into the formless waste.

"I can't figure Leia," Han says. He wants to talk, and Leia is the only subject he can think to discuss. "Just when I think she's a regular human being, she gets mean and starts acting like a princess. Does she like us or not?"

Chewbacca grunts a response.

"It doesn't matter?" Han says. "That's easy for you to say. You don't understand humans." Five minutes later, he adds, "Maybe she just doesn't like Wookiees."

Indignantly, Chewie snarls a question.

"Lots of people don't like Wookiees. You don't have to take it personally."

"Ooouugh!"

"What makes you think it's me she doesn't like? She probably got herself kidnapped just so I'd rescue her!" Chewbacca growls, then falls silent.

Something clicks in the Corellian's mind. He stares out the viewport, barely aware of the emptiness he watches. An hour later, he says, "I know who Alfreda Goot is! She's Leia!"

Chewbacca looks at Han as if he is crazy.

"Think about it. No one's ever heard of Alfreda Goot. Even if she does exist, how would a stranger have known we were on Ord Mantell? And who would challenge me to a race, except Leia? I tell you, this crazy thing is Leia's way of trying to prove she's as good as I am! I'll bet she's fallen in love with me!"

Even though he does not voice an objection, the big Wookiee looks dubious.

• Turn to section 70.

74

Han opens a transmission channel. "Hurry up, Imperial Customs. We've got places to go."

"Stand dead where you are, freighter. This inspection will require only a few minutes."

Han watches several wedges separate from the *Executor* and approach the *Falcon*. When they are within five kilometers, he recognizes the forms of four TIE fighters and an armed spacetrooper shuttle. The shuttle docks with the *Falcon* two minutes later.

An Imperial officer leads the way onto the *Falcon*. He is followed by a dozen armored spacetroopers. It is an unusual Customs patrol. The spacetroopers carry blaster rifles. On their suits are mounted a wide variety of weapons: grenade launchers, miniature proton torpedo hurlers, blaster cannons, and laser cutters.

"Your first mate will show my men to the holds," the officer orders. "You will display your registry on the ship's computer."

Han nods and Chewbacca shows eight spacetroopers to the empty holds. Han briefly considers activating a counterfeit registry program, then rejects the idea. The Imperials are clearly looking for something

specific; Han feels he will only be risking closer inquiry. Once they satisfy themselves that the *Falcon* is not the ship they want, the party will leave.

"The *Millennium Falcon*," the officer muses. "The name is familiar."

"I think you've boarded us before. We usually run out of Tatooine."

The officer shakes his head. "Never worked that sector. What is your origination point?"

"Ord Mantell," Han volunteers with a wide smile. "A little holiday."

"Have you run across any other Imperial traffic?"

"Like what?"

The officer studies Han. "Specifically, the Star Destroyer *Eradicator*."

Han shakes his head.

"We are also seeking an Imperial courier corvette."

"Sorry," Han says.

Chewbacca returns with the spacetroopers. They report finding only an ancient cryogenic hibernation capsule in the hold. "What is the purpose of the capsule?" the officer demands.

"Emergency aid," Han responds. "We don't carry a biotank." Actually, it is for transporting unsavory living cargos, such as Shadorian assassins or Togorian dream weeds.

The officer looks doubtful, but Han knows he cannot object to the explanation. "Why are you empty?"

Han begins to sweat. The Imperial seems dissatisfied with the results of the search. "Rough times. We're on our way to pick up a load now."

The officer's eyes flash. "You are having difficulty finding contracts, yet you have money to waste on Ord Mantell? Please explain this discrepancy."

Han sighs. The man sounds like he is looking for a bribe. It is the last thing Han expects under the circumstances; bribe solicitations usually come from solitary officers working off frigates. He wonders if he dares report the officer's misconduct; it might save him 100 credits, but he will risk detention as a witness.

- If Han offers the officer 100 credits to leave, turn to section 78.
- If Han reports the officer, turn to section 93.

75

The *Falcon* shoots into the destroyer's fading salvo, wobbling slightly in the turbulence. If she can streak out of range before the next wave of the energy storm, Han can jump into hyperspace and the *Falcon* will be free.

"More power, Chewie!" he demands.

Chewbacca points to the sublight drive output monitor. The display reads one hundred twenty-one percent.

"Don't quote me overloads," Han says. "Give me more power!"

A turbolaser shot blossoms above the freighter, then another flares to her right. The destroyer has unleashed another salvo. Chewie adjusts the repulsor output and the *Falcon* accelerates imperceptibly, barely clearing the *Eradicator's* range!

Han slaps in the hyperdrive and the stars assume a red tinge. A moment later, the *Falcon* jumps to supralight speed and is lost in a doppler-shifted cascade of starlight.

At last, the smugglers can relax. The *Eradicator* will not bother them again. Not even the Empire can track starships through hyperspace. To harass the smugglers any further, the *Eradicator* captain would have to know (or guess) their hyperspace departure coordinates. Han suspects that the captain will be more concerned with the Imperial corvette than with a dilapidated Corellian freighter.

During the next standard week, Han and Chewbacca overhaul the *Falcon* and repair the incidental damage the TIE fighters had managed to inflict. They also attend to a much more serious matter—the malfunctioning transmission channel.

Finally, everything that can be repaired aboard the *Falcon* has been and they have nothing to do except stare at the endless streaks of star systems. As beautiful as it is, the view can only occupy one's mind for so long.

"I can't figure Leia," Han says. He wants to talk, and Leia is the only subject he can think of to discuss. "Just when I think she's a human being, she goes off and acts like a princess again. Does she like us or not?"

Chewbacca grunts a response.

"It doesn't matter?" says Han. "That's easy for you to say." Five minutes later, he adds, "Maybe she just doesn't like Wookiees."

"Eerroggh?"

"Lots of people don't like Wookiees," Han informs his co-pilot. "You don't have to take it personally."



“Ooouuuugh!”

“What makes you think it’s me she doesn’t like? She probably got herself kidnapped just so I’d rescue her again!”

Chewbacca growls, then falls silent.

Something clicks in the Corellian’s mind. He stares out the viewport, barely aware of the splendor he watches. An hour later, he says, “I know who Alfreda Goot is! She’s Leia!”

Chewie looks at Han as if he is crazy.

“Think about it. No one’s ever heard of Alfreda Goot. Even if she does exist, how would a stranger have known we were going to Ord Mantell? And who would challenge me to a race, except Leia? I tell you, this is some crazy scheme Leia cooked up to prove she’s as good as I am!”

Dubiously, Chewbacca eyes the pilot, but does not contradict him.

• *Turn to section 70.*

76

They have been in hyperspace for perhaps six hours. Han sits alone in the cockpit. Chewbacca is debugging the hyperdrive control and emergency communications engagement programs on the Microaxial HyD Nav Computer. The Corellian had discovered an open transmission channel two hours after entering hyperspace from the Aldo Spachian Comet. Having already rebuilt the transmission hardware a dozen times, Chewie has concluded that a software glitch is causing the transmission unit to open a channel whenever Han engages the hyperdrive.

Captain Sodarra sticks his head into the cockpit. “May I join you?” he asks. “One can tolerate only so much talk of unpossessed wealth.”

Han nods to the co-pilot’s seat. “Do you think the *Eradicator* plotted our course from the open channel?” he asks.

Sodarra’s face assumes a grim expression. “Yes. But they cannot risk the comet run. We have a twelve hour lead.”

The pilot frowns. “That might not be enough. I don’t know why Leia picked Tatooine as the finish line; if she has a reason, it could take days to talk her into leaving.”

Nodding thoughtfully, the Imperial agrees. “It would be wiser to change course. We bring trouble with us.”

Han shakes his head. “I can’t.” He does not say why. Doubt is something he keeps to himself.

“Vellam wants his deserters, not the *Falcon*,” Sodarra says. “Perhaps you should abandon us.”

“I’ve told you before,” Han shoots back. “I decide who I abandon.”

“We have a contact on Shador,” Captain Sodarra continues. “Strictly speaking, you will be dropping us off.”

“Not my style,” the Corellian says. “Maybe I can borrow the cloaking device until we lose the *Eradicator*?”

Sodarra narrows his eyes and studies Han carefully. “I have thought of that,” he says at last. “But your freighter’s drive is not powerful enough to operate it.”

Han, Chewbacca, and their guests drain one power cell from the Falcon’s batteries during this part of the journey. Keep track of the number of power cells they use during this adventure.

• *If Han tells Sodarra he will go to Shador, turn to section 111.*

• *If Han insists that Chewbacca attempt to install the cloaking device, turn to section 125.*

77

The beggar closes his hand and his eyes clear. “Thanks, bud. That’s Taslo Deville’s place. Into the bar, then up the lift on the right. Six goons went up there this morning—haven’t come down since.”

“Is there another way up?” Han asks.

“Through Zeboron Delta. Used to be a doorway in the back—it connects to a manual stair.”

“Where’s Zeboron Delta?” Sodarra asks.

The beggar points to the rubble pile next door, then lurches to his feet and stumbles into the tavern.

Han and Sodarra carefully pick their way over the rubble pile to the back of the building. True to the beggar’s word, a dark corridor leads into the Zeboron Gamma’s rear sections. The Corellian steps into the foul-smelling hallway and waits for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. Something hisses and slithers over his feet.

Sodarra stifles a scream, then steps into the corridor behind Han. A narrow case of moss-covered stairs leads up into the shadows. “That must have been one of the tenants,” Han says.

“I hope not. I am not that brave.”

Han ascends slowly, testing each plank’s strength before he puts his full weight on it. The stairwell smells mustier and more foul with each step upward. Han stops at the fourth door opening out of the stairwell. It is locked.

He and Sodarra ready their blaster rifles, then the smuggler kicks the door open. It swings into a tiny sleeping cubicle. Apparently, the door is not often used, for a sleeping cot has been placed directly against it. The cubicle is two meters wide and three meters long. It contains the sleeping cot, a half-filled garment suspension rack, and a plasteel security chest. A door stands in the opposite end of the cubicle; a grid of razor-wire serves as the ceiling.

Gruff voices drift over the top of the cubicle. They seem unconcerned about the noise of Han’s entrance. He crosses to the door and cracks it open. Two humans and four Gamorreans sit in a lounge area. All wear dark, cheap graysuits and watch a Twi’lek dancer gyrate on a holoconsole in the center of the room. Battleaxes rest against the console next to the Gamorreans; the humans hold blaster pistols in their laps.

More sleeping cubicles stand around the lounge area. Some have numbers, some do not. The door of number 452 has been smashed in.

“Vader’s agent lives in a public dormitory?” Han whispers.

Sodarra shrugs. “Taslo is Togorian. Try to take one of them alive.”

“Easier said than done,” Han mutters. Holding his breath, the pilot pushes the door open a bit further

and aims at one of the humans. At that moment, a Gamorrean stands, blocking Han's shot. He looks right at the blaster rifle but does not immediately appear to understand what he sees.

Han holds his fire, hoping for a clear shot. He wants to disable the humans first, since they are probably the bosses of the group. Although Gamorreans are excellent fighters, nobody the smuggler knows considers them tactical geniuses.

"Hey!" the Gamorrean shouts. "Somebody's pointing a blaster at—"

Han squeezes the trigger and the porcine creature falls. The others grab their vibroaxes and rush Han's cubicle. Han throws the door open and yells, "I hope you can shoot, Captain!"

Sodarra responds with a series of quick shots that stalls the Gamorrean charge.

• Turn to section 118.

78

"Rest and recreation are most important during rough times." Han smiles. "It's an investment in mental health." Han reaches into his pocket and fingers his currency. "As a matter of fact, why don't I make a little investment in your mental health?"

The officer stares at Han's pocket without moving. "What are you trying to hide?" he asks at last. "Why don't we find out? Sergeant!"

Quickly, the spacetroopers move into position, four of them immediately covering Han and Chewbacca with their heavy blaster rifles, while the remainder disarm the two smugglers and search for hidden weapons.

As the spacetroopers work, Han protests, "No! You thought I was offering a bribe! This is a misunderstanding; can't we discuss it?"

His protests fall on deaf ears. Within ten minutes, Han and Chewbacca are in the *Executor's* brig and the *Falcon* is in one of the destroyer's hangars.

"I don't understand it!" Han says when he and Chewbacca are alone. He rises and begins pacing the length of their cell. It is four steps long, with a ceiling that disappears into blackness. The walls are barren of anything except a depressing black-gray finish meant to impress the captive with the hopelessness of his situation.

"Arrogh, eeoorr."

"What do you know about reading humans?" Han says. "He wanted a bribe."

A low growl is the Wookiee's only response.

"Okay, so he hinted that he wanted a bribe. I still don't understand it."

They debate the officer's words for two hours. Finally, Han says, "I give up. It had to be something personal. Maybe he doesn't like Wookiees."

Chewbacca snarls an angry question.

"Lot's of people don't like Wookiees. Leia, for example."

"Ooouuugh!"

"What makes you think it's me she doesn't like? She probably got herself kidnapped just so I'd rescue her."

Chewie's groan indicates the likelihood he gives the suggestion.

Han does not respond. Instead, he stares vacantly at the wall for nearly a minute. At last, he bursts, "I know Alfreda Goot's real identity! It's Leia!"

The co-pilot looks at Han as if he is crazy.

"Got any better ideas?"

Chewbacca shakes his head.

"Think about it. Do we know who Alfreda Goot is? How can a stranger have known we were on Ord Mantell? Who else would challenge me to a race? I tell you, this crazy race is Leia's way of trying to prove she's as good as I am!"

Although he looks dubious, the Wookiee does not argue.

An hour later, the cell door opens. "Admiral Ozzel wishes to see you, prisoners." Ten stormtroopers stand at the door.

"It's about time," Han snaps.

The stormtroopers escort the pair through a maze of corridors. Han keeps careful track of the route, especially when they pass a hangar holding the *Falcon*. After ten minutes of walking, the party enters a guarded elevator and ascends to the destroyer's bridge.

Two dozen officers monitor the ship's instruments. A squat, evil-looking man stands in the center of the bridge. He is studying the Black Widow Nebula through the forward viewport. At length, he turns to face Han.

"Your ship is empty, Captain. Why did you offer my officer a bribe?"

"Because he asked for one," Han responds.

Ozzel smiles, revealing a set of yellowed teeth. "Come now. Captain Piett is too well paid for that. Tell me of your own accord or . . ." Ozzel motions to his right. Three meters away, a dark metal globe hangs suspended in the air by independent repulsors. A tangle of metal arms protrudes from its soulless body. The arms are tipped with painful looking instruments.

Han gulps. Leia spoke once of such a machine. The commentary was brief but chilling.

"What do you want?" asks the smuggler.

"Tell me where you were going."

"To a rendezvous with an Imperial ship," Han lies. "In there." He nods toward the nebula.

Ozzel's eyes light up. "For what purpose?"

"To take a cargo to the Alliance."

Ozzel furrows his brows. "Do you know the nature of this cargo?"

The Corellian hesitates. "No," he says at last.

"Come now. A renegade governor arranges a meeting in the darkest reaches of the Black Widow, and you do not ask why?"

Han sighs. "Okay, I know."

"Then you also know that your act constitutes the highest treason!" Ozzel roars. "I sentence you to death. You have ten hours to contemplate your crimes."

"Hold on," Han says. "Can't we strike a deal?"

Ozzel sneers. "I doubt it."

"I'll give you the renegade and the cargo; in return, you release me and Chewbacca."

Ozzel turns to face the viewport. "The nebula is not so large that we cannot find the other destroyer. Take them away!"

The stormtroopers return the prisoners to their cell. After reassuring Chewbacca that he will think of a plan,

Han falls into a depressed silence. Try as he may to focus his thoughts, Han's mind will do nothing but race ahead to his impending execution. He keeps returning to the question that matters least: how will they do it?

Chewbacca, too, remains sullen. Han imagines that the Wookiee's thoughts ran along lines similar to his own, but who can tell? Wookiees live far longer than humans, so Chewbacca will lose more than Han. Will that intensify the fear or increase his regret? Han cannot know; in the last analysis, his friend Chewbacca is an alien, and no human can hope to read his thoughts.

After four hours, the pilot turns his thoughts to the cell. Only the barest illumination lights its black walls. The ceiling, though Han senses its presence, is lost in the depths of darkness overhead. The door appears as thick as walker armor, as if the Emperor intends it to restrain the massed oppression of his rule. Han feels helpless in a way he has never felt helpless before.

Why didn't Ozzel accept his offer? The con was perfect. Ozzel wanted to believe the story so badly that he was putting the words into the smuggler's mouth. So why didn't he accept the offer? Ozzel cannot believe that two blind destroyers can find even their own shadow in the sensor-deadening nebula. Why did he seem so confident? If he already knew where his quarry would show, why did he press Han?

Suddenly, Han understands. Ozzel is smarter than he looks!

"We're going to live, Chewie!" the pilot crows.

Chewbacca sighs and lies down. Han does not know if his words have eased the Wookiee's mind, but within minutes, Chewie is snoring loudly. The Corellian yawns and stretches out on the other bunk. The guards will wake them when the time comes.

A low squeal wakes Han. Four stormtroopers stand outside the cell's open door. He shakes Chewbacca awake. "It's time." The Wookiee yawns and stretches, then eyes the stormtroopers as if he is considering them for breakfast.

The squad leader motions them out. "Hope you enjoyed your last sleep," he says. "Me, I would have done something more interesting."

"Yeah? Like what?" Han yawns in turn, trying not to look as alert as he knows he will have to be. "These cells have lousy entertainment modules." He notes with a grin that the troopers make no effort to bind his hands. This will be too easy; he did not expect Ozzel to be so obvious.

As Han hoped, the four stormtroopers lead them down the same maze of corridors he memorized the day before. The pilot considers his options. Although the troopers have probably been ordered not to kill their prisoners, Han doubts that Ozzel has told them to permit an escape—for the admiral's plan to work, the Imperial must make the captives believe they have escaped on their own. So, he and Chewbacca have to subdue their captors before the troopers have a chance to respond.

If he attacks the guard in front first, he will achieve the highest element of surprise. Unfortunately, that leaves his back open to the guard behind him. On the other hand, attacking the guard to his rear first will take a split second longer, allowing the troopers more time to react. But the guards in front will not be

immediately aware of the attack; with a little luck, he can take out the first guard before the others realize what has happened. He knows that Chewbacca will follow his lead, whichever method he chooses.

- If Han attacks the guard in front first, turn to section 66.
- If Han attacks the guard to his rear first, turn to section 88.

79

The pursuers' laser cannons flare one last time, but the bolts wither far short of the *Falcon*.

"Can I fly or can I fly?" Han shouts.

A sheet of painfully brilliant light erupts to the starboard side. It actually outshines Mon Torri's bright surface. Han drops his gaze to the flight computer—what he sees chills him. The *Eradicator* has closed to maximum firing range.

The destroyer looses another salvo, and again the *Falcon* trembles.

"He doesn't want us to go that way," Han comments.

"Eeeerrrooogh," Chewbacca says.

"Yeah—I don't feel like arguing either."

- Turn to section 7.

80

Having disposed of the immediate Imperial threat, Han opens a hailing channel and addresses the corvette.

"Disabled corvette: this is the free-freighter *Millennium Falcon*. Do you desire further assistance?" Han smugly awaits the affirmative response.

"Your offer brings us great joy, *Falcon*," responds a man's voice. "We will prepare the starboard docking door."

Before maneuvering into position, Han checks the locations of the Star Destroyer and the other three TIE fighters. He still has at least eight minutes before either approaches close enough to pose a danger. Han smiles; he will need only five to load his passengers, make the next hyperspace calculations, and escape. He swings the *Falcon* into position with a confidence he hopes his passengers will note.

The airlocks equalize pressure, and Han deactivates the *Falcon's* security program. He awaits his guests with a magnanimous smirk. When the lock opens, however, Han's smile fades and he reaches for his blaster pistol. The crew he has rescued consists of elite stormtroopers and an Imperial officer!

The stormtroopers make no move to raise their own weapons. Instead, the officer removes his vac-suit helmet and says, "Please, do not worry. I am Sodarra, commander of these stormtroopers. We are deserters." He is a short, stocky man with vaguely oriental features.

Han does not lower his blaster. "Stormtroopers don't desert," he says.

Captain Sodarra shrugs. "And stormtroopers do not attack Imperial craft. One of us must be mistaken." The man looks Han squarely in the eye. "I will understand if you must abandon us."

"I decide who I abandon and who I rescue." Han holsters his blaster. "Right now, you're on my good side. Call the rest of your crew."

Sodarra hesitates. "We have one rather large piece of luggage."

"How large?" Han asks skeptically.

"We must load it through an exterior cargo hatch. Even now, my men prepare it."

"Mister, we've got just about—" Han looks at his chronometer—"four minutes before an Imperial Star Destroyer and a flight of TIEs get here."

"Yes, I know," the captain answers calmly. "Nevertheless, we will not abandon our cargo. If you cannot wait, I will understand."

Han sighs. "I told you, I decide who I abandon. Chewie, open the cargo hatch. I'll start hyperdrive calculations."

* * * * *

A jolting explosion and an orange storm of energy announces the *Eradicator's* arrival. "Concussion missiles!" Han gasps. "These guys mean business." A moment later, the destroyer's turbolaser batteries light the blackness around the *Falcon* as if she has wandered into a small sun.

Han looks at the flight computer. The destroyer is still a tremendous distance behind the *Falcon*. It has opened up at just less than maximum range, then purposefully overshot the *Falcon*. Apparently, the destroyer captain does not wish these deserters to escape.

Han stops the hyperdrive calculations. The *Falcon* stands trapped between the destroyer and a grid of death. If they try to enter hyperspace through the destroyer's salvo, they will be melted to slag long before reaching proper velocity.

Han hits the intercom switch. "How's that loading?"

Sodarra answers, "A minute longer—"

"And we'll be free-floating molecules!" Han finishes. "That destroyer captain thinks he's engaging a battle cruiser!"

Despite his anxious words, Han knows he cannot yet budge the *Falcon*. Sodarra's crew has still not entered the ship. If he moves now, they will fall free—and be taken by Imperials or abandoned to a lingering death. In addition, Han does not know where Chewbacca is; he would never risk Chewbacca's life simply to save his own.

So, Han sits in the cockpit for sixty seconds and observes the *Eradicator's* wedge slowly closing to tractor-beam range. All the while, the destroyer's weapon bursts cascade ever closer. Despite the awe-inspiring power of the destroyer's weapons, Han does not enjoy the display.

Finally, Chewbacca growls over the intercom and Han punches the *Falcon's* sublight drive beyond specification. He does not need to waste time deciding which way to flee; the Imperials have left only one choice: into Mon Torri's rings!

As Han drops the *Falcon* into a corkscrew dive toward the planet, an *Eradicator* turbolaser bolt strikes Sodarra's corvette. The ship simply disappears.

Captain Sodarra crawls into the cockpit. "My gratitude for your patience," he says.

"Let's not cut it so close next time, okay?" Han responds. He looks at his flight computer. The de-

stroyer has now commenced probing with its tractor beams.

"Where are we going?" asks Sodarra, eyeing Mon Torri's growing rings.

The destroyer stops firing. The three TIE fighters fall in behind the *Falcon*, but they have a long way to go before reaching their range. A series of silhouettes separate from the *Eradicator*. They can only be more fighters. "Into that rainbow," Han answers.

Sodarra nods. "In there, the tractor beams will find more than Governor-General Vellam expects. A wise move."

"That's the Governor of the Bright Jewel?" Han asks, pointing at the destroyer wedge.

"Yes," Sodarra nods.

"Leia really did it this time."

Han has no time to question Captain Sodarra further—they are entering Mon Torri's first ring. As he hoped, the ring is easily thick enough to conceal the *Falcon*—about a kilometer and a half. It consists mostly of pebble-sized rocks and ice which occasionally slip through the weakened shields to skitter across the *Falcon's* hull with irritating, high-pitched squeals. Unfortunately, the ring also contains enough large chunks to keep Han busy dodging.

Although Han does not relish the debris' abuse of his ship, the pebbles will clog the *Eradicator's* tractor beams with tons of useless rock and ice. The *Falcon's* recent finish job seems a reasonable trade-off for eluding a Star Destroyer.

The TIE fighters reach the ring a few seconds behind Han. They do not enter it, however. They remain outside the ring and take pot-shots. Han breathes a sigh of relief.

"They intend to pin us here until we hit something!" Sodarra gasps.

"Relax," Han says smugly. "You're riding with the best smuggler this side of Shador."

As if to prove him wrong, a dozen boulders appear in front of the cockpit. Han jerks the controls with maniacal precision, hoping as much as attempting to dodge the largest chunks. His efforts do not succeed completely; one man-sized chunk of ice bounces off the forward hull.

The *Falcon's* power fails immediately. The drives cut out and internal life-support systems fail.

"Chewie?" Han yells, alarmed. "What happened?"

Chewbacca bellows a response.

"Hot-rodding?" Han replies. "That hurts."

Chewbacca ignores him and rummages around in the dark. The *Falcon* continues to drift, ice and rock now bouncing off the hull with painful regularity. No one says a word as Chewbacca pounds and growls, then growls and pounds. Finally, a terrible thump sounds and the power returns.

"My first mate's a technical wizard," Han casually tells Captain Sodarra.

Before Sodarra can respond, Chewie says, "Annoarr, uurggh."

"What do you mean you don't know how long it will last?"

Chewbacca growls.

"I think he means just that," Captain Sodarra observes.

Han dodges another man-sized rock, then studies his flight computer. The TIE fighters and destroyer are

so close the vidscreen shows only one wedge. He looks overhead. Beyond the ring's debris, a great white mass of metal fills the horizon. Han cannot see the edge of the destroyer in any direction.

"How'd that get there?" he asks.

Turbolaser salvos strike rock and ice all around the *Falcon*. Within a matter of seconds, Han estimates, a very big gap will open in Mon Torri's outer ring. "Hold on!" Han yells. "I'm taking us in."

He drops the *Falcon* out of the ring and accelerates. His move takes the Imperials by surprise, buying enough time to reach Mon Torri's atmosphere before the TIE fighters jump the *Falcon*. The destroyer, Han knows, is an old one which can skim the outer layers of a planetary atmosphere, but he has to gamble that Governor-General Vellam will not risk crossing the rings to catch a battered Corellian freighter.

A moment later, high clouds engulf the *Falcon*. As it flashes between cloud banks, Han looks for a mountain valley he can use to foul his pursuers' tracking equipment. Chewbacca, who has climbed into the upper laser cannon turret, reports that only two TIEs are following.

Finally, Han drops out of the clouds and finds a deep valley. Snow and narrow, bristling trees line it, and a long river of ice fills its bottom. "Perfect!" Han exclaims. He drops the *Falcon* so low that it barely clears the ice pinnacles rising from the glacier.

A few moments later, Chewbacca reports the TIEs have turned back. Hugging the valley walls, Han rises to the top of the ridge and slips into the next valley. As he attempts this the second time, the *Falcon's* power cuts out.

"Chewie, I thought you fixed that!"

Chewbacca only growls in response. An instant later, the *Falcon* plows into a deep carpet of snow.

Han does not know how long he has lain unconscious, but when he awakes, he is resting in a bunk. Captain Sodarra stands over him. "You'll be just fine, Captain Solo. That was the finest flying I've seen in my many years."

"Thanks." Han tries to get up. "My head hurts."

"Rest," Captain Sodarra says. "I've posted pickets. The *Falcon* lies safely hidden beneath the snow."

One of Sodarra's men bursts into the room. An inch of snow caps his head and shoulders. "Blizzard force snowtroopers approaching, sir. Squad strength."

"Any AT-AT walkers?" Sodarra asks.

"Negative. It's a reconnaissance unit."

"I'll catch up on my sleep later," Han says, reaching for his blaster holster.

• Turn to section 61.

81

"One casualty—fatal."

"Activate the I.D. beacon, and continue normal search patterns. Carry on." The colonel's screen blanks, and Han whoops in triumph. "They bought it!"

• Turn to section 99.

82

If nervous people feel butterflies in their stomachs, Han is feeling bats. The walker has appeared out of nowhere, like a void spider in pursuit of warm blood. But the walker is more dangerous.

"Shields forward!" Han yells. Chewbacca has anticipated his command. He punches a button and the *Falcon's* full shield complement is angled forward.

The walker fires again. Two red energy bolts explode in front of the cockpit. The shields reflect the concussion back at the mammoth vehicle, rocking it badly. Before the Imperial gun crew regains its bearings, Han turns the *Falcon* away and accelerates out of range.

Chewbacca snaps an angry comment. The belly gun-well damage indicator flashes on and off.

"I've been working just as hard," Han responds. "Don't blame me." He pulls the *Falcon* into a steep climb.

"Oooouugharr?"

"How about him?" Han says, jerking his thumb toward Sodarra. "He's the one they want."

"Eeeeoogh!"

"Okay, so picking him up was my idea. But you can bet Leia isn't paying for this trip!" They exit the atmosphere.

When they pass Mon Torri's rings, Han breathes a sigh of relief. The *Eradicator* is nowhere in sight. As the nav computer calculates the hyperspace course, the two smugglers let Lieutenant Birdloe monitor the cockpit while they inspect the damage to the belly. They have suffered a few loose connections, but nothing crippling. Chewbacca can repair the damage in flight.

Han returns to the cockpit and takes the *Falcon* into hyperspace.

• Turn to section 117.

83

Han looks at Chewbacca, already dreading the Wookiee's response to his next order. "Overload the sublight drives, Chewie."

Chewbacca surprises the pilot by easing the dampeners open without protest. He merely sighs.

"We've got to beat those TIEs to Leia," Han explains. When his friend still does not offer a protest, Han returns his attention to piloting the *Falcon*. He feels almost cheated.

The *Falcon* enters the comet's hazy dust tail behind one TIE and ahead of the other. Although the tail is not dense, its dust particles emit a brilliant ghostly glow. Han feels as tense as if he was flying without instruments into a planetary cloud.

Once every three or four seconds, a shot from the TIE behind flashes past. Each bolt quickly dissipates, leaving a red streak of fluorescing dust in its wake. Han pays the spurts no attention; the opposing gravities of Aldo and Spach keep him too busy to worry about potshots.

Chewbacca bellows an exclamation.

The pilot has no time to reply. The lead TIE fighter suddenly reverses course and flies straight for the *Millennium Falcon*. Han jerks hard to starboard. The *Falcon* responds even more quickly than usual, and within a millisecond they have escaped the TIEs.

When Han tries to correct the course, the ship adjusts its attitude sluggishly. The Corellian hazards a glance at Chewbacca's sublight output monitor. It reads eighty-five percent. "What's wrong?" Han asks. "Why aren't the drives at full power?"

Chewbacca moans an explanation. He sounds alarmed.

"They can't be worn out!" Han snaps. "Not now!"

Chewie reports that drive output has fallen to sixty-eight percent, and that the engines are, indeed, worn out. Han sinks deeper into his seat, and the freighter slips further from the comet's heart.

Han jams the throttle full open. They are caught in Spach's gravity well! He refuses to believe that his beloved ship would let him down at a critical time like this.

The *Falcon* hangs as still as the twin suns for five long seconds. The temperature display flashes its danger warning, and the drive output slips to sixty-two percent.

Then something rumbles deep within the aft. The sublight drive cuts out altogether and the *Millennium Falcon* begins a two-million kilometer fall toward the fiery surface of Spach.

Han jumps from his seat. "We've got to fix those drives," he says. "Or we'll get a heck of a sunburn!"

How long will it take to fix the sublight drive? Will the smugglers be able to escape the tremendous gravity well of the star in time? Han and Chewie will eventually get out of this mess, but for now their adventure is over. Return to section one and try again.

84

A tremendous jolt shakes the entire ship.

"What is that?" Han yells. He does not really need to ask. He knows they have suffered a hit in their unprotected rear sections.

Someone aft screams. Air rushes toward a great hole where the belly gun well once was.

"Seal it off!" the pilot orders. Chewbacca unbuckles and jumps to determine the extent of the damage. Han activates the emergency cabin pressurization system.

The TIE fighter closes for another shot. The *Falcon's* top gun well blazes, creating a blue halo around the wildly dodging fighter. An energy bolt touches the TIE's starboard solar panel. The Imperial pilot fires once more in desperation, then spins off toward Aldo. The freighter shudders as the last bursts glance off her already wounded belly.

Cabin pressure continues to fall. It grows difficult to breathe. Han rips his harness off, leaving his seat to help seal the hole. But before he can exit the cockpit, the *Falcon* begins to spin wildly. The twist sweeps Han's feet from beneath him. He slams into the ceiling, then smashes back to the floor. The breath escapes his lungs, but somehow he struggles back to the pilot's seat.

His worst nightmare has come true. The *Millennium Falcon* has started a two-million kilometer nosedive toward Spach. He shakes the growing drowsiness from his head and tries to pull the nose up. It is hard to breathe . . .

Can Han pilot the Falcon out of the star's gravity well before he passes out? Will the emergency pressurization system ever kick in? Whether the Imperials take over the freighter or Han's luck prevails is another story, for this one has ended. Return to section one and try again.

85

The Twi'lek withdraws his hand and pockets the currency. "Into the bar, turn right. Don't stop to talk. Fourth floor."

With that, the beggar lurches to his feet and stumbles into the tavern.

• Turn to section 109.

86

"So long!" Han calls. He steps into the lift and closes the doors. The Gamorreans waste several tremendous blows against the durasteel door, then an agonizing scream informs Han of Sodarra's fate. "Good riddance," Han mutters. The lift drops to the first floor.

Han steps into the empty tavern and wastes no time rushing outside. He weaves his way down the walkway for thirty seconds before the goons reach the street. They fire and a blaster bolt strikes the building to his right. Han ducks.

A flatboat passes two meters from the walkway. Han jumps for it without breaking stride. He lands inside and rolls, then screams in pain as his bruised shoulder scrapes across the rough deck.

When he looks up, he sees the barrel of a blaster pistol. A bipedal alien with sturdy curled horns and short thin arms holds the business end.

"You might not know me," Han says. "But you'll die with me if we don't get moving."

As if to emphasize the warning, several blaster bolts sizzle around the boat. The alien's great brown eyes open wide and it accelerates. Han fires over its head at the pursuing goons.

When they are safely away, the alien pulls alongside a walkway and motions Han out of the boat. The smuggler complies quickly, then rushes down a side canal's walkway until he comes to a main waterway. There, he flags down a public boat.

"Mud Station," he tells the grimy driver-Droid. "And don't give me the scenic tour."

"Do I look like a crook?"

Han finally allows himself to relax and begins rehearsing his story for Sodarra's men. He will tell them that they ran into trouble at Taslo's, and that Sodarra has died. That much is true. But getting the crate and the troopers off the ship will require creativity.

Half-an-hour later, he approaches the *Falcon's* lowered entrance ramp. Two guards greet him. "Where's Captain Sodarra?" they demand.

Han ignores their challenge and walks up the ramp. Birdloe is waiting for him just inside. "Well?" he asks. "Sodarra's dead. I couldn't save him."

"Do you take us for fools?" Birdloe says. "The Captain left very specific orders for this contingency."

The two guards come up behind Han.

"Where's Chewbacca?" Han demands.

"You'll join him shortly."

Something strikes Han in the back of the head. His ears ring and his knees collapse.

What have the stormtroopers done with Chewbacca? How will the smugglers get out of this predicament? They'll have to be creative and careful, but that's another story. This one is over. Return to section one and try again.

87

Han eases off the blaster trigger. He does not have a clear shot at the trooper carrying the communications pack. It will be wiser to let someone who does take the shot.

Nothing happens. The officer begins speaking into the radio and still Sodarra's men do not attack.

Han aims and squeezes the trigger, realizing that he is already too late to prevent the squad from reporting the *Falcon's* location. Two blue bolts streak from Han's blaster rifle and burn holes in the armor of the officer's assistant. Already reaching for his blaster pistol, the officer drops to cover even as his assistant collapses. Chewbacca triggers his bowcaster and the point-guard falls.

A moment later, the officer returns Han's attack. The bolt ricochets off the freighter's hull, then grazes Han's shoulder. He grunts as it opens a long, burning gash.

Chewbacca fires. The bowcaster's slug strikes the snow next to the officer's torso and explodes, shredding armor and flesh. It is the snowtrooper's turn to yell in pain.

In the next instant, Imperial blaster bolts rain down around the cave-mouth. Chewbacca bellows and the smell of singed fur fills their shelter. Han returns fire blindly, still too stunned from his own wound to aim.

It quickly grows apparent that the two smugglers are no match for the squad's heavy salvo. They withdraw further beneath the *Falcon*. Han and Chewie now must rely upon Sodarra and his deserters to save their lives.

That help is a long time in coming. The spacers huddle beneath the *Falcon* as energy bolts zing off the ship's hull and fizzle into the walls of their tiny ice cave. Through the mouth, Han sees snowtrooper feet running toward them. He continues to fire his blaster, but the opening is too narrow to hit anything.

"Where's Sodarra?" Han asks. "He should have clobbered them by now."

"Eeeoorgh! Ooonooooogh!"

"If he's sold us out, I don't think you'll have the chance."

Several blaster bolts lace across the cave-mouth from opposite directions, forming a grid of death just a meter from Han's nose. A snowtrooper's armor passes in front of the cave entrance and Han fires. The

shot strikes the snowtrooper just below the knees—the armor shatters and the trooper rolls away, screaming in agony and terror.

Two more snowtroopers drop in front of the cave, their blaster rifles level and prepared to fire. Han continues to fire, but he does not see his targets: he is blind with anger and frustration. That Sodarra sold them out, he has no doubt.

To his surprise, both he and Chewbacca are still living a moment later. The Imperials lie crumpled in front of the cave. Smoke rises from a hole in the back of each man's armor.

Sodarra sticks his head in the entrance. "It is safe now, gentlemen. You may come out."

Han and Chewbacca try to move, but Han gasps and Chewbacca bellows, each from pain. "You don't think you could help us, do you?" Han asks.

Sodarra gives an order, then turns back to Han. "We waited too long to fire," he says, his face betraying no emotion. "I am sorry. Perhaps your injuries could have been avoided."

"Maybe," Han replies. "But how did we do?"

"They sent a message," Sodarra says. Han can tell he wants to add 'as I said they would.' "But the radio is still intact."

• *Turn to section 92.*

88

Han stops abruptly.

The rear guard stumbles. Spinning, the smuggler grabs the man, then trips the surprised trooper over his extended leg. He finishes the maneuver by throwing his victim into the leading trooper's legs. Both fall to the floor.

Chewbacca chooses a different tactic. He reaches back with a massive arm and grabs the trooper behind him, then swings around and smashes his captive into the front guard's back. The Wookiee's great strength sends both men sprawling.

Han quickly snatches a blaster rifle and cold-cocks his two guards. Chewbacca smashes the helmets of his victims together. When the first blow does not knock them unconscious, he repeats it. There is a hollow clunk and both men's heads roll slackly on their necks.

Han smiles. He didn't expect Ozzel to be this obvious. Perhaps the Admiral is not quite as clever as the pilot first believed.

The two smugglers each take a blaster rifle and run into the hangar. The *Millennium Falcon* still sits there. Its access ramp hangs open, and a single guard stands at the base of the ramp. His blaster rifle remains slung over his shoulder; he obviously expects no trouble.

"Too good to be true," Han says. He points the blaster rifle at the guard and pulls the trigger. The trooper fumbles with his slung weapon for a moment, then flees when Han fires again.

Although an unseen watcher triggers an alarm, nobody else challenges the pair. As Han and Chewbacca run up the ramp, the hangar's massive hyperspace doors begin drawing closed. The doors normally protect the hangar's atmosphere during supralight travel, when the energy used to power the



electromagnetic force field is diverted to the hyperdrive systems. Han notes with satisfaction that the great doors move no faster than a Rigorian mudeater.

Chewbacca raises the ramp while Han prepares for take-off. By the time he has activated the repulsor drive, a platoon of stormtroopers is firing at the *Falcon* with light weapons. Their blaster rifles do not penetrate the freighter's hull. Han activates the antipersonnel blaster cannon to keep them at a distance.

Chewie utters a warning.

"Okay, I'm coming," Han responds. He swings the *Falcon* around to face the hangar entrance. The hyperspace doors are nearly closed. "He wants to make this look good, doesn't he?" the pilot mumbles. For a moment, he doubts his assessment of Ozzel's plan.

Han accelerates and the *Falcon* shoots forward. She slips between the hyperspace doors an instant before they close. Han loops over the *Executor's* back and streaks into the inky camouflage of the Black Widow Nebula. The Imperials have not even launched the first TIE pursuer.

Chewbacca bellows his joy.

"Too easy," says Han. "Ozzel let us escape. My guess is we've got more beacon transponders planted on us than a rogue planet signal station. Sweep us clean while I find a way through this gunk."

Chuckling, the Wookiee adds a comment.

"Ozzel had me scared, too," Han admits. "But nobody beats Han Solo at his own game!"

Three transponders and sixteen hours later, the *Falcon* exits the nebula. Its next stop will be the Aldo Spachian Comet—without the *Avenger* or the *Executor* on its tail!

• Turn to section 70.

89

Chewbacca returns from the engineering station and tells Han where he has hidden the bomb. The pilot smiles briefly and takes his chronometer back. Now comes the tricky part.

He drops out of hyperspace, then begins reprogramming the nav computer. Birdloe hovers over his shoulder, watching. Han makes several errors in a row, cursing loudly each time.

"Shall I do it?" the lieutenant finally asks.

"Only if you like uncharted sectors," Han says. "The Microaxial HyD is kind of temperamental—especially when you load it with security programs. I'm not used to someone second-guessing me."

"Sorry," Lt. Birdloe says. He stands further back in the cockpit.

Han smiles to himself. That is step one. He finishes programming the nav computer, then turns the freighter toward Shador. The hyperdrive engages, and the stars turn to streaks of doppler-shifted light.

Six minutes later, the cutout activates and the *Falcon* slams out of hyperspace. Han frowns. He had programmed the glitch for eight minutes.

In any case, his trick appears successful. Sodarra's men go sprawling. Han leaps from his chair, crying, "Take the helm! Come on, Chewbacca, it must be the actuator again."

"Hold on!" Birdloe says, leveling his blaster rifle at Han's chest.

The Corellian slaps the weapon aside impatiently. "If you don't let me by, that won't make any difference! Watch the helm and activate the hyperdrive when I tell you!"

Birdloe reluctantly steps aside, and Han breathes a secret sigh of relief.

He and Chewbacca rush to the engineering station. Chewie removes an access panel and begins clinking around. The pilot takes the bomb from its hiding place and opens the cargo bulkhead. He pauses for a moment and gathers his courage. Vader's crate remains open. The guard posted in the hold stands at the other bulkhead looking down the main access corridor. He is questioning someone near the cockpit bulkhead. Han does not fear the guard nearly as much he dreads entering the crate again. He does not understand how simply being near a man can make him feel ill, but it does.

Forcing himself to ignore the crawling sensation, he sneaks into the hold and steps inside the crate. He attaches the bomb to the rear of the cockpit, then looks back out of the crate.

The guard has turned back to the hold. Han does not believe that the trooper can see him, for the shadows hide him well. Nevertheless, he sets his watch for a 10

second fuse and holds his finger ready to activate it. If the guard discovers him, Han will activate the bomb. "CV-481!" Sodarra's voice rings from the main access corridor.

The spacetrooper steps out of the hold. Han breathes a sigh of relief and slips back to the engineering bulkhead.

"Watch Lord Vader's cockpit carefully. This may be a trick!"

The pilot pulls the door closed as CV-481 enters the hold again. He nods to Chewbacca, then calls Birdloe on the intercom. "Now, Lieutenant!"

"Yes, sir," Birdloe responds. A moment later, the *Falcon* accelerates to hyperspace velocity.

• Turn to section 144.

90

With his shields angled aft to protect his rear, Han concentrates on securing a good firing angle for his gunners. The TIE swings right; the Corellian mirrors the maneuver and four energy bolts streak past the target's left. It swings left, and again Han mirrors the maneuver. The gunners score another miss. Sweat begins to drip from the smuggler's brow; the TIE is almost close enough to land a point-blank shot.

It swings right once more; this time, Han is waiting for it. The *Falcon's* laser cannons flare and a blue bolt severs the fighter's left support pylon. The TIE cockpit spins to its right and spirals toward Aldo. Its left solar panel tumbles away in the opposite direction.

"That's one!" the smuggler calls. He climbs into a steep loop designed to bring him face-to-face with the remaining TIE. "Shields forward, Chewbacca!"

Unfortunately, the Imperial pilot has anticipated his maneuver. Two red bolts burst atop the *Falcon*, jarring the ship out of Han's control. It begins a dangerous tumble toward Aldo. The TIE resumes its position on the freighter's tail. "Shields aft!" Han yells, fighting to regain mastery of his ship.

Chewie bellows at the control panel, then slams a heavy fist onto it. "Ooough, uuurr!" he reports.

The Corellian manages to steady the *Falcon*. "Stuck forward!" he exclaims. "The TIE's on our tail. Without shields back there, we may as well be a target barge!"

He drops into a dangerous corkscrew loop, hoping to shake the Imperial pilot. The cockpit shudders as the two stars fight for control of the *Falcon*. Han is jerked first to the right, then to the left, his body frail compared to the warring forces of the stars. Through it all, he clings to the controls, trying to pull the *Falcon* back up.

At last, the shuddering ceases and the smuggler, gasping and trembling, stabilizes the ship. Two energy bolts flare to either side of the freighter. He notices that they have nearly flown into the ionized gas tail.

• If Han turns to face the TIE head-on, turn to section 84.
• If Han flees for the ionized gas tail, turn to section 71.

91

The flight computer shows six tiny silhouettes separating from the *Executor*. From this range, they look like gnats against the *Executor's* white bulk. Han does not need to see the H-shaped outline to know they are TIE fighters. His only hope lies in reaching the sensor-obscuring Black Widow Nebula before the TIEs are fully deployed.

His stomach knotting with anticipation—and yes, perhaps with fear—Han tips the *Falcon's* nose and accelerates. He hopes to pass beneath the *Executor* before the Imperials realize he has decided to run. The *Falcon's* powerful sublight engines flare and she shoots toward the Super Star Destroyer like an energy burst out of a blaster.

Then the *Falcon* slams to a halt, nearly throwing Han and Chewbacca from their seats. When Han recovers from the jolt, he eyes his flight computer warily. The *Avenger's* tractor beam snags them. "This isn't going to be as easy as I thought," he mutters. He can wrench the ship hard to port, trying to slip out of the narrow beam. Even if he escapes, however, that maneuver will likely send him spinning out of control, leaving the *Falcon* an easy target for TIE fighters. His other option is overloading the sublight engines and trying to out-muscle the beam. This is a long-shot, but it just might work if the *Avenger's* beam does not have a secure grip.

• If Han tries to out-muscle the tractor beam, turn to section 108.
• If Han turns hard to port, turn to section 114.

92

As Han and Chewie attend each other's wounds, Han and Sodarra discuss their situation. Without doubt, the squad has reported contact with the deserters. Because the *Falcon* is buried in the glacier, they might avoid detection from the air for a day or two. But the command center will certainly dispatch more patrols—probably with walkers—when they hear nothing from the first squad.

"Do you have someone that can operate their communications pack?" Han asks.

"Of course," Sodarra responds. "Why?"

Han explains his plan. Sodarra agrees it is worth a try and orders Lieutenant Birdloe to learn what he can about the enemy's communications protocol. A few minutes later, Han goes outside to where Sodarra's crew has set up the communications pack. Birdloe, indistinguishable from Sodarra's other troopers inside his white armor, briefs Han on what he has learned. When Han asks what his name is supposed to be, Birdloe's helmet stares at Han for a long moment. If the helmet could look sheepish, Han is sure it would.

"I forgot to ask," he admits.

Han shrugs. "So ask now."

"That's impossible," Birdloe says. "The prisoners are dead."

"Dead?" Han asks. "What happened?"

Birdloe seems puzzled by the question. "We shot them, of course."

Han's jaw drops. "Shot them! That's cold-blooded murder!"

"They were only traitors," the lieutenant responds defensively.

Han's eyes narrow. "I thought you guys were the traitors."

Birdloe's voice tone does not change. "We are deserters, if that is what you mean."

Han shoots a glance at Sodarra. The Captain shakes his head gently. "Old habits die hard. Shall we say he meant traitors to sentient freedom?"

Han hesitates. "I guess so," he finally responds.

Birdloe activates the field communications set. "Green squad reporting," Han says into the com-phon. They have purposefully deactivated the video-transmitter on their end.

An Imperial colonel's face appears on the screen. "Report, green squad. And adjust your video—I'm not receiving a picture."

Han gulps. What if the colonel knows the squad leader by name? "Video transmitter malfunctioning due to combat damage, sir. Engagement concluded successfully. Contact subjects were two smugglers. No sign of primary search subjects. Recommend continuation of normal search patterns."

The colonel's face tightens in frustration. "I thought we had them," he says. "I'll send a skimmer to collect the prisoners for further interrogation."

"Negative," Han says. "No prisoners."

"I ordered you to take prisoners!" the commander bellows.

"We did," Han blurts out. "They tried to escape."

The colonel looks angry. "I will expect verification on that. Casualty status?"

Han hesitates. How much did the officer report before he fell? Will the colonel believe that nobody was injured in the battle? Han knows that if he reports casualties, he has to report fatalities to avoid a medical evacuation. But will the colonel send a skimmer to pick up the dead?

- *If Han claims no casualties, turn to section 55.*
- *If Han reports fatalities, turn to section 81.*

93

"Listen, needle-nose," Han snaps, "if I want to waste my money on Ord Mantell, that's my business. It doesn't entitle you to a solitary credit, understand? Get off my ship!"

"Are you accusing me of asking for a bribe?"

"No," Han responds, walking toward the cockpit, "I'm reporting you. And these armored goons are witnesses."

"Have you completed your inspection, sergeant?" The officer addresses a spacetrooper.

"Yes."

"Very well," the officer says to Han. "You may go."

The Imperials return to the shuttle and close the airlock. A few minutes later, Han flies beneath the *Executor's* massive belly and enters the Black Widow Nebula.

- *Turn to section 73.*

94

The Corellian waits for the TIE fighters to reach maximum firing range. To the naked eye, they appear nothing more than a pair of faint stars. The massive Star Destroyer is not even visible.

He quickly designates primary and secondary targets for each of the *Falcon's* gun wells, then presses the trigger. At the same instant, the TIE laser cannons flash red. The fighters swerve away to both sides and the *Falcon's* energy bolts dissipate harmlessly into the starlit vastness.

The TIE bursts streak directly at the cockpit, but wither away a few hundred meters short. He drops the *Falcon* into an evasive corkscrew turn, then brings it back around to face the TIEs.

The TIEs continue toward the heart of the comet.

"Cowards!" Han calls. A moment later, he realizes that the Imperials are also responding to the distress signal. But, since TIE fighters cannot carry passengers, Han knows they do not intend to rescue the sender.

"Leia!" he gasps. TIE fighters move faster than the *Falcon*. He is certain he can catch them by diving toward one of the twin stars and using its gravity to boost his speed. But will he be able to break free of it? Alternately, he can push his sublight engines beyond specification. That just may give him enough extra velocity to catch the TIEs, but he has placed the engines under heavy strain several times recently. The repeated overloading will begin to tell soon.

- *If Han dives toward one of the stars, turn to section 107.*
- *If Han overloads the sublight drives, turn to section 83.*

95

"Stay where you are!" Han orders.

"Why?" asks a human.

His question takes Han by surprise and he hesitates.

"Because we are Imperial officers," Sodarra states evenly. Han groans inwardly; that is exactly the wrong thing to say on Shador. "We have a squad of stormtroopers downstairs," Sodarra continues.

The hoods laugh, then the humans motion for the Gamorreans to charge. Han fires and a Gamorrean drops. Sodarra's shot severs a human's right arm. He screams in agony and his pistol clatters to the floor.

The other three Gamorreans rush Han, and the remaining man fires at Sodarra. Han ducks the first two Gamorrean axes, then reaches back and presses the call button for the lift. He does not want to tangle with axe-wielding Gamorreans; the pork-faced race is legendary throughout the galaxy for its proficiency with polearms.

The flat of the third Gamorrean's axe glances off Han's left shoulder. The shoulder goes numb and his arm drops to his side. "What did I do to deserve this?" Han cries. He couldn't care less about the spy these hoods have presumably killed. In fact, if he worked for Vader, they have done the galaxy a big favor. So Han wonders why he is risking his life to avenge the stoolie's murder. It isn't his style. All he wants to do is unload Vader's crate just before it detonates. This is not his idea of stalling.

The lift doors open. "Come on!" Han calls. "The lift's here."

Sodarra shakes his head and fires again. "We must find Taslo."

Han cradles the blaster barrel with his left arm; it is painful, but at least he can point it in the right direction. He pulls the trigger and his rifle blazes. "They were waiting for us!"

"It does not matter," Sodarra answered, dodging a wild vibroaxe swing. "And you must not abandon me!"

- If Han forsakes Sodarra, turn to section 86.
- If Han continues to fight alongside Sodarra, turn to section 134.

96

Han points the bow at the narrow channel and steadies the bateau's course. The hydrogen turbine's whine rises in pitch and also steadies. A moment later, red and blue energy bolts begin whizzing between the legs of the turbine superstructure with alarming regularity. Han does not resume evasive maneuvers. He worries more about clearing the dam of debris than suffering a hit from the stormtroopers.

As they approach the fallen building, Han sees that the channel bends slightly to the left. On the other end, a long, narrow canalboat maneuvers to enter the narrow passage. It carries so much cargo that its gunnels nearly ride submerged. A stack of plasteel crates obstructs the pilot's view.

"Hold on!" Han yells. It appears the canalboat will enter the passage about the same time Han reaches the far end. He does not want to imagine the collision that will result if the canalboat enters the channel before they clear it.

Sodarra continues trading shots with the broadhorn.

- If Han slows down to allow the canalboat to pass, turn to section 156.
- If Han tries to beat the canalboat through the passage, turn to section 140.

97

The beggar's eyes light up as he clutches Han's donation. "You are truly generous, sir. For this kind of money, I'll take you there myself."

The Twi'lek lurches to his feet and leads the way into the tavern. "I'll tell the bartender to activate the lift," the bum says. He motions for them to wait in front of a durasteel door just to the right of the entrance.

The Twi'lek speaks to the human bartender, then to Han. "Straight up the lift," he says. "You'll see it when you get out—cubicle 452." The bartender walks to the end of the bar and says something to a blurry-eyed Gamorrean. The lift does not come. The Gamorrean stumbles over to a table of four Altorian lizards.

"What's going on?" Han demands, fingering his blaster rifle. He does not need to ask; the Twi'lek has lured them into a trap. Apparently, Han's generosity has stirred the derelict's greed. He sighs and promises



himself he will never be nice again. First, he rescued a group of deserters and ended up with Darth Vader. Now he gives a few credits to a derelict and gets attacked.

The Twi'lek studies Han. "Why don't you drop your weapons and give us your credits?" His eyes clear. "You have plenty to spare."

"He set us up!" Sodarra exclaims, aiming his blaster rifle at the Twi'lek.

The Altorian lizards stand. Each holds a blaster pistol. The Twi'lek smiles. "Don't make us hurt you," he chuckles. "You can't win!"

"Wanna bet?" Han asks. He can shoot the Twi'lek first, hoping that he is the ring leader. Perhaps the Altorians will flee when he falls. Or Han can fire at the lizards first, since they are armed.

- If Han fires at the Twi'lek, turn to section 124.
- If Han fires at the Altorians, turn to section 112.

98

Han accelerates toward the comet, pushing the modified freighter past its top end specifications. Given the superior speed of TIE fighters, the *Falcon's* head start seems very narrow indeed. Chewbacca constantly works to locate the exact origin of the distress signal.

The Corellian knows that once they enter the comet, his lead may grow by several minutes, or it may diminish. The electromagnetic static of the two stars

will play havoc with the *Falcon's* communications equipment—perhaps its flight computer as well. Their success will depend largely upon how closely Chewbacca pinpoints the nucleus before the twin suns blind their equipment.

Han does not want to trust Leia's life to the whims of a star's electromagnetic field. Even though he feels like strangling her for forcing him into this stupid race, he has to admit—grudgingly—that he admires her spirit. He knows very few women (or men, for that matter) who have the guts to challenge him at his own game.

A grim frown on his lips, the smuggler decides to increase his chances of beating the TIEs to the distress signal.

• Turn to section 107.

99

"I think we need not worry about more Imperials for a day or two," Captain Sodarra comments. "The commander has no reason to suspect anything is amiss with this squad. Lieutenant Birdloe, set a minimal picket. All other personnel are on burial detail."

"As you order," Birdloe responds.

"Chewbacca and I'll fix the *Falcon* so we can get off this snowball," Han says. "We'll need some help later."

"My men are your men," Sodarra responds diplomatically.

After thirty minutes of work, Chewie reports that they have a cracked hyperdrive actuation diode. Assuming Sodarra's deserters will help, the Wookiee feels he can repair everything else within a day. But without a new diode for the actuation field generator, the *Falcon* will never enter hyperspace again.

"We'll have to steal one from the Imperials," Han says. "I'll see if Sodarra can help."

The ex-Imperial is less than enthusiastic about the smuggler's plan.

"They are hunting us—they will be on full alert. Our force is pitiful in both number and armament. We may be safe from discovery, but to go seeking trouble? You cannot be serious."

Before Han can argue the matter, a high pitched whine echoes up the valley. Everyone has grown used to the occasional thunder of cracking and falling glacial ice, but this is an eerie new sound. Even Chewbacca stops working and reaches for his weapon. Han at first believes the drone to be the plaintive wail of some giant ice creature. But a few seconds of increasing volume and steady pitch convince him it is some sort of repulsor drive.

"Captain Solo," calls one of Sodarra's men. "A woman hails you over the emergency channel."

The Corellian shrugs in response to Sodarra's unspoken question and runs for the *Falcon*. When he reaches the vidscreen, he is dumb-founded. Leia hails him.

Han opens a transmission channel. "Leia!"

"Han? You're alive! We saw you go down—"

"Are you safe?"

"Of course; being kidnapped is no big deal," she responds sarcastically. "I am uninjured, if that's what you mean. But we've got bigger problems than my

abduction. How did you manage to attract a Star Destroyer?"

"I didn't," the smuggler replies. "The credit is all yours, Princess."

"MINE?" Leia screams.

"Every time I turn my back—"

"Somebody tries to vibro-knife it! You're a dangerous man to know, Han Solo."

"You should have stuck with us like I said—"

"Sleazy floorshows aren't my style," Leia says.

"And rescuing Princesses isn't mine. This is the last—"

The transmission goes dead.

"Leia?"

No answer, just static.

"Leia?"

More static.

"LEIA!"

The video display returns. Instead of Leia, it shows a small, gray helmet with a full mask. Long red hair cascades from beneath the helmet. "We meet at last, Solo." The voice comes through an electronic translator.

Han activates the artificial memory to record the conversation. "Are you Alfreda Goot? What do you want with Leia?"

"I am Alfreda and I will ask the questions. First, what is the condition of the *Millennium Falcon*?"

"We're grounded, so I guess our little race is off."

"Permanently. There are two companies of stormtroopers thirty kilometers from your position. They will find you sooner or later. What do you require to repair your vessel?"

"Why are you helping us?" Han demands.

"My interest is to beat the *Falcon* to Mos Eisley—not to destroy it."

"I'd like to talk to you about your choice of destinations—"

"Mos Eisley," Alfreda insists.

"I've got a little problem there. Ever hear of Jabba the Hutt?"

"If you want to see your precious princess alive again, you will go to Mos Eisley. Now, what do you need to repair the *Falcon*?"

Alfreda promises to return the next day with the diode. Although the smuggler trusts Alfreda less than he trusts Sodarra, he has little choice except to rely upon her promise. Shortly after the transmission ends, Captain Sodarra climbs into the *Falcon's* buried cockpit.

"The strange noise was a space yacht—quite an ugly space yacht."

"Know it?" Han asks hopefully.

"No. It was shaped like a pear-fruit; broad on the bottom and narrow on the top. I assume the transmission came from the yacht?"

The Corellian nods. He replays the portion of the conversation he recorded and tells the story of Leia's kidnapping. Sodarra listens without emotion.

At last, the Imperial captain says, "A strange incident. Leia is the senator from Alderaan?"

"Know her?"

"The Emperor's agents have placed a high price on her head."

"Don't even think of collecting," Han warns.

Sodarra smiles. "I also have a price on my head."
"Speaking of which, what's the big deal about your cargo?"

Sodarra hesitates. "I can trust your discretion?"
"Absolutely," Han replies.

"My men and I were to transport the prototype of a new compact cloaking device to the secret Imperial Production Laboratories on Rigoron. We decided to sell it to Ploovo-two-for-one instead. Alas, we are unused to such scum; he double-crossed us and prepared an Imperial ambush. We have been looking for safe port ever since."

The smuggler whistles. "That took guts."

Sodarra nods. "Perhaps you can help us. We would gladly show our appreciation with a full share."

"Maybe I can—but I have a race to win," Han says. "And the price would be five full shares."

"Three," Sodarra counters. "And we will help you with the race."

"Four."

"Done."

Han smiles warmly as they shake hands. He would have settled for three.

The two spacers spend the next thirty-six hours working on the *Falcon*. Although some of the repairs are not pretty, they will hold until the ship reaches better facilities.

When his mind is not fully occupied with a mechanical problem, Han puzzles over Alfreda Goot's true identity. She acts as though she knows him well, and he certainly finds it strange that she has risked an encounter with an Imperial Star Destroyer to aid him. There is the fact, too, that Leia did not seem worried about her own safety when they spoke. Although Han cannot deduce Alfreda's identity yet, he begins to fear less for Leia. As his fear subsides, his anger increases. The whole screwy race has the feeling of a practical joke gone sour.

As he and Chewbacca are putting the finishing touches on the power flux coupling which had been damaged in Mon Torri's rings, Alfreda's ship descends from the overcast sky. It hovers twenty meters above the glacier and opens a hatch. A small brown package falls out and strikes the snow, then the yacht is gone.

"Thanks a lot!" Han yells after it.

After one of his men retrieves the package, Sodarra says, "Your gratitude may be premature." He gives the pilot a note that is attached to the diode. It reads, "Imperial walker four hours away."

"Plenty of time," Han says, turning toward Chewie. "Right?"

Two hours and fifteen minutes later, Han and Chewbacca finish installing the diode. The smuggler is already firing up the *Falcon*'s repulsor lift drive as the last man boards. When the mighty engines gleam to life, they create a fair-sized lake in the crash furrow. A moment later, the Corellian freighter bursts from the snow and streaks toward space.

As the *Falcon* reaches Mon Torri's rings, Han studies the flight computer for signs of the *Eradicator*. A large object is moving along the edge of the inner ring at an unusual velocity. The pilot activates the nav computer astrogation program and asks Lieutenant Birdloe to monitor it. He and Chewbacca each climb into a laser cannon turret to get a better view of whatever is

moving along the inner ring. It turns out to be a Sivorian mining complex. Everyone breathes a sigh of relief, and Han returns to the cockpit to take the *Falcon* into hyperspace.

• Turn to section 117.

100

The TIE fighters approach head-on. Instead of firing at long range, as inexperienced pilots do, they concentrate on cutting off the *Falcon*'s escape routes. It is a wise move. The coma's dust—even at a single grain per cubic centimeter—dissipates energy beams at long range. By concentrating on positioning instead of wasting shots, the TIE pilots narrow Han's options. He can execute only two or three simple maneuvers without challenging the twin suns' overlapping gravity wells.

"Target the port side fighter!" Han orders through the intercom. He is glad to have Sodarra's gunners. Though he can control the computer-enhanced targeting systems from the cockpit, the weapons are more effective when manually operated.

As the Corellian was expecting, the TIEs split just before reaching medium range. The port side TIE slides high and to the left. The other dives low and to the right. "Power the shields, Chewbacca!" Han orders. He swings the *Falcon* into an upward left-hand turn to meet the port side attack.

"Uuugh?" Chewie asks.

"I'm thinking!" Han replies. If he tells the Wookiee to angle the shields forward, he can move in for a closer shot—practically guaranteeing they will destroy it. But that will leave his tail vulnerable to attack, which is foolish when facing expert pilots. Angling the shields backward will protect his weak point, but it means a longer battle.

The TIE laser cannons flare, creating a storm of energy blossoms near the *Falcon*. An instant later, four blue streaks answer from the *Falcon*'s weapons.

• If Han tells Chewbacca to angle the shields forward, turn to section 84.

• If Han tells Chewbacca to angle the shields backward, turn to section 90.

101

The lift opens. Han and Sodarra step into an unkempt communal lounge. In the center of the room sits a holoconsole. The image of a Twi'lek female gyrates to lewd music. A dozen sleeping cubicles are arranged around the lounge area. Although each cubicle has four walls and a door, razor wire serves as a ceiling for all.

Two humans armed with blaster pistols and four Gamorreans carrying vibroaxes occupy the lounge. Judging by the dark gray suits they wear, they do not reside in this establishment. They have smashed open cubicle 452.

"Vader's agent lives in a public dormitory?" Han whispers. The lift door closes behind them.

Sodarra shrugs. "He is Togorian. Try to take one of these gentlemen alive."

"Easier said than done," Han mutters. He considers his options. He can fire at the Gamorreans. Although they are probably not the brains behind the group, they are certainly the muscle. The trouble with this plan is that there are more Gamorreans than Han can shoot at once.

He can also try to bluff the hoods into surrendering. Han favors this plan, but he is acutely aware that his con-jobs sometimes fail—especially with unversed accomplices. Or, he can fire at the humans, hoping that the Gamorreans will not be such a problem without their bosses.

- *If Han fires at the Gamorreans, turn to section 143.*
- *If Han tries to bluff the hoods into surrendering, turn to section 95.*
- *If Han fires at the humans, turn to section 118.*

102

Han closes the throttle to half. The bateau decelerates so quickly that Sodarra nearly falls over the bow. Before Han turns into the side canal, the stormtroopers' broadhorn almost overruns them. As soon as he is pointed straight down the narrow passage, Han opens the throttle wide again.

The canal is crowded. Thirty meters ahead, a wide-beamed barge inches toward the far end of the canal. It is apparently driven by submerged propellers, for it has no hydrogen turbine. A dozen pirogues drift in both directions.

A flatboat carrying a huge, mildew-covered crate approaches from the other end. It is perhaps twenty-five meters from the bow of the barge. A goose-necked pilot peers around his cargo, preparing to guide the flatboat past the barge. He has a scaly face with protruding, slit-pupiled eyes. Han estimates at his present rate of speed there will be no more than half-a-meter's clearance between the flatboat and the barge—certainly not enough for him to squeeze through!

Han guides the bateau into position to pass the barge. The flatboat pilot whistles an oath and accelerates, determined to beat the human to the bottle-neck.

"Hey!" Han yells. "This is an emergency!"

Energy bursts begin whizzing between the superstructure support legs with alarming regularity. Now that Han can take no evasive maneuvers, the stormtroopers' aim has improved.

- *If Han slows down to allow the flatboat past, turn to section 106.*
- *If Han attempts to beat the flatboat past the barge, turn to section 142.*

103

Chewbacca returns from the engineering station and tells Han where he has hidden the bomb. The pilot smiles and takes his chronometer back. After dropping the *Falcon* out of hyperspace, he re-programs the

nav computer for Shador. Birdloe hovers over his shoulder, watching. When he finishes, he sarcastically asks, "Satisfied?"

"Sorry," Birdloe says. He steps back.

Han smiles to himself and activates the hyperdrive. The stars turn to streaks of doppler-shifted light. They stay in the cockpit for six hours, giving the stormtroopers time to relax and become as careless as they will. Finally, when Han notices Birdloe's helmet nodding as if he is having trouble staying awake, Han stands. "Come on, Chewbacca. I want to check those actuation circuits again."

Chewie complains bitterly, and Birdloe appears to become more alert.

"I know you fixed them, but I want to check. We can't go into Shador announcing our position. Those thieves won't even wait to see who we are before blasting us into meteorites."

The Wookiee stands. Although he appears recalcitrant, Han knows the act is for Birdloe's benefit.

Birdloe reluctantly steps aside and follows them to the engineering station. While Han secures the bomb, Chewbacca occupies Birdloe's attention by angrily and noisily removing the access panel leading to the power core grid. With the small bomb hidden beneath his shirt, the pilot climbs into the ventilation grid. Birdloe, apparently unused to the jury-rigged systems aboard small freighters such as the *Falcon*, does not even think to ask Han why he needs to enter the power core to fix an actuation system.

Once the pilot is safely out of sight behind the access door leading to the cargo bay, he breathes a quiet sigh of relief. He takes a moment to gather his courage. He does not expect to find a guard inside the bay, for Sodarra has stationed one at every entrance, but Han dreads entering the crate more than he fears meeting a guard. He does not understand how standing next to a man can make him feel ill, but it does.

He pushes the access door open and steps into the cargo bay. To his surprise, Sodarra has stationed a guard in the bay. The stormtrooper raises his blaster rifle and aims at Han. "Hold on!" the Corellian says.

The blaster flares and Han feels a terrible impact in his right hip. Before Han hits the floor, the guard fires again. He is already dizzy . . .

Where will Han wake up? Will the Dark Lord be active again by then? Regardless of what happens next, Han knows he has lost the race—and that ends this adventure. Return to section one and try again.

104

The Twi'lek withdraws his empty hand. "On Shador, everything has a price—even a beggar's advice." With that, the derelict lurches to his feet and stumbles off.

Sodarra looks up and down the street. "How shall we find Taslo Deville's residence?"

Han peers into the tavern. "Let's try in here—it looks like an Imperial hangout."

- *Turn to section 109.*

105

"I have difficulty accepting that Birdloe is the traitor," Sodarra says. "His record is excellent."

"Serves you right for believing a report," Han says. "I trust only my instincts—I'm a great judge of character." They have just come out of hyperspace. A vast globe, which casts a flickering topaz light into space, hangs below the *Falcon's* viewport. The planet is almost bright enough and large enough to be a small sun, but it is not. It is, at last, the desert world of Tatooine. Its peculiar starlike glow is the result of sodium-rich sands phosphorescing in the light of its twin suns.

Sodarra studies Han with a sardonic grin. "We shall see how well you judge character, Captain Solo." Sodarra's stormtroopers are ready for action, and Darth Vader's crate has been prepared for unloading.

Han taps his chronometer. "Don't think I trust you for a moment," he says. "Double-cross me, and three seconds later Vader is cosmic dust." Chewbacca has sealed Vader's crate with a tamper-proof lock. Any attempt to remove the cockpit before Han deactivates the bomb will trigger an explosion. It is Han's insurance policy.

"I was speaking of Alfreda Goot," Sodarra says. "She is as ruthless as she is enigmatic."

"Sure," Han responds. Sodarra does not need to remind Han of the Imperial insurance policy. He and Chewbacca have not been without an armed escort since leaving Shador. Despite their pledges not to double-cross each other, neither man is taking any chances.

In fact, Han still hopes he can destroy Vader, though he will not risk Leia's life to do so. Having accepted that she did not fake her own kidnapping, Han is determined to save her—even if it means letting Vader live. He has no doubt that Leia will disapprove of his decision, but if he allows the Princess to die because he has a price on his head, Han knows that the rest of his life will be as pointless as it will be miserable.

That Sodarra also intends to double-cross him, Han has no doubt. The man has already demonstrated his talent for deception. The Corellian now analyzes everything the Imperial says and does, and his trigger finger never moves far from the chronometer. If Leia's life did not depend on cooperating with the Imperials, Han would long ago have detonated the bomb and taken his chances with their superior numbers. Unfortunately, he does not have that option.

When the spaceport officials call for the ship's registry Han discovers, to top everything off, the *Falcon's* radio is malfunctioning—whether from battle damage or general disrepair isn't obvious. Chewie grumbles about maintenance as Han tries to hear their berth designation through a symphony of pops and crackles.

"I heard Bay 32, am proceeding to that location," the Corellian finally replies. "Never did like that Chedak circuitry much. It's sloppy," he mutters for the general audience. Captain Sodarra refrains from comment.

The pilot descends to the haphazard arrangement of crater-shaped depressions Mos Eisley calls a spaceport. As soon as the *Falcon* touches down, Sodarra gives one of his men a voucher chip and sends him to pay the berthing fees. Unlike Shador, no port master

on Tatooine will dare refuse Sodarra's voucher; the planet is seldom without Imperial visitors.

Han and Sodarra discuss strategy. "We do not know if Alfreda has beaten us or not. The wisest course is to reconnoiter the cantina before making our move."

"Good idea," Han says. "Let's go."

"One moment," Sodarra says. "Alfreda is undoubtedly expecting you. However, I doubt that my presence will alarm her. I should go alone."

Han hesitates. He does not like the idea of letting the Imperial officer out of his sight. The man has consistently proved his capacity for subterfuge, and the stakes here are Leia's life—and his own. On the other hand, Sodarra's proposal is tactically sound and will no doubt provide an edge against Alfreda. It also keeps Han out of sight as much as possible. Jabba has spies everywhere on Tatooine, and Han suspects that the crime-master will know of Han's arrival within the same hour he shows himself. Both he and Leia will be much safer if he can conclude his business with Alfreda and leave quickly.

- If Han sends Sodarra to reconnoiter the cantina, turn to section 137.
- If Han rejects Sodarra's proposal, turn to section 128.

106

Han closes the throttle down and the bateau slows, but not enough. He will still overtake the barge, and the stormtrooper flatboat will smash into his stern. The bateau should fold like an accordion. The Corellian swings the bateau into the narrow gap between the barge and the opposite wall. The cargo-laden flatboat approaching from the other end has already reached the barge's bow. The other pilot bares a row of yellowed incisors in a triumphant grin and chirps a chorus of insults at Han. The imminent collision seems less important to him than reaching the passing zone first.

Han yells, "Jump!" He leaps for the barge's gunnel, a full meter above his head.

Sodarra keeps firing, ignoring the warning. He is as stubborn as the scaly flatboat pilot. Han feels his hands strike the gunnel. He flexes his fingers and secures a grip, seeming to dig his fingers into solid durasteel.

Alarmed squeals arise from the barge's deck, then the whole canal shakes with the impact of his bateau and the cargo flatboat. Debris rains into the water, bouncing off the barge hull and battering Han. Still, he holds on. He does not know how he will explain Captain Sodarra's death to the stormtroopers back on his ship, but he will have to think of a way.

Something hisses above his head. The smuggler looks up into a pair of slit pupils. A forked tongue protrudes from a set of scaly lips. The reptilian creature waves a nasty-looking wrench at Han.

"I'll give you a thousand credits to throw that thing overboard!" Han calls.

The reptile replies in a series of squeals Han does not understand. When the Corellian refuses to release his grip, the reptile kneels and begins hammering Han's fingers. He now hangs directly adjacent to the cargo flatboat's burning wreckage.

"Give me a break!" Han calls, releasing one hand. The reptile raps the knuckles on the remaining fist. His hand involuntarily stiffens in response, relaxing its grip, and he drops into the narrow gap between the barge and the burning flatboat. After splashing into the oily water, Han feels himself being sucked beneath the barge.

In the murky canal, he sees nothing. But the strum of the barge's massive propellers vibrates through the water and through his bones. He feels the barge's cold hull above his body, and the silty bottom below. There is barely a meter and a half between the two. This will not be pretty: the barge's propellers have to be at least a meter in diameter.

Will Han make it out of the canal alive? And what will he tell the stormtroopers about Sodarra? The Corellian scoundrel has survived tougher straits than this—but that's another story. This adventure has ended. Return to section one and try again.

107

Han drops the *Falcon's* nose toward Aldo's fiery surface. Even before he opens the throttle, the freighter accelerates quickly. Chewbacca looks at Han with his eyebrows. He says nothing.

"We've got to beat the TIEs to the comet nucleus," Han says evenly. Chewbacca simply nods. His eyes are round as saucers and he sits braced stiffly in his seat. Two minutes later, the *Falcon* has surpassed the top-end velocity of the TIE fighters. Han edges out of Aldo's gravity well and turns toward the comet.

The *Falcon* enters the comet's hazy dust tail just ahead of the TIEs. Although the tail is not dense, its dust particles emit a brilliant ghostly light. The ambient glare blinds Han as badly as a total absence of light would have. It feels like flying inside an immense illumination tube.

TIE energy bolts flash past the *Falcon* every half-second. Each bolt quickly dissipates, leaving a red streak of fluorescing dust in its wake. Han pays the spurts no attention; the opposing gravities of Aldo and Spach keep him too busy to worry about potshots.

Chewbacca groans a report.

"It's out already?" Han asks.

The Wookiee opens an audio receptor channel. Nothing but static. They have lost their fix on the distress signal.

"Then let's even the odds," Han says. He turns toward the ionized gas tail. From inside the dust tail, it appears to be a streak of polychromatic strands ending in a subdued burst of primary colors. The TIEs follow, still gaining on the *Falcon*. Inside the gas tail, Han hopes, the ionized gases will render the TIE targeting computers as useless as the *Falcon's* communications channels.

As they approach the gas tail, its strands twist into narrow, knotted tongues that resemble nothing so closely as a jet of fire. They leave the dust tail, flash through a thousand kilometers of open space, then enter the gas tail. Wisps of royal blue, brilliant orange, fervent red, and a dozen other colors dance over the *Falcon* as it streaks toward the coma.

They have been in the tail for a full minute before Han notices the TIE cannons have stopped firing. After climbing into the upper turret to check on their pursuers, Chewbacca reports that the TIEs have fallen far behind. Their drive systems appear to be troubling them.

"The gases!" Han blurts. "TIE fighters run on ionized gas. The comet's ionized tail must be fouling their drives."

The Wookiee roars in excited agreement.

Han pushes the *Falcon* even harder. "As soon as they drop out of the gas tail, they'll clear their engines. Let's try to be so far ahead they can't catch us."

A few minutes later, the *Falcon* reaches the coma. Like the dust tail, it is a mass of glowing particles—except it is much brighter and more dense. A trail of twisting colors leads generally ahead. Although Han can see out of the coma easily enough, looking deeper into it hurts his eyes. This relatively dense region is a near vacuum by planetary standards, but it contains dozens of atoms per cubic centimeter. Each of those atoms glows with every erg of energy it has absorbed from two suns.

"Trying to find the nucleus in this is like trying to find a grain of dust in a smoky room," Han says.

Chewbacca utters a suggestion.

"Already thought of that," the pilot responds. He continues following the brightly colored tail deeper into the coma. "I hope we see the nucleus before we hit it."

Five minutes later, they are still following the colored trail. Han decelerates. They should have encountered the nucleus over a minute earlier. He studies the gaily colored streamers carefully, then realizes that the *Falcon* is now traveling in the same direction as the tongues of flame. They have overshot the nucleus.

Han turns around and follows the ionized gases back toward the core. When he encounters a particularly knotted area, he cautiously flies into the knot.

A ball of steam whirls within the densely twisting strands. Han circles the orb several times. The steam ball is barely twelve kilometers in diameter. Cautiously, the Corellian descends. As he goes deeper, he begins to make out terrain features. The surface appears remarkably smooth—but then, it should. It is melting away.

At last, he finds a shadow which rises at a sharp angle. Landing the *Falcon* next to the shadow, he and Chewbacca go aft to don protective gear.

Before they finish, a rapping sounds at the airlock door. Han immediately releases the security program and stands back with a condescending smile on his face. He is already rehearsing the lecture he intends to give Leia about her brainless race.

When the lock opens, the smuggler's smile fades to an open-mouthed gape. He reaches for his blaster pistol, and the Wookiee runs for his bowcaster.

Three stormtroopers in full battle armor stand in the lock, steaming and dripping condensation. An Imperial officer wearing a vac-suit stands with them.

"Don't shoot," commands the officer. He removes his helmet and says, "I am Sodarra, commander of these troopers." He is a short, stocky man with vaguely oriental features.

Han does not lower his pistol. "Don't come any closer. I thought you were somebody else."

"Who?"

"Never mind," Han answers. "Just put your helmet back on and leave. Your friends will be here in twenty minutes."

"Friends?"

"Yeah. The TIE fighters that chased me in."

Sodarra's face shows concern. "They are not friends. We are deserters."

Sarcastically, Han smiles. "Stormtroopers don't desert." Chewbacca returns with his bowcaster cocked and level.

Captain Sodarra shrugs. "And one does not send TIE fighters to rescue a downed ship. One of us must be mistaken." The man looks Han squarely in the eye. "I will understand if you must abandon us."

The pilot thinks for only a moment. Sodarra's words make sense, especially considering the Star Destroyer activity he has seen. "I'll decide who I abandon and who I rescue." He holsters his blaster. "Right now, you're on my good side. Come in."

The Imperial hesitates. "There are three more of us. And we have a rather large piece of luggage."

"Forget the luggage and get the crew. Those TIEs can arrive any time."

"We will not abandon our cargo," Sodarra insists. "If you cannot wait, I will understand."

"What's so valuable about this cargo?" Han asks.

Sodarra remains silent for a moment. "May I trust your discretion?"

"Absolutely." Han grins.

"My men and I were to transport the prototype of a new compact cloaking device to the secret Imperial Production Laboratories on Rigoron. We decided to sell it to Ploovo-two-for-one instead. We are unused to such scum; he double-crossed us, and Governor-General Vellam ambushed us in his Star Destroyer, the *Eradicator*. We tried to flee to the Aldo Spachian system but had to enter hyperspace before the calculations ended. This is the result."

The pilot whistles. "That took guts."

Sodarra nods. "Perhaps you can help us. We will gladly show our appreciation with a full share."

"Maybe I can—but I have a race to win," Han says.

"And the price will be five full shares."

"Three," the Captain counters. "What kind of race?"

"Four," Han responds. "I'll tell you about it after we're out of here."

"Done."

"Good. Chewie, open the exterior cargo hatch. I'll get ready to fly."

Ten minutes later, the *Falcon* leaves the surface. Han tells Sodarra about his mysterious race, including his suspicions about the challenger's identity. Captain Sodarra does not have time to ask questions, however. A surprise awaits them in the coma. As soon as they clear the gas streaming from the nucleus, two TIE fighters jump them. Sodarra does not need to be asked to man the gun wells.

- If Han concentrates fire on one TIE fighter, turn to section 100.
- If Han fights both at the same time, turn to section 67.

Han jams the throttle wide open, then says, "Give me more power, Chewie!"

The Wookiee groans a harsh protest.

"I know we can't out-tug a Star Destroyer, but it never hurts to try."

Chewbacca obediently adjusts the power dampeners on the sublight drives. A tremendous whine whistles up the access corridor from the straining engines. The *Falcon* hangs motionless for a moment—then slips toward the *Avenger*.

Chewbacca opens the power dampeners further. The freighter holds its position. Han realizes that with each passing second, the *Avenger* secures its beam hold a bit more. "We've got to open the dampeners all the way!" Han yells, reaching for the co-pilot's controls.

Wookiees are frightening creatures, especially on the rare occasions when they feel threatened. Chewbacca instinctively growls and bares his teeth at Han. He clearly thinks Han has lost his mind and intends to destroy the *Falcon* before allowing the *Avenger* to capture it.

Han withdraws his hand. "Just do it, okay?"

Chewbacca nods. With a last, lingering glance at the cockpit and his best friend, the Wookiee grimaces and opens the power dampeners wide.

The *Falcon* shoots toward the *Executor*, the screams of its over-stressed sublight engines echoing through the hull. The Wookiee roars in glee, then closes the dampeners to a safer level. On his flight computer, Han watches the TIE blips rush to cut off his escape route. It will be close.

An instant later, dozens of energy bolts flare ahead, creating a storm of multicolored death that overshadows even the Widow's menacing darkness. The *Falcon* lurches as if she has struck a cosmic spiderweb. The *Avenger* has loosed a warning turbolaser salvo! As the brilliant energy bursts fade, even the *Executor* rocks gently from the nearby concussion.

"Fire again!" yells the pilot. If he can lure one Imperial Star Destroyer into atomizing another, Han will feel no grief.

Chewbacca points to the flight computer and snarls. The TIE fighters drew back when the *Avenger* fired!

Han aims the *Falcon* directly at the *Executor*'s belly. She streaks within 200 meters of the mighty ship—too close for the Super Star Destroyer's weapons to target. The *Avenger* dares not fire, either, for fear of hitting her flagship.

The *Falcon* passes beneath the *Executor*'s immense bulk. The TIE fighters circle as aimlessly as trapped insects, searching in vain for the freighter. Fortunately for Han, the Corellian vessel's white body camouflages her from visual sighting, and her proximity to the *Executor* renders instrumental scans useless.

Three seconds later, the *Falcon* flashes from beneath the destroyer and is lost in the inky blackness of the nebula. Nothing can find her now.

- Turn to section 73.

109

The interior of the tavern is no more inviting than the outside was, but Han and Sodarra don't stop to savor the atmosphere. Just to the right of the entrance, Han spies a durasteel door—obviously the lift to the higher floors.

The human bartender glanced up assessingly in their direction when they first entered; now the Corellian gives him a short nod.

"We're going up."

Without missing a glass, the man slaps the bar-rag with which he is wiping out his crystal against a hidden button, and the durasteel doors hiss apart behind them.

• *Turn to section 101.*

110

Han studies the Twi'lek. "How much is your help worth?" he asks.

The Twi'lek's eyes clear a bit. "That depends."

"On what?" Sodarra demands impatiently.

The Twi'lek sneers. "On how much you know about Shador." He holds out his hand.

- *If, in section 144, Han decided to give the Twi'lek nothing, turn to section 104.*
- *If, in section 144, Han decided to give the Twi'lek 1-5 credits, turn to section 85.*
- *If, in section 144, Han decided to give the Twi'lek 6-9 credits, turn to section 77.*
- *If, in section 144, Han decided to give the Twi'lek 10 or more credits, turn to section 97.*

111

"We have no choice, then," Han says. "We'll drop out of hyperspace tomorrow and turn toward Shador." A moment later, he asks, "Leia Organa really is Alfreda Goot, isn't she? I'd hate to lose this race if it endangered Leia."

Sodarra nods and sighs. "Trust me; you are making the wisest decision for all. If you will excuse me, I will break the news to my men."

The commander leaves the cockpit and goes back to the cabin lounge. Han remains in the pilot's seat and stares at the vast emptiness ahead. Sodarra's hesitation does not make sense. He is certain that the *Falcon's* Quadex Power Core can energize any cloaking device worthy of the modifier "compact." Perhaps the ex-Imperial fears that Han, being a smuggler, will find the cloaking device too useful to sell. He has a point.

Four hours later, Chewbacca enters the cockpit and reports that he has found nothing wrong with the programs. The Wookiee nearly roars with frustration.

"Forget it for now," Han says. "We have a few days to fix it. Let's go back to the cargo hold. There's something I want to hook up."

The Corellian climbs back to the cockpit access corridor, then peers down the main access corridor

into the cabin lounge. Sodarra and his stormtroopers are engaged in quiet conversation. Only the Captain faces the exposed portion of the corridor, and his attention is on his men. Han signals Chewbacca to keep quiet. The Wookiee looks puzzled, but nods his head. Sodarra would surely be angry if he caught them snooping around the cloaking device. Han prefers to delay the confrontation until after the device is attached; it will be less likely to grow violent.

They sneak quickly down the walkway to the cargo bay bulkhead. The door squeaks as the pilot opens it. He curses himself for not paying more attention to non-functional maintenance. Chewbacca follows him into the bay, then Han closes the door and activates the ceiling illumination.

A black plasteel crate, nearly four meters high and five meters wide, sits in the middle of the hold. A long seam runs down its middle. The latches have no security locks.

Han releases the latches and the seam cracks open. A large black ball rests inside. Chewie grabs one side of the crate and pulls. The seam opens to a width of a meter. The ball is a TIE fighter cockpit!

Han whistles in astonishment. "If a TIE can power the cloaker, then the *Falcon* can!"

Chewbacca opens the crate further and steps inside. "Can we hook it into our power core?" Han asks.

The Wookiee mutters a response. He sounds nervous.

"Too bad," the pilot says. "Smuggler's luck. Maybe we can sell it to the Alliance. This prototype ought to be worth a fortune."

A loud thump resounds from the crate. Chewie's arm flops onto the floor.

"Chewbacca!"

The arm remains limp. Han kneels and feels a rapid, weak pulse. Grunting with effort, he pulls the Wookiee out of the crate. Chewbacca is out cold, though he shows no sign of physical injury.

The Corellian draws his blaster and steps inside. The hair on his neck bristles with—is it anticipation or fear? It is dark inside, though some light slips into the crate via the opened seam. He circles the cockpit; nothing unusual. Han climbs onto one of the shortened support pylons and peers inside.

A man sleeps in the pilot's seat. The smuggler presses his face against the viewport. He sees the shape of a head—no, a helmet. A broad neck guard flares from the back of the brim and frames what Han cannot yet see of the face. He wants to say the armored helm is black, but that is not quite correct. An aura of blackness hangs about the helmet, defying the ceiling illuminators to shed light on this particular head.

Han continues to stand on the pylon. A breathing screen hides the face from view. Like the helmet, the screen is completely dark. It is a grotesque parody of a face. Where there should be eyes, there are two hollows. A terrible darkness looks out from those soulless holes.

There should be a nose. Instead, a flat circular area suggests a grotesque deformity. Below that protrudes a triangular filter resembling nothing quite so much as a grinning mouthful of fangs.

Unaccountably, the pilot trembles. "Vader!" he whispers. The air seems suddenly stifling and foul, as if the

essence of evil has penetrated the cockpit's airtight seals and is seeping into the close confines of the plasteel box.

Han stumbles out of the crate, pale and gagging. He feels afraid in a way he has never known fear. But his body is reacting to more than fear—he feels polluted, as if standing that close to the Dark Lord has covered him with a film of corruption.

Chewbacca twitches and moans as if suffering a terrible nightmare. Han shakes his shoulder. "Wake up!"

Chewbacca growls without opening his eyes. The growl is not ferocious—it is pitiful.

Han shakes harder. "Chewbacca, snap out of it!"

Chewbacca bellows and sits up straight. He flings Han across the room, then opens his eyes. Han realizes then that he has never before seen true, mortal terror in the Wookiee's expression.

"Ooooggggggh," Chewbacca moans.

"It's okay," the pilot says, standing. "Vader's unconscious—or something. We've got to get rid of him."

They discuss their options, and finally decide to attach a chrono-fused bomb to the cockpit. Darth Vader, as far as they are concerned, practices the blackest arts. Without understanding the reason, Han knows that opening the cockpit and blasting the dormant figure would be foolish to the point of suicide. No, they have to destroy Vader without waking him—while his dark powers sleep with him.

After they enter normal space, Chewbacca will get the drop on the Imperial captain and his men. Han will

evacuate the cargo hold, then trigger the chrono-fuse. A few minutes later, the bomb will destroy the cockpit and Vader with it. They will dump Sodarra and his "deserters," then head for Tatooine to meet Leia.

Chewie takes Han's chronometer and goes out the port side bulkhead to the engineering station. The pilot nervously paces the hold, expecting Sodarra to charge into the bay at any moment.

Twenty minutes later, the Wookiee returns with the bomb and Han's chronometer. To trigger the bomb, Han simply has to enter the fuse delay on his chronometer, then activate it. The Corellian relaxes a little. They'll be heroes again.

"Wait until Leia hears about this."

Chewbacca grunts a response.

"You're right," Han says. "She'll think we're just making excuses for losing the race. Get the holocorder!"

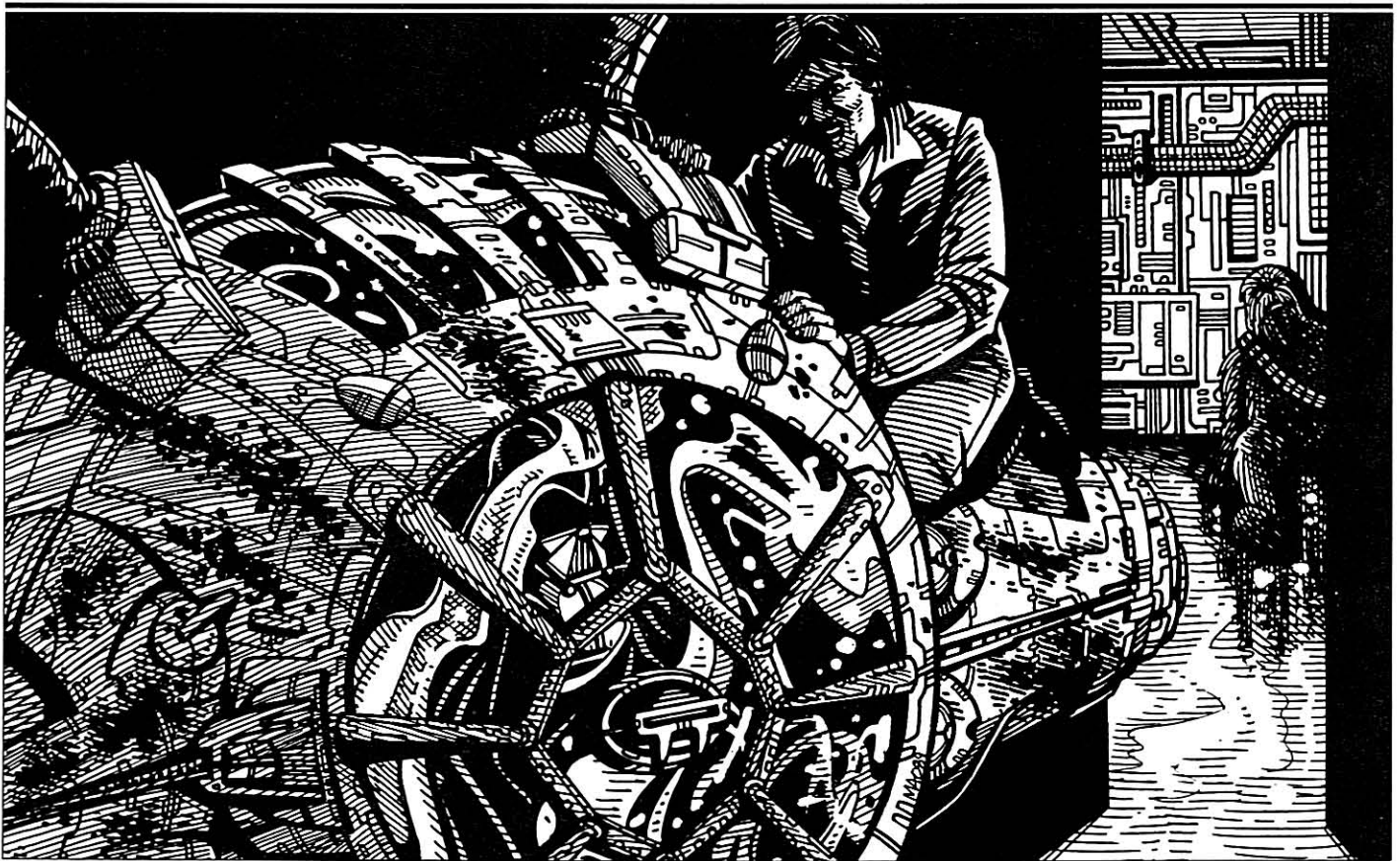
"Urrgh?"

"So we can prove we destroyed Darth Vader!" the pilot says. "Leia will be unbearable if she thinks she beat me in a fair race!"

Chewbacca moans in bewilderment and goes to get the holocorder. Han plants the bomb on the back of the cockpit, then awaits Chewbacca's return. A few minutes later, the starboard bulkhead door opens.

Sodarra stands in the doorway, two stormtroopers at his back. Each holds a blaster rifle trained on Han.

The smuggler looks at the blaster rifles, then at the crate, then back to Sodarra. "This isn't a cloaking device," he says accusingly.



Sodarra smiles. "No, it is not. And we are hardly deserters. Perhaps you would have been wiser not to discover the truth."

"What is the truth?" Han demands.

The Imperial officer motions Han back. A trooper goes to the crate and glances inside to make sure Vader's cockpit remains undisturbed. "My men will take care of our cargo," Sodarra says. "No doubt, being a friend of Leia Organa, you recognized Lord Vader?"

"Yeah, I recognized His Vileness." The trooper prods Han toward the bulkhead.

Sodarra steps aside. "Flattery may save your life, Captain Solo. Shall we join your friend in the lounge?"

"So why is the *Eradicator* after you?"

"Political differences. Governor-General Vellam envies our commander's influence with the Emperor. The destruction of the Death Star made the situation worse."

Han enters the lounge. Two of Sodarra's men guard Chewbacca with blaster rifles. "How so?" Han asks.

Sodarra motions the pilot to a seat. "The battle of Yavin occurred in Vellam's sector. To punish Vellam for allowing the Rebels to establish a base under his nose, the Emperor placed five of Vellam's most productive planets under Vader's administration—"

"But how can he have known Vader lived?" Han interrupts.

"Like Lord Vader," Sodarra explains, "the Emperor has ways. However, I think he underestimated Vellam's spite."

"A bad mistake," Han says. "But it looks like Vader is nearly dead, anyway."

"The Emperor assures us he is merely dormant. When we open the cockpit, he will awaken."

"So why haven't you opened it?" the Corellian demands. "You sure could have saved me a lot of trouble!"

"Indeed, why not?" Sodarra asks. "I have answered enough questions. Let us say Vellam has done all he can to prevent our success. You, Captain Solo, will do all you can to ensure it—you will take us to Shador."

Han shakes his head. "Do it yourself," he says.

"I have considered this option," Sodarra replies. "But Lieutenant Birdloe informs me that you have placed certain security programs in the flight and nav computers."

"Sharp guy," Han comments.

"You have a choice," Sodarra continues. "Take us to Shador or die—your friend goes first."

Instead of answering, Han looks at his wrist chronometer, then quickly glances at Chewbacca. The Wookiee shakes his head slightly, indicating he has not revealed the presence of the bomb. "When you put it that way, I'd say we better get started on new hyperspace calculations."

• *Turn to section 144.*

112

Han's blaster rifle flares. The first bolt catches one Altorian square in the chest and drops him before the lizard fires a shot. Sodarra's rifle blazes in the same instant, severing the Twi'lek's remaining skull tentacle. The beggar drops beneath a table, and Han notes

with interest that Sodarra values vengeance above his own life.

The three remaining lizards dive for cover, peppering the corner with red and green bolts. Han drops to the floor and feels a sharp pain in his belly. He does not know whether he has been hit or has just fallen in a bad spot. At the moment, he is too busy to worry about it. The thieves have trapped them in a corner. Someone long ago boarded the windows and Han doubts that the bartender has called the lift.

"How do I get into these things?" he moans.

Sodarra slams into the corner. At first, the Imperial remains motionless and Han thinks his companion has been killed. A second later, however, Sodarra crawls forward and finds shelter behind an overturned table.

"Too bad," Han mutters. A fresh round of Altorian fire reminds him that Imperial officer or not, he needs Sodarra. Han squeezes his rifle trigger half a dozen times. A burst of blue energy slices a table in half; when the halves part, a dead Altorian lies on the floor. Sodarra fires again and yells triumphantly in a language Han does not know.

The last Altorian bolts for the door. Han fires once and the lizard loses its right arm. The wound does not even slow the Altorian down; it dives out the door into the murky canal.

The Twi'lek stands, holding one hand over the stump of its skull tentacle. "Please," he begs. "We aren't going to hurt—"

Sodarra's blaster cuts him short. Han turns his weapon on the bartender just in time. The burly man is reaching down behind the bar. "Don't!" Han warns. "Just call the lift."

The bartender gulps, then nods his head and presses a button. A moment later, the lift door opens. "We're going upstairs now," Han says. "It will be better if we returned to an empty bar."

Surviving patrons scramble for the exit.

• *Turn to section 101.*

113

Han and Chewbacca stop in front of the Dockside Cafe. It is constructed of the new plasfoam blocks gaining popularity on desert and arctic worlds alike. There are only a few assorted ground transports parked around the building, but the volume of chatter which drifts into the scorched streets whenever the door opens indicates a sizeable crowd.

Though this is not one of the ageless taverns free-freighters prefer, it must draw its clientele from the surrounding spaceport. Han dislikes the place immediately. The absence of free-freighters in a spaceport bar means the presence of tourists, shipping line crew, Imperial personnel, and other chumps.

Han signals Sodarra and his men to wait, then steps into the cantina doorway. The tavern is stylishly decorated in an art-galactic theme. It is also clean, filled to three-quarters capacity, and too well lit for Han's tastes.

The customers are, for the most part, clean-cut and of harmless appearance. Only a few are armed. A dozen insectoids sit at a table near the entrance,

chirping and clacking their forelimbs together in a serious argument. A bug-eyed piscine lies on a bar couch holding a drink-tube between two fins. From the way its artificial gills puff, Han knows the fish will bother no one.

He studies the rest of the patrons. There are creatures with one eye and a dozen ears, and creatures with a dozen eyes and no ears. Some of the aliens have skin, some fur, and one or two a glistening, rough-textured surface that defies description. A steady gaggle of conversation in a dozen alien languages buzzes throughout the room. The place makes the pilot nervous—no one expects trouble. When it develops, they will panic or interfere. Neither is to his advantage.

Chewbacca nudges Han and nods toward the other side of the room. In the shadows of the back corner, eight aliens of various races sit without conversing. There are two Gamorreans, a Twi'lek, two Togorian males, and three four-eyed, six-armed anthropoids Han does not recognize. Han cannot see whether they are armed.

"Looks like they're waiting for someone," Han says.

Chewie grunts a barely audible comment.

"Maybe it is Alfreda," he answers, "and maybe not. After all, this is Mos Eisley." The smuggler hesitates. He can use Sodarra's troopers to chase the aliens from the bar. But if they are not Alfreda's hirelings, he will be tipping his hand to anyone she does have in the cantina. If they are Alfreda's goons, chasing them off before she arrives will give him a tremendous advantage.

- If Han brings Sodarra's stormtroopers into the cantina now, turn to section 131.
- If Han sends Sodarra and his men to hide until Alfreda arrives, turn to section 148.

114

Han wrenches sharply to port and tries to break the Avenger's grasp. The Falcon lurches, then spins out of control. Within seconds, the TIE fighters close in. Han tries to target the gun wells, but his vessel's spin makes that an impossible task. The TIEs pick the weapons off at their leisure.

When the Falcon finally stops spinning, she is helpless. All of her ship-to-ship weapons have been disabled. The armed spacetrooper shuttle approaches, and two dozen men in bulky armor leap from its airlock toward the freighter. Han activates the Falcon's anti-personnel blaster cannon and hits two troopers. Before he can do any more damage, a trooper launches a miniature proton torpedo from his suit and even that blaster cannon is destroyed.

The two smugglers check and recheck their weapons for the next two minutes. A bowcaster and heavy blaster pistol are poor matches for zero-g combat armor. Han does not know how he can escape this time, but he is determined not to rot in an Imperial brig.

At last, several clunks echo from the port side. A moment later, the airlock security system flashes an override warning.

Spacetroopers pour into the cabin. Han and Chewie return fire, but their weapons have little effect on the

heavy armor. A spacetrooper points his blaster rifle at Han. A red flash blossoms in his eyes, then Han feels himself falling. His ears ring.

"I wonder why they bothered with the airlock?" he thinks. His vision fades entirely and Han feels as though he is falling from a great height.

Where will the smugglers wake up—in an Imperial brig? Will Han find out why they bothered with the airlock after all? Our heroes are too resourceful not to escape Imperial clutches—but that is another story. This adventure has come to a close. Return to section one and try again.

115

Before he can maneuver, a laser burst explodes atop the Falcon. A deafening roar rumbles through the hull as it vibrates with the force of the direct hit. Han instinctively grabs his aching ears and closes his eyes.

When he opens them against, the cockpit has fallen dark. Chewbacca's stunned form slumps in the copilot's seat, silhouetted against the pale starlight outside. A loud hiss drifts down the access corridor; the Falcon is losing pressure.

"Chewbacca!" Han yells, "this is no time for a nap!"

Chewbacca does not respond. Han stands and puts a hand behind the Wookiee's ear. His pulse is strong and steady, but Chewie still does not respond when Han tries to waken him.

"Well, first things first," Han mumbles. He goes aft to seal the bulkhead door before trying to activate the emergency life-support systems. "Just like a Wookiee to stick me with the emergency repairs."

Another laser shot bursts in front of the cockpit. The Falcon rocks gently with the shockwave.

How long will it take Han to repair the Falcon? Will Chewbacca be all right? What if they get captured by the Imperials? However they get out of this mess, Han and Chewie have lost the race—and ended this adventure. Return to section one and try again.

116

"You make sense," Han says. "I'll wait here. Then when Chewie gets back, we can head out together."

Sodarra breathes a sigh of relief and smiles. "You are a good judge of character," he says. "I will need some method of reporting back—in case there is trouble."

Han gives Sodarra his comlink.

Time crawls. Waiting has never been one of Han's strong points, and Chewie's continuing absence escalates his tension. Why did he give Sodarra the comlink? Now he cannot contact the Wookiee and find out what's holding him up.

Just as Han is pacing the lounge area for the fiftieth time, the co-pilot's heavy tread sounds on the entry ramp.

The Corellian sprints for the corridor, but there is nothing amiss with Chewbacca.

"What took you so long? We're not on vacation, here."

Chewie cocks his head at Han's remark, but says nothing as he unloads the supplies. Han fills him in on the details of Sodarra's actions. Chewbacca growls an uneasy question.

"What can he do?" Han responds. "Any trouble from him and Vader pops like Rigorian bloodmite."

And the wait begins again. But Han feels immensely calmer knowing where his partner is.

Sodarra calls on the comlink a few minutes later and reports that Alfreda is in the cantina with Leia. "She has eight desperate-looking creatures in the tavern, and one lookout outside."

Han raises his voice to include the stormtroopers. "Let's go."

• Turn to section 145.

117

Han and Chewbacca have been watching the doppler-shifted streaks of starlight for three hours. They are in the last period of hyperspace before the next jump. The smugglers have nothing to do except watch the ship fly itself. Although the *Falcon* needs some maintenance, they feel uncomfortable working with so many eyes about. Besides, they have repaired the worst of the recent damage.

Captain Sodarra and the stormtroopers are polite, but Han senses that he has nothing in common with the Imperial deserters. The troopers spend their time

sharpening their martial disciplines or discussing what they will do after selling the cloaking device. He would not tell them as much, but Han suspects they will spend the rest of their lives dodging Imperial bounty hunters.

"I can't figure Leia," the Corellian says. He wants to talk, and Leia is the only subject he and Chewbacca have not talked to death. "Just when I think she's a regular human being, she gets huffy and starts acting like a princess. Does she like us or not?"

Chewie grunts a response.

"It doesn't matter?" Han repeats. "That's easy for a Wookiee to say. You don't understand humans." Chewbacca is not in a talkative mood, but Han can restrain himself for only five minutes. "Maybe she just doesn't like Wookiees."

The co-pilot snarls an indignant question.

"Lots of people don't like Wookiees," Han says. "It's nothing personal."

"Oooooouugh!"

"What makes you think it's me she doesn't like? She probably got herself kidnapped just so I'd rescue her!"

Chewbacca growls, then falls silent.

Something clicks in Han's mind. He stares out the viewport, barely aware of the emptiness he watches. An hour later, he says, "I know who Alfreda Goot is! She's Leia!"

The look Chewie gives Han says he is crazy.

"Who's ever heard of Alfreda Goot? How would she have found us on Ord Mantell? Who but Leia would challenge me to a race? This crazy race is Leia's way of trying to prove she's as good as I am!"

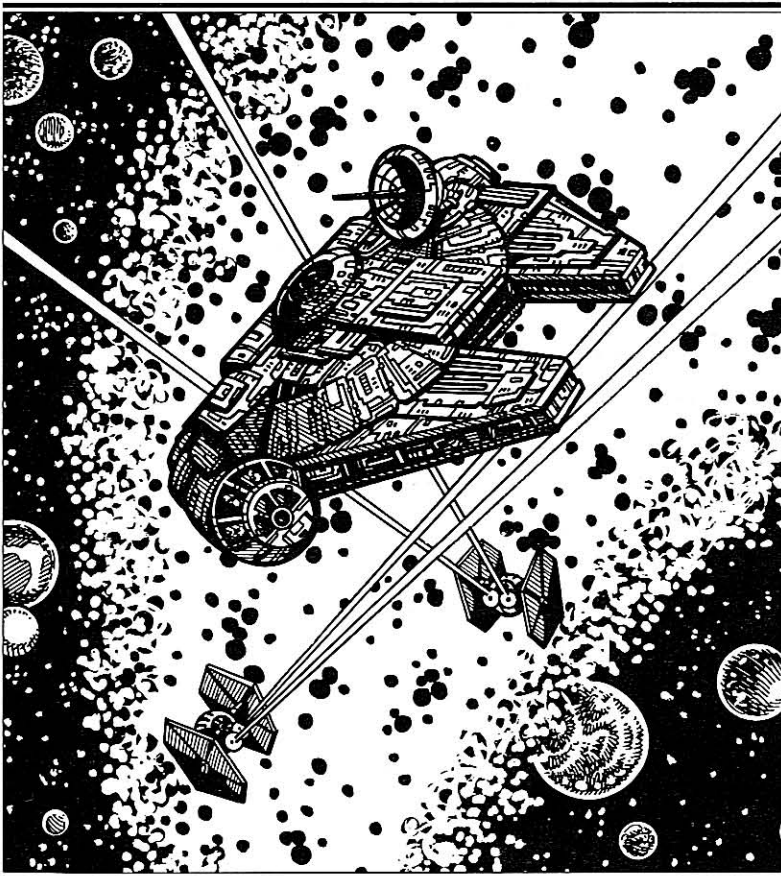
Chewbacca shakes his head and returns to staring out the forward viewport.

Ten hours later, everyone aboard the *Falcon* is happy to drop to sublight speeds. The beauty of the Aldo Spachian Comet is legendary. Trapped between two stars of an otherwise unremarkable binary system, the comet is so spectacular that men risk death for a close look. Any pilot wishing to pass close has to fly a tightrope between its two stars. Overcompensating to escape one star's gravitational attraction often means plunging into the other.

Han rechecks the course plotted by the nav computer. The quickest route to Tatooine runs right between the stars, through the comet's coma, a gaseous sphere 100,000 kilometers across. Buried somewhere inside the coma is a 10 kilometer chunk of dirty ice, rock, and metal which they will probably not see unless they hit it. Han briefly considers flying around the entire system. But Leia—or Alfreda—will no doubt risk the shortcut. Han does not intend to be outdone by a woman, whatever her name.

The comet currently hangs almost exactly between Aldo and Spach. Even from a distance of several tens of millions of kilometers, each star is the size of the *Falcon* and shines with an intensity that would dim a turbolaser blast by comparison.

Most comets have two tails, a straight one with a fiery appearance, and a glowing, slightly curved one. The Aldo Spachian Comet has four tails, two straight and two curved. The straight, fiery tails shoot a quarter million kilometers in opposite directions from the coma. They end in stubby, mushroom-like caps. The straight tails are created when the solar wind passes



through the coma and drags away certain ionized gases. Because the Aldo Spachian Comet has two stars, it has two tails of ionized gases. The Corellian guesses that the unusual stubby tail caps are created when the solar wind of the opposite star forces the tail to curl back on itself.

The glowing, curved tails sweep away from the coma, also in opposite directions. They consist of dust particles so fine that the touch of starlight knocks them into space. Perhaps a half-million kilometers from the coma, each tail turns back in a great arch and tapers to a narrow point that ends abreast of the coma.

"Now that I have seen such beauty, I would happily die," Sodarra comments.

"You just may," Han says. He shifts his attention to plotting the safest route between the two stars.

What he sees on the flight computer's vidscreen concerns him more than the danger posed by the twin suns. A large wedge has appeared only 85,000 kilometers behind the *Falcon*. Two smaller silhouettes have separated from the large one. It can only be a Star Destroyer dispatching TIE fighters!

"They followed us!" Han yells. "How'd they do that?"

Sodarra looks over the pilot's shoulder at the flight computer and curses. Then he points to the transmission actuation switch. It is in the "on" position again.

"I told you to fix that!" Han yells at Chewbacca. "Do I have to do everything myself?"

For a moment, the Wookiee looks as if he will tear Han limb from limb. His face quickly sags into depression, however, and he moans an apology.

"At least the *Eradicator's* not coming after us," Han says. "Yet."

"It will not," Sodarra promises. "Vellam will not risk his prize so close to the gravity wells of a double-star—but I am certain those are his best pilots."

The Corellian accelerates. The TIE fighters are much faster than his vessel. But if he can lure them into the comet, away from reinforcements, the *Falcon* stands a good chance of winning the battle. As the freighter enters the comet's hazy dust tail, Sodarra assigns two men to operate the gun wells. The two TIEs enter just behind the *Falcon*.

Although the tail is not dense, its dust particles emit a brilliant ghostly light. The ambient glare impairs Han's vision as badly as a dark room would have. It is like flying inside an immense illumination tube.

TIE energy bursts flash past the *Falcon* every half-second. Each bolt quickly dissipates, leaving a red streak of fluorescing dust in its wake. Han pays the spurts of light no attention; the tricky gravity wells of Aldo and Spach keep him too busy to worry about potshots. The freighter bucks and gyrates wildly as Han fights to walk the tight-rope between the two stars.

"Hold your fire," Captain Sodarra orders his men. "Until we reach a stable gravity plateau, you are only wasting energy."

A few minutes later, the *Falcon* reaches the coma. Like the dust tail, it is a mass of glowing particles—except it is much brighter and more dense. A trail of twisting colors leads generally ahead. Although Han sees out of the coma easily enough, looking deeper into it hurts his eyes. This relatively dense region is a near vacuum by planetary standards, but it contains

dozens of atoms per square centimeter. Each atom glows with every erg of energy it has absorbed from two suns.

The ship ceases bucking. They have reached an area of equal gravitational pull between the two stars. "Time to fight!" Han says, pulling into a tight loop.

During the long hyperspace jump, Han, Chewbacca, and their guests drain one power cell from the Falcon's batteries. Keep track of the number of power cells they use during this adventure.

- If Han concentrates fire on one TIE fighter, turn to section 100.
- If Han splits his attention between both fighters, turn to section 67.

118

Han fires past the Gamorrean charge at one of the humans. His shot goes wide, then he has to face the porcine creatures face-to-face. A Gamorrean axe crashes to the floor on Han's right. Another clangs off the wall to his left. "We need maneuvering room!" the smuggler yells. He rushes to the center of the lounge and leaps atop the holoconsole. The image of the Twi'lek continues to dance. Han almost feels as if he has two bodies.

Sodarra follows him into the room, but chooses to stand on the floor at Han's back. Both men fire their blaster rifles at the bosses. Han briefly glimpses one man staring dumbly at a smoking wound in his torso. Sodarra lets out a victory whoop.

The Gamorreans swing their vibroaxes again. Without their human superiors, the green-skinned brutes fight without discipline. Han jumps a slow swing, then side-steps a haphazard thrust. He pulls his blaster trigger twice and two Gamorreans stumble backward, puzzled expressions on their pained faces.

Han turns to help Sodarra, but the wiry Imperial has already downed his opponents. Two mounds of gray-suited green flesh lie at his feet.

"Why'd they bother buying suits for those things?" Han wonders.

Sodarra is already too busy to respond. He searches cubicle 452 first, then goes through the effects of their opponents. So thorough is the Imperial Captain that it requires several hours. Han does not bother to help. He knows why they were ambushed; one of Sodarra's men has arranged Taslo's death.

"I cannot understand this!" Sodarra says at last. "Who are these mercenaries? What happened to Taslo?"

Han does not explain. It makes no difference to him whether his bomb or Governor-General Vellam kills Vader. He looks at his chronometer. The bomb will detonate in an hour. If he doesn't succeed in ejecting Vader before the device explodes, Han hopes Leia will eventually learn what he has done. He isn't as concerned that she knows why he lost her race as he is that she knows why he and Chewbacca died. Han doesn't consider himself one given to noble sacrifices, but after standing close to Vader he has a better understanding of what motivates Leia—and young

Luke Skywalker, too. Without understanding why, it seems important that Leia know that he has shared some small part of her dream.

The Corellian nudges a corpse with his foot. "I don't think they're going to spill the beans," he says. "Let's get back to Mud Station before the *Eradicator* arrives." Han wants one last chance to save the *Falcon*, Chewbacca, and himself.

"Yes," Sodarra answers. "If they know we came to Shador, and it is apparent they do, they might have arrived by now."

As they step into the lift, Sodarra says, "It is unfortunate we are enemies. You would make a worthy friend."

"Yeah," Han answers. "Too bad."

"Perhaps I can persuade Lord Vader to pardon you? If I seek you for my unit, it is possible."

Han shakes his head. "Sorry. Your choice of company stinks."

The lift door opens into an empty tavern. Han leads the way toward the exit.

The Imperial sighs. "Then we must remain enemies."

"I guess so," Han sneers. He isn't sure whether the offer should insult or flatter him.

As they step outside, half a dozen energy bolts strike the door frame.

"Now what?" Han gripes.

A team of stormtroopers approach Zeboron Gamma in a broadhorn. Han fires at the large craft, then runs up the walkway toward a swift-looking bateau. Sodarra, providing covering fire, follows more slowly.

Han jumps into the bateau. A furred biped about a meter tall sits at the helm. It jabbars at Han in a tongue he does not understand, and its large eyes show its anger.

"Sorry, shortstuff!" Han says. He grabs the furry creature and tosses it into the slimy canal. The effort strains his left shoulder; the creature weighs much more than it appears to. Sodarra leaps into the boat.

"Can you drive this?" he asks.

"Does it have an engine?"

Han's question puzzles Sodarra. "Of course."

"Then I can drive it," Han answers.

A pair of mucky paws grab the gunnel. Han smacks them with his rifle butt. The creature whines and slips back into the scummy canal.

Han engages the drive and the bateau leaps away from the walkway. Sodarra continues to fire back over Han's head. Considering their relationship, Han feels less than comfortable about that. However, he has no time to object. With the throttle open wide, they streak up the canal.

A blaster bolt zips through the turbine support structure. Han starts involuntarily, then begins dodging wildly. Energy bursts sizzle into the filthy water on both sides of the boat, scenting the air with ammonia.

"We'll soon lose them!" Sodarra yells. He continues to fire at the pursuers. With Han jerking the boat in random directions, he has small chance of hitting anything.

"Wanna bet?" Han answers. They are fast approaching a collapsed building. Han doubts that he can negotiate the narrow channel leading through the debris at his present speed.

Just before the dam, a side canal opens to the right. It is perhaps two meters wider than the partially-dammed channel.

• If Han tries to negotiate the dam-narrowed channel, turn to section 96.

• If Han turns into the side canal, turn to section 102.

119

As Han and Sodarra walk up the *Falcon's* entry ramp, Han checks his chronometer. Twenty minutes.

"Prepare to leave port!" Sodarra orders.

"What happened?" Lieutenant Birdloe demands, following them toward the cockpit. The Captain tells Birdloe what they found in Fink's Hole.

"If Vellam has stormtroopers there," Birdloe says, "the *Eradicator* must be here. Perhaps leaving port is not wise."

"What would you do?" Sodarra snaps. "Wait until Vellam's agents come here, too?"

"No, sir," Birdloe replies meekly.

Sodarra remains motionless for several minutes. Only the faint trembling in his upper lip belies his anger. At last, he says, "Vellam is everywhere; we cannot hide from him. Perhaps we must simply run."

Han checks his watch. Fifteen minutes. "Now hold on," he says. "First I saved you, then I brought you to Shador. If you think I'm going to try outrunning a Star Destroyer—"

"You can take your chances against the *Eradicator*," Sodarra says, drawing his sidearm, "or you can die here."

Han pushes the blaster barrel aside with one finger. "It's no big deal," he says nonchalantly. "Where are we going?"

"I must think," Sodarra says.

Five minutes later, Chewbacca reports they are ready for lift-off. Sodarra still does not give the order to leave. Han is growing nervous. His last hope is to blow the external cargo hatch and evacuate the hold before the bomb explodes. That will not work unless they are in space.

"Tatooine," Sodarra says at last. "I may find help there, and it is outside Vellam's sector."

The Corellian checks his watch. Four and half minutes. "Fine," he says. He streaks skyward and swings around the planet, hoping to avoid the *Eradicator*.

Once they are in space, Han enters Tatooine's coordinates in the nav computer and activates the astroga program. Three and a half minutes.

Chewbacca growls an urgent warning.

The pilot drops his attention to the flight computer vidscreen. A destroyer-sized wedge approaches from the far horizon. It is dispatching a squadron of TIE fighters. "Looks like the party's over," Han says. "They'll be here in four minutes."

"Battle stations, Lieutenant Birdloe!" Sodarra orders. The lieutenant goes to the main cabin to spread the alarm. "I don't see the problem, Captain Solo," Sodarra says. "The nav computer should finish the calculations in plenty of time."

"This isn't a D&S Supercircuit," Han bluffs. "We need at least six minutes for that calculation."

Sodarra levels his gun at Han. "Let's hope not."

Chewbacca moves a paw to the cargo hold evacuation switch. Han checks his watch. Two minutes—still enough time to recover the crate, if Sodarra acts fast. Han shakes his head ever so slightly.

All three watch the TIE fighters close in. The pilot moves away, but at far less than top speed. He wants Sodarra's men to be concentrating upon a space battle when he blows the cargo hatch.

The nav computer beeps and displays the ready signal. Thirty seconds. Han does not activate the hyperdrive.

"Go to hyperspace!" Sodarra demands. The first long-range TIE shots burst to starboard.

"No," Han says. "We've got to dump a bomb."

"A bomb?" Sodarra asks.

Han smiles. "Yeah. It used to be a cloaking device."

A look of terror crosses Sodarra's face. "Lord Vader?"

Han looks at his chronometer. "Fifteen seconds," he announces.

Sodarra laughs bitterly and holsters his blaster. "Then we both lose, Captain Solo."

The pilot does not like Sodarra's tone. "How?"

"I know Alfreda Goot. Lord Vader has hired her on occasion. She is a ruthless murderer."

Han stops the countdown. Three seconds. "You just bought some time."

"Alfreda is a bounty hunter," Sodarra explains. "If she has Leia, Darth Vader will not make his final journey alone."

"You knew that Alfreda wasn't really Leia?"

"Yes," Sodarra says. "All along."

Han hits Sodarra, then jumps from his chair and grabs the Imperial in a choke hold. "You lying scum!" The Imperial has purposefully misled him and placed Leia's life in danger, and that angers Han beyond control. His fury surprises even him; if it was his own life that Sodarra threatened, he would have remained more calm and in control of himself. He tightens his grip on Sodarra; he just can't help himself.

The *Falcon* rocks with the first near miss. Its laser cannons flare in response. Chewbacca ignores the melee and takes control of the freighter.

"Swamp slug!" Han screams. The race he had dismissed as a stupid practical joke now seems the most important thing in the galaxy; he has to win it—just as soon as he finishes with Sodarra. "I'll kill you!"

"How will that help her?" Sodarra gasps. "Or do you simply seek a scapegoat for her death as well?"

Han relaxes his grip. "What are you saying?"

"That Alfreda kidnapped Leia to lure you into a trap. You would have seen this, were you not so determined to lay your troubles at her feet."

A TIE fighter screams past the cockpit. A half dozen of the *Falcon*'s probing energy bolts follow close behind. "The race was a set-up?" He releases Sodarra entirely.

The Imperial nods.

"Then it can't be Leia's fault!"

"Precisely," Sodarra says. "What are you going to do about it?"

Chewbacca growls a warning about the destroyer's range.

Han looks around the cockpit as if awakening from a long sleep. "Eight TIEs at medium range, and the *Eradicator* closing to tractor beam. How about Vader's life for Leia's, no tricks?"

"Agreed," Sodarra says. "Now, activate the hyperdrive."

"Not yet."

"What now?" Sodarra yells.

"We still have someone to dump," he says. Han tells Sodarra about the open transmission channel. "One of your men must be working for Vellam."

"I have been as blind as you," Sodarra says. "There is no other explanation. But who?"

"I know how to find out."

Han overrides the automatic switcher in the power core, and manually punches over to the next cell in the hodge-podge of power cells and power core from which the *Millennium Falcon* draws her energy. The freighter's ship-board lights flicker.

A moment later, Sodarra makes an announcement over the intercom. "Attention. The *Falcon* is disabled; we cannot flee. We will fight until the last minute, then eject Lord Vader's cockpit and overload the ship's power core. Of course, this means our deaths, but perhaps it will shield our commander from detection."

Sodarra and Chewbacca go to guard the cargo hold. Han attempts to dodge TIE shots without revealing that the *Falcon* is fully functional.

Thirty seconds later, the port escape pod ejects. "Target the escape pod," Han orders. Four bolts strike the unarmored pod almost instantly, then Han activates the hyperdrive.

Han's trick does not drain any power cells. Check the tally you have been keeping. If the travelers have drained four or more power cells from the Falcon's batteries, turn to section 136.

• *If they have used three or less power cells, turn to section 105.*

120

"Sorry," Han says. "You're still an Imperial officer. We'll go together."

Sodarra sighs in frustration. "You could be leading us into a trap!"

"Or avoiding one," Han replies. "I want everybody in one place, and then we all go at once, and there's no backstabbing. I like my back whole, thank-you very much."

The Imperial looks like he would carry the argument further, but Chewbacca's arrival with the supplies forestalls any more discussion for the moment. Han helps stow rations, and not-so-surreptitiously check the ship for take-off. He has the feeling they won't be leaving Tatooine in a leisurely fashion.

At last satisfied with the ship's condition, he turns to the Wookiee. "I think it's time to put in a visit 'dock-side'."

Chewbacca growls his agreement.

"Very well, then," Sodarra says. "At least let me have a comlink so that I can contact you if we get separated."

"Not on your life," Han says. Although Sodarra's stormtroopers have radios inside their armor, those radios can only be used to contact each other. With a comlink, Sodarra can contact any Imperial soldier within an hour of Tatooine. Han does not feel like trusting him that far.

• *Turn to section 147.*

121

Han sidesteps Alfreda's claw, but the bounty hunter spins and scratches his torso. He barely notices.

The woman has made a mistake. She now stands dangerously off-balance. Han catches her claw hand and pins it against her torso. He pushes. She topples and they both clatter to the ground. They fall on his blaster, and it skitters down the alley.

Han lands atop his armored opponent. He now has her at a serious disadvantage. No matter how light or sleek one's armor, it is an encumbrance when the wearer is prone. Han grabs the helmet with his free hand and smacks it against the pavement. Sparks fly from the translator and it begins to hiss.

Alfreda smashes an armored right fist into Han's ribs. The blow has tremendous power; he nearly blacks out, but manages to hold on to her helmet and claw hand. He ignores the pain and dizziness and bangs Alfreda's helmet against the pavement again. The translator ceases functioning altogether, and Alfreda hits him another time.

Although the blow feels weaker, Han does not know how many more he can withstand. Her armor is obviously electronically enhanced, and his ribcage is a poor match for a micropower plant. She hits him again and Han gasps for breath.



He feels groggy. The scratches in his chest burn. "P-p-poison!" he gasps. Alfreda hits him again and Han tumbles away. She rolls, then rises to her knees, struggling against the armor.

Han's abuse of the helmet has loosened the power coupling. A few more good blows can sever the connection altogether. He tries to rise, then finds he has grown too weak. The poison is already taking effect.

"Han!" Leia yells.

He painfully turns in her direction. Alfreda lifts her claw to strike. Leia stands over his blaster, her hands still bound. Han's groggy mind cannot comprehend how she intends to fire the blaster with her feet.

Alfreda lunges and he rolls. The blades strike next to his head. So sharp are they that the claw lodges in the pavement. Leia kicks and the blaster clatters toward Han. He instinctively holds out his hand and the blaster touches his fingers.

Even through the gauze gathering in his mind, Han knows what to do. He presses the blaster against Alfreda's armor and pulls the trigger. There is a super-hot flash and a tremendous thump. The armored figure slumps, then crumples away to the ground. Blue streaks of static electricity hiss across the motionless suit.

Leia pushes it over with her foot. "There's an antidote in the utility belt," she says. "Hurry."

Han fumbles with the belt coupling and eventually releases it. The third compartment holds several capsules. He places one between his teeth and bites down. A cool gas hisses into his mouth.

A few moments later, he feels well enough to stand. His ribs ache terribly, but he knows they will heal in time.

"Chewie..." Han needs to know where his co-pilot is. He fumbles for his com-link just as the Wookiee's questioning roar bursts over the alley.

"Yeah, buddy, we're fine. Meet you inside?"

• Turn to section 138.

122

Han waves Sodarra forward, then enters the tavern ahead of the stormtroopers. When Sodarra's armored men appear, a quiet hush falls over the room. A hundred eyes, human and otherwise, watch the Imperials spread out through the crowd.

Sodarra glances at Han for instructions; the Corellian nods toward the eight rough-looking aliens. As the troopers move to the back corner, a rustle of relieved sighs follows them. The squad stops in front of the eight aliens. Sodarra says nothing.

"W-what did we do?" asks the Twi'lek.

Sodarra regards the Twi'lek carefully. "Perhaps you should tell me." Sodarra's voice carries a clear tone of menace.

The aliens regard each other warily. "We were just going, I think," the Twi'lek says.

"That would be a good idea," Sodarra answers. "Leave your weapons. Stay away from the spaceport."

The eight aliens hesitate. Blasters are expensive. Han turns his attention to the bartender. "Do you know

those guys?" he asks. The bartender does not answer; he is watching the stormtroopers with almost paternal concern for his property. He would never agree to anything which might damage his establishment.

Sodarra's men raise their rifles. The aliens reluctantly place their assorted blasters on the table and leave. The Imperials take their seats.

"What's going on?" the bartender asks.

"Nothing," Han says. "Just turn down the lights and nobody will get hurt." Han motions Chewbacca to an alcove near the main door.

Over the next twenty minutes, the other patrons finish their drinks and find excuses to depart. Han is sure their discomfort is due less to the dimmer lighting and more to the stormtroopers.

An hour later, the stockroom door opens. Leia stands in the doorway, her hands bound behind her back. Despite her situation, the Princess looks as confident and beautiful as ever. She peers into the darkened bar as if searching for a friend. Han hopes she still considers him that friend—if she ever has.

A figure stands behind Leia in a full duralloy suit of blaster armor. It matches the gray helmet Han has come to identify as Alfreda Goot. The bounty hunter holds a blaster pistol against the small of Leia's back. There is a black strap looped around Leia's neck in a slipknot; Han assumes Alfreda holds the other end.

"I win," Han calls merrily.

Leia turns toward Han's voice. "Han? I'm sorry. This is a trap—"

Alfreda jerks the strap and chokes off Leia's warning.

"This isn't your fault, Leia," the pilot says. "I know all about Alfreda."

Alfreda pushes Leia forward. "Then you must know what I want, Solo," she says. Alfreda has not yet seen the stormtroopers.

"You lured me here to collect Jabba's reward."

Alfreda nods. "It was easier than trying to bring you here by force."

Han pulls his blaster pistol. "Let her go, Alfreda."

A cold laugh crackles from Alfreda's translator. She aims her blaster pistol at Han. "You are in a poor position to issue orders." Alfreda says. Chewie steps out of the alcove and levels his bowcaster at Alfreda. His angle is little better than Han's. "I wondered where the mighty Chewbacca was," she comments.

"Second chance, Alfreda," Han warns. "Let her go."

Alfreda laughs again. "Sorry, Solo. I made a big investment in you. Look to the back corner."

Han smiles and looks. "So?"

Alfreda hesitates. Her confidence seems shaken for the first time. "Karlo?" she calls, still not looking away from Han. Leia turns her head. Her jaw drops in surprise, then she shoots a querying glance at Han.

Sodarra's stormtroopers do not move. Han can see that they have all trained their weapons on Alfreda. "Sorry," Han says. "Karlo had to leave."

Alfreda hazards a look. The dim light reflects off the stormtroopers' armor just enough to identify them. "How?" she gasps.

"Abduction is a crime against the Empire," Sodarra informs her. "Release the Princess!"

"She'll die, Solo!" Alfreda hisses. She fires a wild shot in Han's direction. He dives for cover and the bartender screams as a whole shelf of mugs crashes to the

floor. The troopers hold their fire and Han silently thanks Imperial boot camp for instilling them with so much discipline.

By the time Han stands, Alfreda has dragged Leia back into the stockroom. "Chewbacca, go around front," Han orders. "Someone cover the spaceport. I'll flush her out."

The Wookiee bellows a warning.

"You don't have to tell me to be careful!" Han responds.

He rushes into the stockroom. A long corridor leads toward the back of the room between two high rows of crates. At the end of the corridor, an unlatched door opens into the alley. Han pauses. The trail is too clear. A hunter like Alfreda would not be so easy to follow.

As he steps into the stockroom, a blaster bolt whistles past his head. The bartender screams in proprietary anguish as it explodes in the tavern. Han drops to the floor, then rolls to cover behind a crate. When he looks back down the corridor, Alfreda is dragging Leia into the alley. Han pauses for an instant. He does not want to risk hitting Leia, but unless Alfreda believes he will fire at her, she has an insurmountable advantage. Han fires a couple of shots into the wall.

Alfreda is not expecting that. When the energy bursts explode above her head, she panics and dives for cover, dragging Leia along. They land out of sight in the alley.

Han jumps to his feet and runs to the alley door. Alfreda is scrambling for her blaster, which Leia has somehow kicked away in their tumble. Though the effort chokes her, Leia struggles against the leash to keep Alfreda from reaching the blaster pistol. Her hands remain bound behind her back.

"It's over," Han calls, aiming his pistol at Alfreda.

Alfreda spins on her knees. At the same time, she pulls the leash tight around Leia's neck. "Not yet," she hisses. "I can still break Princess Leia's neck."

"And die yourself," Han warns.

Alfreda shrugs. "I am a bounty hunter. Life is cheap—even my own." She tugs the leash tighter with her left hand. Leia gasps for breath.

"What do you want?" Han asks.

"A fair end," Alfreda responds. "Throw aside your blaster and fight me with your hands."

• If Han drops his blaster pistol, turn to section 149.

• If Han fires at Alfreda, turn to section 135.

123

The bipeds fire. Han sees a flash of red and feels a sharp blow in his head. His ears ring and his vision dims.

"That's what I get for being a nice guy," he mutters.

Chewbacca bellows in pain. The floor trembles as his tremendous body collapses. Han tries in vain to lift his blaster...

Where will our heroes regain consciousness? Whether it's an Imperial brig, the local med station or Jabba the Hutt's palace, they've lost this adventure. Return to section one and try again.

124

Han's blaster rifle flashes. The first shot takes the Twi'lek square in the chest. "He is unarmed!" Sodarra yells. "Why worry about vengeance when our lives are at stake?"

Han shrugs. "He was the ring-leader."

Sodarra's rifle blazes, cutting a lizard in two. The other Altorians drop beneath a table and pepper the corner with blaster fire. Han feels a sharp pain in his belly and falls to the floor. Although he does not recall being shot, he knows that he has been wounded. At the moment, he is too busy to worry about it. The thieves have trapped them in a corner. Someone long ago boarded the windows, and Han doubts that the bartender called the lift.

"How do I get into these situations?" Han moans.

Sodarra slams into the corner, then slumps to the floor. "Couldn't happen to a nicer guy," Han mutters.

A fresh round of Altorian fire reminds Han that the odds are now three-to-one. He rolls for cover and pain lances his stomach. Han fires again, and an Altorian hisses in agony.

"Take that, slime-skin!" he yells. The odds are now two-to-one. Not bad for Han Solo.

A red burst flashes in his eyes. His vision blanks and he drops his head to the floor. He feels weak, too weak to fight. . .

What will the bar patrons do with Han now? How will he get back to the Falcon? Whether Chewie hunts him down or the local authorities 'clean up' or Sodarra's lieutenant takes the initiative, Han has lost this fight—and the race. Return to section one and try again.

125

"I thought you said it was a compact cloaking device," Han says. "If the *Falcon's* power core can't handle it, you'd need a frigate, and that's hardly compact."

"Perhaps—"

"Let's take a look," Han insists. "What harm can it do?"

"How do I know you'll return it?"

The smuggler smiles. "You have my word on it."

Sodarra sighs. "Very well. I'll meet you in the cargo hold. I must inform my men, or they will think you are stealing it."

"Fair enough," Han says.

Both men leave the cockpit. Han stops by the flight computer and gets Chewbacca, then goes to the cargo hold and activates the ceiling illumination. A black plasteel crate, nearly four meters high and five meters wide, sits in the middle of the hold. A long seam runs down the center. Han and Chewie carefully inspect the latches.

"Open it, Captain Solo," calls Sodarra. "There are no security locks."

Han looks toward the bulkhead door. Sodarra stands in the entrance with two troopers. All three carry blaster rifles. The engineering station bulkhead opens and three more stormtroopers enter. They, too, are armed.

"Why the blaster rifles?" Han demands. "I thought we had a deal!"

"Open it," Sodarra insists.

Han shrugs, then releases the latches. He and Chewbacca pull the crate open about a meter. Inside rests a TIE cockpit.

"The Empire can cloak fighters?" the smuggler questions. He turns to face Sodarra. "Do you know how much the Alliance will pay for this prototype?"

"Perhaps you should inspect it further," Sodarra says.

Han returns his attention to the crate and steps into the narrow opening. It is dark, though some light slips into the crate via the opened seam. The hair on his neck bristles with—is it anticipation or fear? He circles the cockpit; it does not look unusual, save that the support pylons have been severed close to the body. Han climbs up on one of the pylon stumps and peers inside.

A man sleeps in the pilot's seat. The Corellian presses his face against the viewport. He can make out the shape of a head—no, a helmet. A broad neck-guard flares down from the back of the brim, framing what Han cannot yet see of the face. He wants to say that the armored helm is black, but that is not quite accurate. An aura of blackness hangs about the helmet, defying the ceiling illuminators to touch light to this particular head.

Han continues to stand on the pylon. A breathing screen hides the sleeper's face. Like the helmet, the screen is completely dark. It is a grotesque parody of a face. Where there should be eyes, there are two hollows. A terrible darkness looks out from those soulless holes.

There should be a nose. Instead, a flat, circular area suggests a grotesque deformity. Below that protrudes a triangular filter resembling nothing quite so much as a grinning mouthful of fangs.

Unaccountably, the smuggler trembles. "It can't be!" he whispers. The air seems suddenly stifling and foul, as if the essence of evil has penetrated the cockpit's airtight seals and is seeping into the close confines of the plasteel box. Han stumbles out of the crate, pale and gasping. He feels afraid in a way he has never known fear before. But his body is reacting to more than fear—he feels polluted, as if standing so close to Vader has covered his body with a film of corruption.

"Being a friend of Leia Organa," Sodarra says, "you no doubt recognize Darth Vader?"

Chewbacca roars in alarm. Four stormtroopers raise their weapons to firing position.

"That's no cloaking device!" Han exclaims. "You lying Khoanian slime crab!"

Sodarra smiles. "Flattery just might save your life, Solo."

"What's going on here?" Han demands. "Why are you running from the *Eradicator*?"

"Political differences," Sodarra explains amicably. "Governor-General Vellam envies our commander's influence with the Emperor. The destruction of the Death Star worsened the situation."

"How so?" Han asks.

"The battle of Yavin occurred in Vellam's sector. As punishment, the Emperor placed five of Vellam's most productive planets under Vader's administration—"

"How did he know Vader lived?" the pilot demands. "Like Lord Vader, the Emperor has his ways," Sodarra says. "But he may have underestimated Vellam's spite."

"Or overestimated Vader's chances. He's nearly dead."

"The Emperor has assured us he is merely dormant," Sodarra says. "He will awaken when we open the cockpit."

"So why haven't you opened it?" Han asks.

"Indeed, why not?" Sodarra echoes. "I have answered enough questions. Let us say Vellam has done all he can to prevent our success. You, Captain Solo, will do all you can to ensure our success—you will take us to our agent on Shador."

The smuggler shakes his head. "Fly yourself."

Sodarra smiles. "We would, but Lieutenant Birdloe informs me you have placed certain security programs in the flight and nav computers."

"Sharp guy," Han comments. "But I'm not changing my mind."

Sodarra smiles. "If you do, I may let you live."

Han hesitates.

"The Wookiee will die first. It will be slow and painful."

"When you put it that way," answers the pilot, "we'd better start new astrogation calculations."

Sodarra orders two men to escort Han and Chewbacca to the cockpit. As Han makes preparations for dropping out of hyperspace, Chewie stares vacantly ahead. Lt. Birdloe stands behind them, his blaster rifle leveled at the Corellian's head.

"Aaarroogh, eeoogh," Chewbacca says at last.

"What did he say?" the stormtrooper demands.

"That we need to fix the transmission channel," Han lies. What Chewbacca has actually said is, 'I can build a bomb.'

"Forget that," Birdloe orders. "The *Eradicator* is too far behind to pick up on the signal."

"You ever been to Shador?" Han asks.

The lieutenant shakes his head.

"I didn't think so. If we don't fix that transmitter, we'll be praying for the *Eradicator* to show. Shador is the pirate's version of Ord Mantell."

"Okay," Birdloe says.

The pilot removes his wrist chronometer and gives it to Chewbacca. "We haven't got much time. Don't take more than a few hours."

Chewie accepts the chronometer. "Aaarroogh."

"He says two hours, tops," Han lies. The Wookiee actually says he will wire the fuse into Han's chronometer.

Birdloe assigns a man to accompany Chewbacca. "I'd advise that guy to stand a few feet away," Han warns. "Wookiees tend to tear things up when they get frustrated. It's a racial flaw."

"Thanks for the warning." Birdloe passes the smuggler's words onto the guard. Han smiles. Now he has only to attach the bomb to Vader's cockpit. No problem; all he needs is a plan. He can purposefully program an emergency hyperspace dropout into the nav computer, then attempt to attach the bomb during the resulting confusion. It will probably take Sodarra a few seconds to realize that the dropout may be a diversion. The question is, can the Corellian attach the bomb before Sodarra gets wise to him?

His other option is going to the engineering station to make some repairs, sneaking into the power core ventilation grill, then entering the cargo bay through the service access panel. Although this plan gives the Imperials no reason to believe anything is amiss, Han suspects it is the riskier of the two. Sodarra certainly expects the smugglers to attempt something, and his stormtroopers are disciplined enough to stay alert for the tiniest noise in the cargo bay.

- *If Han programs a hyperspace dropout into the nav computer, turn to section 89.*
- *If Han sneaks into the cargo bay through the power core ventilation grid, turn to section 103.*

126

Sodarra steps away cautiously. Something in his manner worries Han. The Imperial officer's hand drops to his utility belt.

Han nudges Leia and whispers, "Get to the *Falcon*, quick!" Leia moves to follow Han's instruction.

Sodarra withdraws Han's comlink. The Corellian winces; Sodarra has set up an ambush, and Han himself gave him the comlink to do it. He has to act fast; he can jump the Captain and attempt to keep him from activating the comlink. Unfortunately, with two stormtroopers in full armor to back him up, Sodarra will probably win the fight.

Or Han can draw his blaster pistol, giving him an advantage over the three Imperials.

- *If Han jumps Sodarra, turn to section 154.*
- *If Han draws his blaster pistol, turn to section 155.*

127

Han fires. His blaster bolt penetrates Alfreda's armor and the bounty hunter drops the leash. Han yells triumphantly.

Alfreda somehow finds the strength to fire again, nearly hitting Han. He drops to the floor and rolls, then comes up and fires once. The shot goes high, but Leia has crawled to safety.

Alfreda's gun flares again, sending a dozen shots streaking at Han's head. He pulls his trigger just as rapidly. For the next second, his world becomes a grid of colored death. Alfreda's red blaster bolts sizzle from her weapon in a fan-shaped pattern. His own blue energy bolts cross hers in mid-flight, burning diamond-shaped blocks into the air.

At length, the red bolts cease. He holds his fire. Alfreda lies motionless. Blue-green streaks of static electricity dance across the motionless armor. Leia steps from behind the bar and pushes the suit over with her foot. "That's it," she says.

Han guesses from the sound of things that the fight on the other side of the bar has nearly ended. Only an occasional potshot or the shuffle of stormtrooper armor indicates that Sodarra's men flush out the last of Alfreda's goons.

- *Turn to section 138.*

128

"Sorry," Han says. "You're an Imperial officer. We'll go together."

Sodarra groans in frustration. "You could be leading us into a trap!"

"Or avoiding one," Han replies.

Chewbacca growls his agreement.

"Very well, then," Sodarra says. "At least lend me a comlink, so that I can call you if we become separated."

"Forget it," Han says. Although all of Sodarra's troopers have short-range radios in their armor, they will be able to communicate only with each other. With a comlink, Sodarra can contact any other Imperial troops within an hour of Tatooine.

"Uuuuaoorrrr."

Han nods; Chewie is right. Some reconnoitering is smart. "All right, you go. Report back when you've checked out the docking bay, and we'll head out together."

Captain Sodarra looks as if he'll try one more argument, but a menacing rumble as the Wookiee leaves stills his attempt. Minutes later Han's comlink crackles as Chewbacca barks a short 'all clear.' The smuggler and the Imperials leave the *Falcon* to rendezvous with Chewie.

• Turn to section 153.

129

Han holds his fire, afraid of hitting Leia instead of Alfreda. With no such worries, the bounty hunter takes advantage of the situation and pulls her blaster trigger. Han's left leg goes numb and he falls to the ground.

Despite the shock, Han's head remains clear—but he still does not know what to do.

Alfreda does. She fires three times in quick succession. A bolt flares in Han's face and he screams in pain. A moment later, he can hear or see nothing. . .

Has the bounty hunter succeeded in capturing her prey, or is Chewbacca ready to rescue Han? Whatever happens, that's another story. This one has ended. Return to section one and try again.

130

The bipeds fire. A bolt whistles past Han's head so close that it burns. He returns fire and nicks one, but the hairy creature does not fall. Chewbacca fires his bowcaster and the bipeds' table disappears in spray of debris.

The hairy bipeds fire again. Han rolls and squeezes the blaster trigger. His shot finishes the wounded alien. Chewbacca bellows, then a bowcaster explosion sounds in the second alien's direction. A moment later, the firefight in Han's part of the bar has ended.

Han ignores the stormtroopers and grabs the bartender by the collar. "Where's Alfreda Goot?" he demands.

"Stop this!" the bartender screams. "You're destroying my livelihood!"

Han nods at Chewbacca. "See that Wookiee? He's going to destroy more than your livelihood."

The bartender fearfully regards the Wookiee, then drops his eyes. "I don't know," he lies.

Han jerks him over the counter. "Do it, Chewbacca!"

A blaster bolt flies over the bar close by. A collection of exotic drinking utensils crashes to the floor. "Please!" the bartender screams. "She made me do it!"

"What!" Han demands.

The bartender's eyes turn toward the stockroom. Han follows his gaze.

Leia stands in the doorway, her hands bound behind her back. Despite her situation, the Princess looks as confident and beautiful as ever. She studies the chaos in the bar as if concerned for a friend. Han hopes she still considers him that friend—if she ever did.

A figure stands behind Leia in full duralloy blaster armor. It matches the helmet Han has come to identify as Alfreda Goot. The bounty hunter holds a blaster pistol against the small of Leia's back. There is a black strap looped around Leia's neck in a slipknot; Han assumes Alfreda holds the other end.

"You lose," Alfreda says to Han.

Leia turns to Han. "I'm sorry. This is a trap—"

Alfreda jerks the strap and chokes off Leia's warning.

"Don't think this is your fault, Leia," Han says. "I know all about Alfreda."

"Then you must know what I want, Solo," Alfreda says. From her position in the storeroom, she cannot see who is winning the battle against her aliens—or even who is fighting it.

"You lured me here to collect Jabba's reward."

Alfreda nods. "It was easier than bringing you here by force."

Han aims his blaster pistol over Leia's shoulder. "Let her go, Alfreda."

A cold laugh crackles from Alfreda's translator. She points her blaster pistol at Han. "You avoided the worst of my trap," she says, "but you are in no position to issue orders."

Another stray energy bolt strikes the bar. A keg of foul-smelling liquid geysers into the air.

Chewbacca levels his bowcaster at Alfreda. "Second chance, Alfreda," Han warns. "Let her go."

Alfreda laughs again. "Sorry, Solo. I made a big investment in you."

Han smiles and says, "I suggest you take your losses and run—before my stormtroopers finish your goons."

Alfreda hesitates. Her confidence seems shaken for the first time. She steps further into the room. "Karlo, how goes it?" she calls, still not looking away from Han. Leia turns her head toward the fight. Her jaw drops open in surprise, then she shoots a querying glance at Han.

Alfreda hazards a look into the back section. The stormtroopers have cornered the aliens and are systematically picking them off.

"How?" she gasps.

"A little trade," Han answers. "I save Darth Vader, they save Princess Leia."

Alfreda does not respond. If a suit of armor could look puzzled, Han imagines that Alfreda's suit would be green with curiosity.

"You what?" Leia screeches.

"I saved your life," Han replies evenly. "I thought you'd appreciate it."

"By helping Vader?"

"It was a tough decision."

"Traitor!" Leia yells. "I'll see you court-martialed!"

"I'm not in your crummy army, remember?"

"Aarrogh!" interrupts Chewbacca.

"Why should I bother?" Han demands. "She wants to die so bad!"

"As she will, Solo!" Alfreda fires a wild shot in Han's direction.

"Don't shoot back!" Han yells to his companions. "You might hit Leia, and if anyone gets to kill the Princess, I do!" Alfreda is already dragging Leia into the stockroom. "Go around front, Chewbacca. I'll flush her out. Whatever we do, we can't let her get to the spaceport."

Chewbacca bellows a warning.

"You don't have to tell me to be careful!" Han responds.

He rushes into the stockroom. There is a long corridor between two high rows of crates. It leads toward the back of the room. At the end of the corridor, an unlatched door opens into the alley. Han pauses. The trail is too clear. A hunter like Alfreda would not be so easy to follow.

As Han steps into the stockroom, an energy bolt whistles past his head. Someone in the tavern screams. Han drops to the floor, then rolls to cover behind a crate. When he looks back down the corridor, Alfreda is dragging Leia into the alley. Han pauses for an instant. He does not want to risk hitting Leia, but unless Alfreda believes he will fire at her, she has an insurmountable advantage. Han fires a couple of shots into the wall.

Alfreda was not expecting that. When the energy bursts explode above her head, she panics and dives for cover, dragging Leia along. They land out of sight in the alley.

Han jumps to his feet and runs to the alley door. Alfreda is scrambling for her blaster, which Leia has somehow kicked away in their tumble. Though the effort chokes her, Leia struggles against the leash to keep Alfreda from reaching the pistol. Her hands remain bound behind her back.

"It's over," Han calls, aiming his pistol at Alfreda.

Alfreda spins on her knees. At the same time, she pulls the leash tight around Leia's neck. "Not yet," she hisses. "I can still break sweet one's neck."

"And die yourself," Han warns.

Alfreda shrugs. "I am a bounty hunter. Life is cheap—even my own." She tugs the leash tighter. Leia gasps for breath.

"What do you want?" Han asks.

"A fair end," Alfreda responds. "Throw aside your blaster and fight me with your hands."

- If Han drops his blaster, turn to section 151.
- If Han fires at Alfreda, turn to section 139.

131

Han waves Sodarra forward, then enters the tavern ahead of the stormtroopers. When Sodarra's armored men appear, a quiet hush falls over the room. A hundred eyes, human and otherwise, watch the Imperials spread out through the crowd.

Sodarra glances at Han for instructions; the Corellian nods toward the eight rough-looking aliens. As the troopers move to the back corner, a rustle of relieved sighs follow them. The squad stops in front of the eight aliens. Sodarra says nothing.

"W-what did we do?" asks the Twi'lek.

Sodarra regards the Twi'lek carefully. "Perhaps you should tell me." Sodarra's voice carries a clear tone of menace.

The aliens regard each other warily. "We were just going, I think," the Twi'lek says.

"That would be a good idea," Sodarra answers. "Leave your weapons. Stay away from the spaceport."

The eight aliens hesitate. Blasters are expensive. Han turns his attention to the bartender. "Do you know those guys?" he asks. The bartender does not answer; he is watching the stormtroopers with almost paternal concern for his property. He would never agree to anything which might damage his establishment.

Sodarra's men raise their rifles. The aliens reluctantly place their assorted blasters on the table and leave. The Imperials take their seats.

"What's going on?" the bartender asks.

"Nothing," Han says. "Just turn down the lights and nobody will get hurt." Han motions Chewbacca to an alcove near the main door.

Over the next twenty minutes, the other patrons finish their drinks and find excuses to depart. Han is sure the dim lighting has less to do with their discomfort than do the stormtroopers.

An hour later, the stockroom door opens. Leia stands in the doorway, her hands bound behind her back. Despite her situation, the Princess looks as confident and beautiful as ever. She peers into the darkened bar as if searching for a friend. Han hopes she still considers him that friend—if she ever has.

A figure stands behind Leia in a full duralloy suit of blaster armor. It matches the gray helmet Han has come to identify as Alfreda Goot. The bounty hunter holds a blaster pistol against the small of Leia's back. There is a black strap looped around Leia's neck in a slipknot; Han assumes Alfreda holds the other end.

"I win," Han calls merrily.

Leia turns toward Han's voice. "Han? I'm sorry. This is a trap—"

Alfreda jerks the strap and chokes off Leia's warning.

"This isn't your fault, Leia," the pilot says. "I know all about Alfreda."

Alfreda pushes Leia forward. "Then you must know what I want, Solo," she says. Alfreda has not yet seen the stormtroopers.

"You lured me here to collect Jabba's reward."

Alfreda nods. "It is easier than trying to bring you here by force."

Han pulls his blaster pistol. "Let her go, Alfreda."

A cold laugh crackles from Alfreda's translator. She aims her blaster pistol at Han. "You are in a poor position to issue orders," Alfreda says. Chewie steps out of the alcove and levels his bowcaster at Alfreda. His angle is little better than Han's. "I wondered where the mighty Chewbacca was," she comments.

"Second chance, Alfreda," Han warns. "Let her go."

Alfreda laughs again. "Sorry, Solo. I made a big investment in you. Look to the back corner."

Han smiles and looks. "So?"

Alfreda hesitates. Her confidence seems shaken for the first time. "Karlo?" she calls, still not looking away from Han. Leia turns her head. Her jaw drops in surprise, then she shoots a querying glance at Han.

Sodarra's stormtroopers do not move. Han can see that they have all trained their weapons on Alfreda. "Sorry," Han says. "Karlo had to leave."

Alfreda hazards a look. The dim light reflects off the stormtroopers' armor just enough to identify them. "How?" she gasps.

"Abduction is a crime against the Empire," Sodarra informs her. "Release the Princess!"

"She'll die, Solo!" Alfreda hisses. She fires a wild shot in Han's direction. He dives for cover and the bartender screams as a whole shelf of mugs crashes to the floor. The troopers hold their fire and Han silently thanks Imperial boot camp for instilling them with so much discipline.

By the time Han stands, Alfreda has dragged Leia back into the stockroom. "Chewbacca, go around front," Han orders. "Someone cover the spaceport. I'll flush her out."

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The bipeds fire. A bolt whistles past Han's head so close that it burns. He returns fire and nicks one, but the hairy creature does not fall. Chewbacca fires his bowcaster and the bipeds' table disappears in spray of debris.

The hairy bipeds fire again. Han rolls and squeezes the blaster trigger. His shot finishes the wounded alien. Chewbacca bellows, then a bowcaster explosion sounds in the second alien's direction. A moment later, the firefight in Han's part of the bar has ended.

Han ignores the stormtroopers and grabs the bartender by the collar. "Where's Alfreda Goot?" he demands.

"Stop this!" the bartender screams. "You're destroying my livelihood!"

Han nods at Chewbacca. "See that Wookiee? He's going to destroy more than your livelihood."

The bartender fearfully regards the Wookiee, then drops his eyes. "I don't know," he lies.

Han jerks him over the counter. "Do it, Chewbacca!"

A blaster bolt flows over the bar close by. A collection of exotic drinking utensils crashes to the floor. "Please!" the bartender screams. "She made me do it!"

"What!" Han demands.

The bartender's eyes turn toward the stockroom. Han follows his gaze.

Leia stands in the doorway, her hands bound behind her back. Despite her situation, the Princess looks as confident and beautiful as ever. She studies the chaos in the bar as if concerned for a friend. Han hopes she still considers him that friend—if she ever did.

A figure stands behind Leia in full duralloy blaster armor. It matches the helmet Han has come to identify as Alfreda Goot. The bounty hunter holds a blaster pistol against the small of Leia's back. There is a black strap looped around Leia's neck in a slipknot; Han assumes Alfreda holds the other end.

"You lose," Alfreda says to Han.

Leia turns to Han. "I'm sorry. This is a trap—"

Alfreda jerks the strap and chokes off Leia's warning.

"Don't think this is your fault, Leia," Han says. "I know all about Alfreda."

"Then you must know what I want, Solo," Alfreda says. From her position in the storeroom, she cannot see who is winning the battle against her aliens—or even who is fighting it.

"You lured me here to collect Jabba's reward."

Alfreda nods. "It was easier than bringing you here by force."

Han aims his blaster pistol over Leia's shoulder. "Let her go, Alfreda."

A cold laugh crackles from Alfreda's translator. She aims her blaster pistol at Han. "You avoided the worst of my trap," she says, "but you are in no position to issue orders."

Another stray energy burst strikes the bar. A keg of foul smelling liquid geysers into the air.

Chewbacca levels his bowcaster at Alfreda. "Second chance, Alfreda," Han warns. "Let her go."

Alfreda laughs again. "Sorry, Solo. I made a big investment in you."

Han smiles and says, "I suggest you take your losses and run—before my stormtroopers finish your goons."

Alfreda hesitates. Her confidence seems shaken for the first time. She steps further into the room. "Karlo, how goes it?" she calls, still not looking away from Han. Leia turns her head toward the fight. Her jaw drops open in surprise, then she shoots a querying glance at Han.

Alfreda hazards a look into the back corner. The stormtroopers have cornered the aliens and are systematically picking them off.

"How?" she gasps.

"A little trade," Han answers. "You know—I scratch their backs, they scratch mine."

Alfreda does not respond. If a suit of armor could look puzzled, Han imagines that Alfreda's suit would be green with curiosity.

"You what?" Leia screeches.

"I saved your life," Han replies evenly. "I didn't think you'd nit-pick on the details."

"By helping Imperials?"

"It was a tough decision."

"Traitor!" Leia yells. "I'll see you court-martialed!"

"I'm not in your crummy army, remember?"

"Aarrogh!" Chewbacca interrupts.

"Why should I bother?" Han demands. "She wants to die so bad!"

"As she will, Solo!" Alfreda fires a wild shot in Han's direction.

"Don't shoot back!" Han yells. "You might hit Leia, and if anyone gets to kill the Princess, I do!" Alfreda is already dragging Leia into the stockroom. "Go around front, Chewbacca. I'll flush her out. Whatever we do, we can't let her get to the spaceport."

Chewbacca bellows a warning.

"You don't have to tell me to be careful!" Han responds.

He rushes into the stockroom. There is a long corridor between two high rows of crates. It leads toward the back of the room. At the end of the corridor, an unlatched door opens into the alley. Han pauses. The trail is too clear. A hunter like Alfreda would not be so easy to follow.

As Han steps into the stockroom, an energy bolt whistles past his head. Someone in the tavern screams. Han drops to the floor, then rolls to cover behind a crate. When he looks back down the corridor, Alfreda is dragging Leia into the alley. Han pauses for an instant. He does not want to risk hitting Leia, but unless Alfreda believes he will fire at her, she has an insurmountable advantage. Han fires a couple of shots into the wall.

Alfreda does not expect that. When the energy bursts explode above her head, she panics and dives for cover, dragging Leia along. They land out of sight in the alley.

Han jumps to his feet and runs to the alley door. Alfreda is scrambling for her blaster, which Leia has somehow kicked away in their tumble. Though the effort chokes her, Leia struggles against the leash to keep Alfreda from reaching the pistol. Her hands remain bound behind her back.

"It's over," Han calls, aiming his pistol at Alfreda.

Alfreda spins on her knees. At the same time, she pulls the leash tight around Leia's neck. "Not yet," she hisses. "I can still break sweet one's neck."

"And die yourself," Han warns.

Alfreda shrugs. "I am a bounty hunter. Life is cheap—

even my own." She tugs the leash tighter. Leia gasps for breath.

"What do you want?" Han asks.

"A fair end," Alfreda responds. "Throw aside your blaster and fight me with your hands."

• *If Han drops his blaster, turn to section 149.*

• *If Han fires at Alfreda, turn to section 135.*

133

Han blocks Alfreda's first slash with his right forearm. The blades leave four deep cuts, but the wounds cause no serious pain.

The pilot snakes his left foot behind Alfreda's right leg, then pushes with all his strength. She strikes the ground hard, her armor clattering against the stone pavement. She attempts to roll, but Han catches her with a swift kick to the helmet.

As long as she remains on the ground, her protection works to her disadvantage. No matter how sleek or light a person's body armor, it encumbers a prone wearer. Han has to exploit his advantage if he is to defeat the bounty hunter.

He kicks again, but he feels dizzy and weak as his foot strikes. It is then that he notices the tremendous sting flooding his body from his wounds. He feels groggy.

"P-p-poison?" he stammers.

A cruel chuckle rumbles from Alfreda's translator. "Somniject. Not fatal—but you lose."

Han kicks again, then loses his footing and feels himself falling.

Where will Han wake up? Will Leia still be a prisoner? Will Chewie figure out what has happened? Alfreda is right—Han has lost the adventure. Return to section one and try again.

134

The lift door closes behind Han. "I hope I don't regret this," he says. Although his arm hurts terribly, the shock has subsided enough that he can use it.

"You won't," Sodarra promises. He fires at the humans again. "My men had execution orders in case you returned alone."

"Some pal," Han says. He jams the butt of his blaster rifle into a Gamorrean's stomach, then turns the weapon toward another of the axe-wielding aliens and pulls the trigger. It falls, screaming in agony.

• *Turn to section 118.*

135

Han lowers his blaster, as if he is going to drop it. "Release Leia," he says.

Alfreda drops the leash. Leia rolls away, gasping for breath.

"Drop the weapon, Solo," Alfreda says.

"Don't!" Leia warns. "Watch out for the—"

Han lifts his blaster to fire. In the same instant, Alfreda curls her left hand into a fist. Four gleaming



blades spring from her forearm armor and lock into place.

Han pulls the trigger and Alfreda leaps to attack at the same instant. His blaster bolt bounces off her armor, then Alfreda is on him.

• Turn to section 141.

136

"I have difficulty accepting that Birdloe is the traitor," Sodarra says. "His record is excellent."

"Serves you right for believing a report," Han says. "I trust only my instincts—I'm a great judge of character." They have just come out of hyperspace. A vast globe which casts a flickering topaz light into space hangs below the *Falcon's* viewport. The planet is almost bright enough and large enough to be a small sun, but it is not. It is, at last, the desert world of Tatooine. Its peculiar starlike glow is the result of sodium-rich sands phosphorescing in the light of its twin suns.

Sodarra studies Han with a sardonic grin. "We shall see how well you judge character, Captain Solo." Sodarra's men are ready for action, and Darth Vader's crate has been prepared for unloading.

Han taps his chronometer. "Don't think I trust you for a second," Han says. "Double-cross me, and three seconds later Vader is cosmic dust." Chewbacca has sealed Vader's crate with a tamper-proof lock. Any attempt to remove the cockpit before Han deactivates

the bomb will trigger an explosion. It is Han's insurance policy.

"I was speaking only of Alfreda Goot," Sodarra says. "She is as ruthless as she is enigmatic."

"Sure," Han responds. Sodarra does not need to remind Han of the Imperial insurance policy. He and Chewbacca have not been without an armed escort since leaving Shador. Despite their pledge not to double-cross each other, neither man is taking any chances.

When the spaceport officials call for ship registry, Han discovers that the *Falcon's* radio is malfunctioning—whether from battle damage or general disrepair isn't obvious. Chewie grumbles about maintenance as Han tries to hear their berth designation through a symphony of pops and crackles.

"I heard Bay 32, am proceeding to that location," the Corellian finally replies. "Never did like that Chedak circuitry much. It's sloppy," he mutters for the general audience. Captain Sodarra refrains from comment.

Han descends to the haphazard arrangement of crater-shaped depressions Mos Eisley calls a spaceport. As soon as the *Falcon* touches down, Sodarra gives one of his men a voucher chip and sends him to pay the berthing fees. Han sends Chewbacca along to re-provision the *Falcon* on the Imperial's tab—they might have to leave in a hurry, and Han wants to be sure he doesn't have to pause for supplies. Unlike Shador, no port master on Tatooine will dare refuse Sodarra's voucher; the planet is seldom without Imperial visitors now.

As they wait for Chewbacca and Sodarra's man to return, Han is silent and reflective. He still hopes he can find a way to destroy Vader, though he will not risk Leia's life in order to do so. Having accepted that she did not fake her own kidnapping, Han is determined to save Leia—even if it means letting Vader live. He has no doubt that Leia will disapprove of his decision, but if he allows the Princess to die because he has a price on his head, Han knows that the rest of his life will be as pointless as it will be miserable.

That Sodarra also intends to double-cross him, Han has no doubts. The man has already demonstrated his talent for deception. Han now analyzes everything the Imperial says and does, and his trigger finger never moves far from the chronometer. If Leia's life did not depend on cooperating with the Imperials, Han would long ago have detonated the bomb and taken his chances against their superior numbers. Unfortunately, he does not have that option.

Sodarra interrupts Han's reverie. "We do not know if Alfreda beat us or not. The wisest course is to reconnoiter the cantina before making our move."

"Good idea," Han says. "Let's go."

"One moment," Sodarra says. "Alfreda is undoubtedly expecting you. However, I doubt that my presence will alarm her. I should go alone."

Han hesitates. He does not like the idea of letting the Imperial officer out of his sight. On the other hand, Sodarra's proposal is sound and will no doubt provide an edge against Alfreda. In addition, it will keep him out of sight for a while. Han remains acutely aware that Jabba has placed a price on his head, and Jabba has spies everywhere on Tatooine. Within an hour of showing his face, Han realizes, one of Jabba's spies will report his location.

Chewbacca is getting the power cells recharged as well as picking up supplies. It is no longer necessary to keep track of the number of power cells they use.

- If Han sends Sodarra to reconnoiter the cantina, turn to section 116.
- If Han rejects Sodarra's proposal, turn to section 120.

137

"You make sense," Han says. "We'll wait here." Sodarra sighs and smiles. "You are a good judge of character," he says. "I will need some method of reporting back—in case there is trouble."

Han gives Sodarra his comlink.

After Sodarra leaves, Chewbacca growls a question. "What can he do?" Han responds. "Any trouble from him and Vader pops like Rigorian bloodmite."

Chewbacca rumbles uneasily.

Time crawls. Waiting has never been Han's strong point, and the tension on board the freighter mounts in direct proportion to the time elapsing.

At last, the Wookiee pushes himself to his feet.

"Maaurgh, roauungh?"

"No!" Han snaps immediately. "What if he comes back when you're out? We need to stay in touch."

Reluctantly, Chewie nods. But he doesn't return to his seat, instead prowling around the ship in search of an outlet for his frustration.

Han perches tensely in the pilot's chair. Where is Sodarra? Could he have figured some way around the smuggler's precautions? He could kick himself for giving a comlink to an obviously untrustworthy scout. Better to have braved Jabba's minions—

The comlink on the console crackles. Sodarra's voice comes in low and clear.

"Captain, my report."

Han grabs the slim cylinder, bellowing over his shoulder for the co-pilot.

"There are eight desperate-looking creatures in the tavern. I overheard one of them say that Alfreda is running late."

"Interesting," Han says. He motions to the Wookiee. "Let's go."

Chewie cocks his head toward the stormtroopers now at attention in the lounge.

"Oh, yeah." The Corellian raises his voice slightly. "Action, guys. We're meeting your captain at the cantina."

- Turn to section 113.

138

Han removes Alfreda's helmet—he wants to see the bounty hunter whom he has chased across the galaxy. He finds a Togorian female, as dainty and petite as any of her race. Her slit pupils are set in emerald eyes, now still and lifeless—though Han cannot picture the eyes as anything but cold and cruel in life. A dozen carefully clipped whiskers grow beneath a small fine-featured nose. Her mouth hangs open to reveal a predatory set of snow-white fangs. An immense head of flame-red hair frames her prominent cheekbones.

Leia stands beside Han. "Doesn't look like a killer, does she?"

Han drops the helmet. "I'm beginning to distrust appearances altogether," he says.

"Why's that?" Leia asks.

Han studies her carefully. He does not want to tell her the full story—not yet, anyway. "I don't know. Just a feeling, I guess." He steps behind her and unbinds her hands.

"I know what you mean," Leia answers. "I wasn't sure you'd come after me. Thanks—for all you did."

"I couldn't leave you in Alfreda's hands. It was my fault," Han pauses. "I must have known that all along."

She turns to face him. "You had a doubt?"

Han knows better than to admit the truth. "I came, but I'm not sure why. Sometimes I think I have a special feeling for you, Leia."

Leia's eyes betray her surprise. They also hint at something else; something she may be afraid to admit. "That's a very nice thing to say. Even if I don't always say it, Han, I think you're a—" She struggles to finish the sentence.

"A what?" Han asks eagerly.

"Captain Solo? Are you—" The Imperial commander questions, and the magic of the moment is lost. Han glares at Sodarra for interrupting, but when he turns back, Leia is all business, and all Princess, once more. What had she been about to say?

"It is finished, then," the Imperial says. He leads the way back into the cantina, where Chewie and the stormtroopers are warily eyeing each other. "The chronometer?"

Han looks toward Sodarra's men. They are not prepared for this fight—even if the enemy consists of only a man, a woman, and a Wookiee. Nevertheless, he knows it will be safer if they are not near.

"Why don't we go back to the *Falcon*?" Han says cautiously. "Just you and us?"

Sodarra smiles. "Yes, why not? But I insist on equal numbers." He motions to two men, then leads the way into the dry heat of Mos Eisley's dusty streets. Leia and Chewbacca follow Han.

Halfway to the spaceport, Han fingers the chronometer. "Now your weapons."

"You first," Sodarra says.

"I keep my pistol," Han says. "Deactivate your bowcaster, Chewbacca."

"Very well," Sodarra reluctantly agrees. "And I will keep my sidearm. They will do us no good holstered."

Sodarra's men toss their blaster rifles away. "We are now evenly matched," he says. "None of us is in condition to wrestle. The agreement?"

"When we get to the berth."

Sodarra scowls, but he nods. They resume walking.

"Agreement?" Leia demands.

"I am sorry, Princess," Sodarra says. "The terms of the agreement prohibit disclosure of its terms. As Captain Solo and I are both men of honor—"

Leia snorts.

"This must remain between us."

"Thanks," Han whispers. If Leia ever finds out, she'll never admit—whatever it was she'd been about to say in that lull after Alfreda's defeat.

"It will go as hard on me if anyone discovers our arrangement," Sodarra admits.

Outside the berth, Han deactivates the lock-explosive, then turns the chronometer over to Sodarra. Leia watches with interest.

• *Turn to section 126.*

139

Han lowers his blaster, as if he is going to drop it. "Release Leia," he says.

Alfreda drops the leash. Leia rolls away, gasping for breath.

"Drop the weapon, Solo," Alfreda says.
"Don't!" Leia warns. "Watch out for the—"

Han lifts his blaster to fire. In the same instant, Alfreda curls her left hand into a fist. Four gleaming blades spring from her forearm armor and lock into place.

Han pulls the trigger and Alfreda leaps to attack at the same instant. His blaster bolt bounces off her armor, and then the bounty hunter is on him.

• *Turn to section 121.*

140

Han enters the near end of the channel a few seconds before the canalboat reaches the far end.

Energy bolts continue to sing through the support structure as Han negotiates the rocky channel. Sodarra fires almost constantly, regardless of the fact that he stands as much chance of hitting the pilot as the pursuing stormtroopers.

They reach the bend and Han nudges the control stick. The bateau's aft skids to starboard and the whole craft shakes as it bangs into debris. The port side rises a full meter into the stinking air.

Han closes the throttle down and straightens the rudder. The hull flops back onto the water.

Sodarra screams in triumph and Han hazards a look back. The stormtroopers' broadhorn has slowed to a crawl at the channel mouth. It has only centimeters of clearance on each side.

Han opens the throttle wide again. The bateau shoots out of the channel as the canalboat enters. As they streak past, an astonished Twi'lek fights to steady his rocking craft.

"We'll be back to the *Falcon* in no time!" Han calls.

• *Turn to section 119.*

141

Han sidesteps Alfreda's claw, but the bounty hunter spins and scratches his torso. He barely notices.

The bounty hunter has made a mistake. She now stands dangerously off-balance. Han catches her claw hand and pins it against her torso. He pushes. She topples and they both clatter to the ground. They fall on his blaster, and it skitters down the alley.

Han lands atop his armored opponent. He now has her at a tremendous disadvantage. No matter how light or sleek one's armor, it is an encumbrance when the wearer is prone. Han grabs the helmet with his free hand and smacks it against the pavement. Sparks fly from the translator and it begins to hiss.

Alfreda smashes an armored right fist into Han's ribs. The blow has tremendous power; he nearly blacks out, but manages to hold on to her helmet and claw hand. He ignores the pain and dizziness and bangs Alfreda's helmet against the pavement again. The translator ceases functioning altogether, and Alfreda hits him another time.

Although the blow feels weaker, Han does not know how many more he can withstand. Her armor is obviously powered, and his ribcage is a poor match for a micropower plant. She hits him again and Han gasps for breath.

He feels groggy. The scratches in his chest burn. "P-p-poison!" he gasps. Alfreda hits him again and Han tumbles away. She rolls, then rises to her knees, struggling against the armor.

Han's abuse of the helmet has loosened the power coupling. A few more good blows can sever the connection altogether. He tries to rise, then finds he has grown too weak. The poison is already taking effect.

"Han!" Leia yells.

He painfully turns in her direction. Alfreda lifts her claw to strike. Leia stands over his blaster, her hands still bound. Han's groggy mind cannot comprehend how she intends to fire the blaster with her feet.

Alfreda lunges and he rolls. The blades strike next to his head. So sharp are they that the claw lodges in the pavement. Leia kicks and the blaster clatters toward Han. He instinctively holds out his hand and the blaster touches his fingers.

Even through the gauze gathering in his mind, Han knows what to do. He presses the blaster against Alfreda's armor and pulls the trigger. There is a super-hot flash and a tremendous thump. The armored figure slumps, then crumples away to the ground. Blue streaks of static electricity hiss across the motionless suit.

Leia pushes it over with her foot. "There's an antidote in the utility belt," she says. "Hurry."

Han fumbles with the belt coupling and eventually releases it. The third compartment holds several capsules. He places one between his teeth and bites. A cool gas hisses into his mouth.

A few moments later, he feels well enough to stand. His ribs ache terribly, but he knows they will heal in time.

• *Turn to section 152.*

142

Han's bateau speeds toward the approaching flatboat, tipping pirogue after pirogue in its wake. The scaly-faced pilot continues accelerating, all the while chirping insults.

Han risks a look behind. He cannot slow down; by the time the flatboat passes, the stormtroopers will catch him. They are scarcely fifteen meters away.

The bateau reaches the barge's stern ten seconds before the flatboat reaches the other end. The Corellian smiles; he will just clear the barge before the flatboat seals the other end. Another salvo of blaster bolts zip through the turbine superstructure. Alarmed squeals rise from the barge's reptilian crew.

They reach the barge's bow. Han jerks the control stick hard and their stern skids. For a long moment, the craft hangs on its port side, ready to topple over.

At last, the bateau settles and springs out of the flatboat's path. It bounces off the canal wall in front of the barge, then Han corrects its course. As they pass the flatboat, the scaly-faced pilot sneers at Han, revealing a long row of sharp incisors.

Han smiles, then glances back at the stormtrooper's broadhorn. The heavy broadhorn has followed Han into the bottleneck. There can be only centimeters between it and the barge. Scaly-face's eyes follow Han's gaze. It squawks once, then a tremendous clap echoes along the narrow canal.

Han does not have time to look at the crash. He has reached a wide waterway. Han turns toward Mud Station. "We'll be back at the *Falcon* in no time!" he informs Sodarra.

• Turn to section 119.

143

Han fires and a Gamorrean drops. Another charges his position, swinging a huge vibroaxe. Han blocks the swing with his blaster.

The axe severs it. A thunderous clap assaults his ears and a white flash blooms in his eyes. The concussion flings Han against a wall; the breath escapes his lungs.

As he slides to the floor, he grows vaguely aware of a terrible ache in his chest. He needs rest in the worst way.

Will the Imperial survive this fight—and rescue Han? Whose uniforms do the Gamorreans wear? Wherever Han regains consciousness, he'll probably wish he hadn't. But that's another story; this one is over. Return to section one and try again.

144

The trip to Shador lasts only two days, but it seems an eternity. Now that Sodarra's charade has ended, the atmosphere is tense and antagonistic in the *Falcon's* cramped quarters. A guard watches the smugglers at all times—even while they sleep.

Han's mood is sullen and rude, even to Chewbacca. He spends the trip alternately cursing himself for trusting Sodarra and silently berating Leia for getting him into this mess. Although Sodarra has hinted that he will release the spacers after Shador, Han harbors no illusions. Like all Imperial officers, the captain is an accomplished liar. As soon as he no longer needs the *Falcon's* crew, he will arrest or execute them.

As they drop into normal space, Sodarra steps into the cockpit. "You will be rid of us soon, Captain Solo."

Han fingers his chronometer. "One way or another," he mutters. The bomb will explode in ten hours—unless he cancels the countdown. Han hopes he and Chewbacca will be safely on their way to their rendezvous with Leia—even if they are now sure to lose the race.

Shador orbits its white sun at a distance of only a hundred million kilometers. Murky clouds of gray and black swirl over its surface, hiding its pariah population from the gaze of the galaxy's decent creatures. Where the clouds do not cover the planet, dirty-green seas and yellow-brown continents cast a mottled reflection back toward its star. Shador's air, Han remembers, stinks so badly that it hurts to breathe. It will be a fitting place to dump Darth Vader's body—but not his own, if he can avoid it.

Three of Shador's five moons hang in sight. From those moons, an odd assortment of starfighters rushes to meet the *Falcon*. There are two TIE fighters, an X-wing, and a couple of other craft Han does not recognize. He reaches to open a hailing channel.

The transmitter is already activated! Han pauses long enough to cause Chewbacca to take notice. This time, he does not suspect for even a second that Chewie failed to repair it correctly. The two of them worked the entire communications system over from hardware to software. Someone opened the channel and left it open intentionally! Han says nothing, however, and hails the approaching interceptors.

"Outlaw, outlaw! This is the free freighter *Millennium Falcon* requesting sanctuary."

The escort splits to all sides and approaches the *Falcon*. "Transmit the code," orders a coarse voice.

Han calls the outlaw code from the flight computer and transmits it to the X-wing. The response comes a moment later. "Welcome back to Shador, Han. You have the berthing fee this time?"

The smuggler switches off the transmitter and turns to Sodarra. "Do you have a thousand credits?"

Sodarra shakes his head. "I can issue an Imperial voucher."

"Great." Han activates the transmitter again. "My passenger's credit is good."

"It better be!" the voice snaps. "You know what we do to stiff's."

Since Captain Sodarra's contact lives in Fink's Hole, Han berths the *Falcon* at nearby Mud Station. The launch stations here lie in concrete-lined, durasteel cones. The cones rest above Shador's swampy surface on immense pylons.

After berthing the ship, Han takes Sodarra's voucher chip and meets the port boss, an Altorian bird. He has a large hooked beak, golden eyes, and a feathery skull-covering that sweeps away from his face. As the Altorian appraises him, Han feels as though the bird is more interested in eating him than in doing business with him.

As Han feared, the port boss has no interest in an Imperial voucher. They argue up and down bureaucratic channels for hours before the angry avian agrees to accept a blaster rifle as payment.

When he returns to the *Falcon*, Han finds Sodarra's humor no better than the Shadorian's. Vader's agent has not yet answered the Imperial's summons. Sodarra orders Han to guide him to the agent's address,

and Han has his second lengthy argument of the day. Sodarra insists upon wearing his uniform into Fink's Hole while Han remains entirely unarmed. But Shador is not a place to wear unusual uniforms advertising off-world origins—especially Imperial uniforms. And it is most definitely not a place to walk about lightly armed. After convincing Sodarra to remove his uniform and trust his captive with a blaster rifle, Han leads the way out of Mud Station.

Like all of Shador's burroughs, Fink's Hole is built upon massive support pylons sunk deep into the planet's swampy surface. Endless rows of dingy structures rise ten to twelve meters out of the swamp. The bottom floor of each building is dedicated to commerce—gambling dens, houses of ill-repute, weapons shops, and so forth. Prices, where actual numbers appear, are cheap, and a handful of credits would likely assuage just about any need a body could have. In front of each shop, life forms of every type walk, scuttle, or crawl along a narrow walkway.

A green, filmy canal, upon which float all types of shallow-water craft, separates the rows of buildings. Most of the boats, whether immense freight-hauling broadhorns or zippy passenger bateaus, rely upon hydrogen turbines for propulsion. The jets are mounted atop A-shaped, durasteel superstructures in the aft. The fact that Shadorians still use the ancient drive systems amazes Han. Although as fast and nearly as powerful as repulsor lifts, the hydrogen-turbines have maintenance problems—they occasionally explode.

Han guesses that, on the outlaw world, spare parts are easier to acquire for turbines than for repulsor craft.

The sweet smell of rot pervades the sulfury air to such an extent that Sodarra gags. "I didn't think bad smells bothered Imperials," Han comments.

An unexpected need to wretch cuts Sodarra's reply short. Han smiles and hails a public flatboat.

Han, who understands Shador's layout, works hard for the next hour to keep track of the taxi-boat's course. Sodarra quickly loses his bearings, and his face shows his frustration. Even to an experienced military officer, Shador's twisting canals are an impenetrable web of half turns and hairpins. The fact that the driver doubles-back several times to hike the fare only adds to Sodarra's confusion. When the rusty driver-Droid stops at last, Han pays the fare without objection—it won't hurt to let Sodarra believe their twisting course has been the most direct.

Han can only assume the flatboat has brought them to the right address, for none of the buildings are marked. This neighborhood has deteriorated more than most. Many buildings have no coverings over the windows or doorways, and several lie collapsed across the canals. These collapsed buildings create wide dams of debris, although someone has cleared narrow channels to maintain access to the neighborhood.

Han and Sodarra stand in front of a grimy five story building. A foreboding tavern occupies the lowest floor. The building next to the tavern has collapsed. Nothing but a pile of rubble remains. Derelicts of all races litter the walkways up and down the canal.

Han approaches a Twi'lek with an amputated right skull tentacle. The bum smells of cheap liquid intoxicants. "Can you tell me where Zeboron Gamma 452 is?"

The Twi'lek lifts his gaze to Han's face. His eyes are glassy and un-focused. "Sure can," he slurs. "And something else, too. How about a credit or three for my trouble?"

- *Decide how many credits Han should give the Twi'lek.*
- *Turn to section 110.*

145

Han and Chewbacca stop in front of the Dockside Cafe. They have purposely allowed the lookout to see the two of them and report to the cantina. Han hopes to surprise Alfreda with his escort of Imperial stormtroopers.

The building is constructed of the new plasfoam blocks gaining popularity on desert and arctic worlds alike. Only a few assorted ground transports crowd around the building, but the volume of chatter which drifts into the scorched streets whenever the door opens indicates a sizeable crowd.

Though this is not one of the ageless taverns free-freighters prefer, it must draw its clientele from the surrounding spaceport. Han dislikes the place immediately. The absence of free-freighters in a spaceport bar usually means the presence of tourists, shipping line crew, Imperial personnel, and other chumps.

Han signals Sodarra and his men to wait, then steps into the cantina doorway. The tavern is stylishly decorated in an art-galactic theme. It is also clean, filled to three-quarters capacity, and too well-lit for Han's taste.



The customers are, for the most part, clean-cut and of harmless appearance. Only a few are armed. A dozen insectoids sit at a table near the entrance, chirping and clacking their forelimbs together in a serious argument. A bug-eyed piscine lies on a bar couch holding a drink-tube between two fins. From the way its artificial gills puff, Han knows the fish will bother no one. He sees no sign of Alfreda.

Han studies the rest of the patrons. There are creatures with one eye and a dozen ears, and creatures with a dozen eyes and no ears. Some of the aliens have skin, some fur, and one or two a glistening, rough-textured surface that defies description. A steady gaggle of conversation in a dozen alien languages buzzes throughout the room. The place makes Han nervous—no one expects trouble. When it develops, they will panic or interfere. Neither reaction is to his advantage.

Chewbacca nudges Han and nods toward the other side of the room. In the shadows of the back corner, eight aliens of various races sit without conversing. There are two Gamorreans, a Twi'lek, two Togorian males, and three four-eyed, six-armed anthropoids Han does not recognize. Han cannot see whether they are armed.

"Looks like they're waiting for someone," Han says. Chewbacca ventures a guess.

"Maybe it's us," Han answers, "and maybe not. There's only one way to find out."

Han waves Sodarra forward and enters the tavern ahead of the stormtroopers. When Sodarra's armored stormtroopers appear, a hush falls over the room. A hundred eyes, human and otherwise, watch the stormtroopers spread through the crowd.

Sodarra glances at Han for instructions; Han nods toward the back corner. As the troopers move to the back of the room, a rustle of relieved sighs follows them.

That relief does not last. The room suddenly erupts into whistles and crumps as the eight aliens open fire. The stormtroopers reply immediately.

Bar patrons shriek and dive for cover. The air begins to stink of burning cloth and melting plascompounds.

A pair of well-dressed, hairy bipeds draw hold-out blasters and fire at the stormtroopers' backs. Han nudges Chewbacca and targets on the pair. "Don't be stupid!" he calls. The hairy bipeds slowly turn to face Han, their blasters ready to fire.

- If Han holds his fire, turn to section 123.
- If Han fires on the bipeds, turn to section 130.

146

Han fires. His blaster bolt penetrates Alfreda's armor and the bounty hunter drops the leash. Han yells triumphantly.

Alfreda somehow finds the strength to fire again, nearly hitting Han. He drops to the floor and rolls, then comes up and fires once. The shot goes high, but Leia has crawled to safety.

Alfreda's gun flares again, sending a dozen shots streaking at Han's head. He pulls his trigger just as rapidly. For the next second, his world becomes a grid

of colored death. Alfreda's red blaster bolts sizzle from her weapon in a fan-shaped pattern. His own blue energy bolts cross hers in mid-flight, burning diamond shaped blocks into the air.

At length, the red bolts cease. He holds his fire. Alfreda lies motionless. Blue-green streaks of static electricity dance across the motionless armor. Leia steps from behind the bar and pushes the suit over with her foot. "That's it," she says.

Han notices that the fight on the other side of the bar has nearly ended. Only an occasional potshot or the shuffle of stormtrooper armor sounds as Sodarra's men flush out the last of Alfreda's goons.

- Turn to section 152.

147

Han and Chewbacca stop in front of the Dockside Cafe. They have purposely allowed the lookout to see the two of them and report to the cantina. Han hopes to surprise Alfreda with his escort of Imperial stormtroopers.

The building is constructed of the new plasfoam blocks gaining popularity on desert and arctic worlds alike. There are only a few assorted ground transports crowd around the building, but the volume of chatter which drifts into the scorched streets whenever the door opens indicates a sizeable crowd.

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Han studies the rest of the patrons. There are creatures with one eye and a dozen ears, and creatures with a dozen eyes and no ears. Some of the aliens have skin, some fur, and one or two a glistening, rough-textured surface that defies description. A steady gaggle of conversation in a dozen alien languages buzzes throughout the room. The place makes Han nervous—no one expects trouble. When it develops, they will panic or interfere. Neither reaction is to his advantage.

Chewbacca nudges Han and nods toward the other side of the room. In the shadows of the back corner, eight aliens of various races sit without conversing. The bunch Sodarra saw. There are two Gamorreans, a Twi'lek, two Togorian males, and three four-eyed, six-armed anthropoids Han does not recognize. Han cannot see whether they are armed.

"Looks like they're waiting for someone," Han says. Chewbacca mutters a comment.

Han waves Sodarra forward and enters the tavern ahead of the stormtroopers. When Sodarra's armored stormtroopers appear, a hush falls over the room. A hundred eyes, human and otherwise, watch the stormtroopers spread through the crowd.

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- *If Han holds his fire, turn to section 123.*
- *If Han fires on the bipeds, turn to section 132.*

148

Han signals Sodarra to hide until it looks like he is needed, then enters the cantina to wait. He and Chewbacca take a seat near a section of transwall, where Sodarra can see them from outside.

For the next twenty minutes, Han watches the eight aliens in the corner attempt to watch him without being obvious. Are they Alfreda's goons, or do they recognize him? He half expects them to attempt to collect Jabba's reward right here in the bar. Han does not doubt that they will ambush him if he leaves. He has just decided to signal Sodarra when the stockroom door opens.

Leia stands in the doorway, her hands bound behind her back. Despite her situation, she looks as confident and beautiful as ever. She scans the bar as if searching for a friend. Han hopes he is still that friend—if he has ever been.

A figure stands behind her in a full duralloy suit of blaster armor. The bounty hunter holds a blaster pistol against the small of Leia's back. There is a black strap looped around Leia's neck in a slipknot; Han assumes Alfreda holds the other end.

"I win," Han calls merrily. He pulls his blaster pistol from its holster and holds it in his lap.

Leia turns to Han. "I'm sorry, Han. This is a trap—"

Alfreda jerks the strap and chokes off Leia's warning.

"Don't think this is your fault, Leia," the Corellian says. "I know all about Alfreda."

Alfreda pushes Leia forward. "Then you know what I want, Solo," she says.

"You lured me here to collect Jabba's reward."

Alfreda nods. "It was easier than trying to bring you by force."

Han aims his blaster pistol at the bounty hunter. "Let her go, Alfreda."

The aliens in the corner stand and level their weapons at Han. Chewbacca growls in anger and lifts his bowcaster to face off the eight aliens. The odds are not good, even for Han.

A cold laugh crackles from Alfreda's translator. "You are in no position to issue orders."

"So you think," Han says. "I have half a dozen stormtroopers waiting outside."

Leia frowns a query at Han and mouths the words, "Are you crazy?"

"Second chance, Alfreda. Let her go!" Han demands.

"Sorry, Solo. I made a big investment in you, and your bluffs are not enough to deter me." She turns her blaster pistol toward him.

He ducks beneath the table and fires at the aliens. He does not want to risk Leia's life by firing at Alfreda. The room erupts into whistles, flashes, and dull crumps as the aliens pull their blaster triggers. Patrons scream in terror and dive for cover.

"Where's Sodarra?" Han cries.

Chewbacca shrugs and fires another round at Alfreda's aliens.

The crash of overturning furniture fills the room and the smell of burning cloth begins to permeate the air. Han pulls his trigger again.

Then, noticing a distinct lack of fire from Alfreda's direction, Han checks on Leia's welfare. Leia has leapt backward and trapped Alfreda against a wall. The Princess is kicking at Alfreda's lower legs in an attempt to sweep the bounty hunter's feet from beneath her. Alfreda struggles unsuccessfully to tighten the leash around Leia's throat.

A blue bolt slices into the room from the transwall. Han glances up and sees two stormtroopers using their blasters to open a passage in the unbreakable window. Chewbacca bellows and points at the door. Two more troopers stand in the doorway, sweeping the back corner with sizzling energy bolts. Han still does not see Sodarra.

He scrambles toward the stockroom to help Leia. In the same instant, Leia knocks Alfreda's feet from beneath her and both females tumble to the ground. Leia rolls away from Alfreda, only to be caught by the choking leash. Alfreda aims at Han with her blaster hand and pulls on Leia's leash with the other. Although the princess cannot breathe, she continues to struggle against Alfreda's death-hold.

Han sights his blaster pistol on Alfreda's chest, but he does not fire yet. If he pulls the trigger, he stands a fair chance of hitting Leia instead of Alfreda. But if he does nothing, Alfreda might choke Leia to death.

- *If Han holds his fire, turn to section 129.*
- *If Han fires, turn to section 127.*

149

Han tosses his blaster aside. Alfreda drops Leia's leash and makes a fist of her left hand.

Leia rolls away and gasps, "Watch out for the—"

Four gleaming blades spring from Alfreda's forearm armor. A series of clicks sound as each blade locks into place.

"Claw," the Princess finishes lamely.

As Alfreda stands, Han studies the blades. They appear sharp enough to shred durasteel and sturdy enough to puncture a starfighter's hull.

"Why didn't you warn me before I dropped the blaster?" he demands.

"Only a fool would need a warning," Leia retorts. "And I forgot who was rescuing me."

Alfreda raises her claw and charges. Han stands motionless for a moment. He can stand firm and try to overpower her. Or he can sidestep her, hoping that her body armor will impair her mobility enough to give him the advantage.

- If Han stands firm, turn to section 133.
- If Han sidesteps Alfreda, turn to section 141.

150

They enter the *Falcon's* berth. Chewbacca and one Imperial go inside to lower Vader's crate while everyone else remains outside. Sodarra and the other trooper await their cargo below the lift. Leia and Han stand near the entrance ramp, ready to climb aboard as soon as the cargo touches the ground.

"The agreement?" Leia demands.

"You expect me to violate my honor?" Han mocks.

"You have as much honor as a Talvarian speeder salesman," Leia counters. "Now give."

"You first. What were you going to say back there? You think I'm a—?"

Leia's face softens a little. "I think you're . . . a first-class pilot. Her eyes narrow. "And a scalawag! Now tell!"

"It was a simple freight job," Han says. "Trust me."

"Never!" Leia spits.

A minute later, the cargo lift descends, carrying Sodarra's last trooper and the black crate. Though Leia is as curious as a Shadorian dragonfly, she has no time to indulge her interest. Han pushes her up the entrance ramp.

As Sodarra and his men remove the crate, Han calls, "Remember, we get a full day's head start."

Sodarra nods. "Of course. You will not reconsider my offer? I am certain I can arrange a pardon."

Han glances at Leia and shakes his head. "I've got some things to work out. Thanks anyway."

Sodarra smiles. "I understand. I wish you luck." He turns away.

Han runs up the entry ramp. "Let's get out of here, Chewbacca!" He closes the ramp and rushes to the cockpit.

"What's wrong?" Leia asks, suddenly alarmed.

Han looks out the viewport. Sodarra is already running for a communications station. "We've got about ten minutes before every Imperial fighter in the sector jumps us!"

Leia peers out the viewport. "I thought he was a man of honor."

Han looks at Leia as if she is hopelessly naive. "He's Imperial, isn't he?"

The End



151

Han tosses his blaster aside. Alfreda drops Leia's leash and makes a fist of her left hand.

Leia rolls away and gasps, "Watch out for the—"

Four gleaming blades spring from Alfreda's forearm armor. A series of clicks sound as each blade locks into place.

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Alfreda raises her claw and charges. Han stands motionless for a moment. He can stand firm and try to overpower her. Or he can sidestep her, hoping that her body armor will impair her mobility enough to give him the advantage.

- If Han stands firm, turn to section 133.
- If Han sidesteps Alfreda, turn to section 121.

152

Han removes Alfreda's helmet—he wants to see the bounty hunter whom he has chased across the galaxy. He finds a Togorian female, as dainty and petite as any of her race. Her slit pupils are set in emerald eyes, now still and lifeless—though Han cannot picture the eyes as anything but cold and cruel in life. A dozen carefully clipped whiskers grow beneath a small fine-featured nose. Her mouth hangs open to reveal a predatory set of snow-white fangs. An immense head of flame-red hair frames her prominent cheekbones.

Leia stands beside Han. "Doesn't look like a killer, does she?"

Han drops the helmet. "I'm beginning to distrust appearances altogether," he says.

"Why's that?" Leia asks.

Han studies her carefully. He does not want to tell her the full story—not yet, anyway. "I don't know. Just a feeling, I guess." He steps behind her and unbinds her hands.

"I know what you mean," Leia answers. "I wasn't sure you'd come after me. Thanks—for all you did."

"I couldn't leave you in Alfreda's hands. It was my fault." Han pauses. "I must have known that all along." She turns to face him. "You had a doubt?"

Han knows better than to admit the truth. "I came, but I'm not sure why. Sometimes I think I have a special feeling for you, Leia."

Leia's eyes betray her surprise. They also hint at something else; something she may be afraid to admit. "That's a very nice thing to say. Even if I don't always say it, Han, I think you're a—" She struggles to finish the sentence.

"A what?" Han asks eagerly.

"Captain Solo? Are you—" The Imperial commander pushes through the alley door of the tavern, and the magic of the moment is lost. Han glares at Sodarra for interrupting, but when he turns back, Leia is all business, and all Princess, once more. What had she been about to say?

"It is finished, then," the Imperial says. He leads the way back into the cantina, where Chewie and the stormtroopers are warily eyeing each other. "The chronometer?"

Han looks toward Sodarra's men. They are not prepared to fight—even if the enemy consists of only a man, a woman, and a Wookiee. Nevertheless, he knows it will be safer if they are not near.

"Why don't we go back to the *Falcon*?" Han says cautiously. "Just you and us?"

Sodarra smiles. "Yes, why not? But I insist on equal numbers." He motions to two men, then leads the way into the dry heat of Mos Eisley's dusty streets. Leia and Chewbacca follow Han.

Halfway to the spaceport, Han fingers the chronometer. "Now your weapons."

"You first," Sodarra says.

"I keep my pistol," Han says. "Deactivate your bowcaster, Chewbacca."

"Very well," Sodarra reluctantly agrees. "And I will keep my sidearm. They will do us no good holstered."

Sodarra's men toss their blaster rifles away. "We are now evenly matched," he says. "None of us is in condition to wrestle. The agreement?"

"When we get to the berth."

Sodarra scowls, but he nods. They resume walking.

"Agreement?" Leia demands. Han groans inwardly. Leia seems to be at her most regal now, as if to make up for that one moment of intimacy. What had she been about to say?

"I am sorry, Princess," Sodarra says. "The terms of the agreement prohibit disclosure of its terms. As Captain Solo and I are both men of honor—"

Leia snorts.

"This must remain between us."

"Thanks," Han whispers.

"It will go as hard on me if anyone discovers our arrangement," Sodarra admits.

Outside the berth, Han deactivates the lock-explosive, then turns the chronometer over to Sodarra. Leia watches with interest.

• Turn to section 150.

153

Han and Chewbacca stop in front of the Dockside Cafe. It is constructed of the new plasfoam blocks gaining popularity on desert and arctic worlds alike. There are only a few assorted ground transports parked around the building, but the volume of chatter which drifts into the scorched streets whenever the door opens indicates a sizeable crowd.

Though this is not one of the ageless taverns free-freighters prefer, it must draw its clientele from the surrounding spaceport. Han dislikes the place immediately. The absence of free-freighters in a spaceport bar means the presence of tourists, shipping line crew, Imperial personnel, and other chumps.

Han signals Sodarra and his men to wait, then steps into the cantina doorway. The tavern is stylishly decorated in an art-galactic theme. It is also clean, filled to three-quarters capacity, and too well lit for Han's tastes.

The customers are, for the most part, clean-cut and of harmless appearance. Only a few are armed. A dozen insectoids sit at a table near the entrance, chirping and clacking their forelimbs together in a serious argument. A bug-eyed piscine lies on a bar couch holding a drink-tube between two fins. From the way its artificial gills puff, Han knows the fish will bother no one.

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Chewbacca nudges Han and nods toward the other side of the room. In the shadows of the back corner, eight aliens of various races sit without conversing. Sodarra's crowd, no doubt. There are two Gamorre-

ans, a Twi'lek, two Togorian males, and three four-eyed, six-armed anthropoids Han does not recognize. Han can not see whether they are armed.

"Looks like they're waiting for someone," Han says. Chewie grunts a barely audible comment.

"Maybe it is Alfreda," he answers, "and maybe not. After all, this is Mos Eisley." The smuggler hesitates. It is possible that the Imperial captain lied about overhearing Alfreda's name—but he has no reason to do so. Having Sodarra's troopers chase the aliens from the bar will give Han a tremendous advantage. But on the off chance they are not Alfreda's hirelings, he will be tipping his hand to anyone she does have in the cantina.

- *If Han brings Sodarra's stormtroopers into the cantina now, turn to section 122.*
- *If Han sends Sodarra and his men to hide until Alfreda arrives, turn to section 157.*

154

Han leaps for Sodarra. The two stormtroopers step in to protect their captain. Han meets a wall of plasarmor and falls under a hail of hardened fists. The two troopers hit him time after time. When he lands a punch or kick, Han hurts himself more than he hurts them.

By the time Chewbacca drags the two stormtroopers off him, Han feels like a carcass of tenderized meat. He tries to stand, but he is too weak and dizzy.

Sodarra draws his blaster and holds it on Han.

"Relax, Chewbacca," Han says. "He's got the drop on us." Leia has disappeared.

"Yes, I do," Sodarra responds. He lifts Han's comlink to his lips. "Secure Lord Vader. And search the area; Princess Leia has escaped."

"Save your effort," Han says. "Leia's too smart to get caught by your goons."

Sodarra smiles. "But I have a whole platoon of 'goons,' thanks to the loan of your comlink. You are not as good a judge of character as you think."

Han grimaces. He should have known better than to let the Imperial out of his sight.

The End

155

As Han draws, Sodarra drops the comlink and reaches for his own blaster. Eight energy bolts flash between the two in less than a second. An instant later, Sodarra lies on the ground grievously wounded. It happens that fast—draw, fire, and the Imperial drops.

The inactivated comlink lies at Sodarra's feet. Han gasps for breath and his body aches, but he is too numbed by the swiftness of the battle to worry about wounds yet. Chewbacca has wrestled the other two stormtroopers to the ground. As Han has a blaster pistol and they don't, the stormtroopers stop struggling. Leia has disappeared into the launch station.

"Why?" Han gasps.

"You are not as good a judge of character as you believe, Captain Solo," Sodarra whispers. A weak smile crosses his lips. "I used your comlink to locate another Imperial squad." He shrugs. "We are enemies; nothing can change that."

Leia sticks her head out of the berth entrance. "Get moving, Solo! There are stormtroopers in here, and they are getting impatient."

Han nods and takes the comlink. "See to your captain," he orders the stormtroopers Chewie's got.

"What about our cargo?" asks one.

Han points at his chronometer, which Sodarra still grasps in his weak hand. "He holds the trigger. It'll be safe—unless you follow us."

"Agreed," the trooper says.

"Sure," Han replies sarcastically.

Han and Chewbacca limp into the launch station. Several stormtroopers hide around the fringes of the berth. They make no move to stop the pair, though they clearly wonder if they are doing the correct thing.

As Han boards the *Falcon*, a call comes over his comlink. "Captain Sodarra, they are boarding their craft now. What are your orders?"

Han holds the comlink to his mouth. "Do nothing," he mumbles, hoping he sounds at least a little like the Imperial officer.

"Nothing?" comes the reply. Then, a moment later, "Hey! You're not Captain Sodarra!"

Han deactivates the comlink. "Sorry." He closes the entry ramp, then turns to Chewbacca. "Drop their cargo—we don't want them triggering the bomb!" He rushes for the cockpit, Leia close behind. By the time he slips into the pilot's seat, stormtroopers are attacking the *Falcon* with blaster rifles. Two pairs of Imperials are setting up heavier weapons.

Han activates the auto blaster cannon and targets on the heavy weapons crews.

The Imperials abruptly stop firing. Han knows that Chewbacca has lowered Vader's crate. He moves to the center of the launch station and activates the repulsor field drive.

A moment later, they escape Tatooine's atmosphere.

Though the princess slumps back into her seat with the abrupt lessening of tension, her expression is alert. "A bomb? That stormtroopers wouldn't fire at, but might trigger?"

The pilot busies himself with his instruments. He remembers the timeless moment after Alfreda's defeat, but Leia is in complete control again. He can almost feel her eyes drilling into the back of his skull. But the explosion he is braced for never comes.

Instead, Leia's measured tones state: "I don't think I'll ever want to know what was in the crate."

Her response is so unexpected, Han twists to see if it is a bluff, and their gazes lock. Challenge dwells in the cool depths of Leia's eyes. He is reminded of Alfreda's death again. Will he ever know what she'd been about to say?

He grins to himself. Sure he will; it just takes a plan. The Corellian smiles. "Good. We've finally found something to agree on."

The End

156

Han eases up on the throttle and his bateau immediately slows as if it has struck a mudbank. Sodarra's feet fly out from beneath him and, his arms flailing wildly as if attempting to take wing, he pitches over the bow. The Imperial captain splashes into the water two meters ahead of the bateau.

The pinging whine of energy bursts reminds the smuggler of the stormtrooper flatboat behind him. He turns to see the craft's immense bow looming just above his bateau's stern. Six stormtroopers stand on the craft's bow firing at him.

Han does not need time to consider his next move; he has only one choice. Cursing the canalboat at the other end of the channel with his last breath, Han leaps into the filthy canal. As he hits the water, the flatboat strikes his bateau. A solid thump, then a series of sharp cracks echoes across the canalway. The bateau bursts into a spray of arm-sized splinters.

As Han turns to dive beneath the canal's murky surface, he feels a sharp whack in the back of his head. His skull erupts into pain and his body goes limp. A dozen planks shower into the water nearby. Han finds himself floating in the putrid water like so much flotsam, too stunned to move.

"Here's one!" calls a stormtrooper. Han struggles to focus his eyes on the flatboat's bow. A blurry white form stands at what he thinks is a mid-ship gunnel. It points a fuzzy blaster rifle at him. "One move and you're fishchum," the white form threatens.

"No problem," Han murmurs. "Who can move?"

How will Han escape the stormtroopers? He'll have plenty of time to think about his options as he's recovering. But this adventure is over. Return to section one and try again.

157

Han signals Sodarra to hide until it looks like he is needed, then enters the cantina to wait. He and Chewbacca take a seat near a section of transwall, where Sodarra can see them from outside.

For the next twenty minutes, Han watches the eight aliens in the corner attempt to watch him without being obvious. Are they Alfreda's goons, or do they recognize him? He half expects them to attempt to collect Jabba's reward right here in the bar. Han does not doubt that they will ambush him if he leaves. He has just decided to signal Sodarra when the stockroom door opens.

Leia stands in the doorway, her hands bound behind her back. Despite her situation, she looks as confident and beautiful as ever. She scans the bar as if searching for a friend. Han hopes he is still that friend—if he has ever been.

A figure stands behind her in a full duralloy suit of blaster armor. The bounty hunter holds a blaster pistol against the small of Leia's back. There is a black strap looped around Leia's neck in a slipknot; Han assumes Alfreda holds the other end.

"I win," Han calls merrily. He pulls his blaster pistol from its holster and holds it in his lap.

Leia turns to Han. "I'm sorry, Han. This is a trap—" Alfreda jerks the strap and chokes off Leia's warning. "Don't think this is your fault, Leia," the Corellian says. "I know all about Alfreda."

Alfreda pushes Leia forward. "Then you know what I want, Solo," she says.

"You lured me here to collect Jabba's reward."

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"So you think," Han says. "I have half a dozen stormtroopers waiting outside."

Leia frowns a query at Han and mouths the words, "Are you crazy?"

"Second chance, Alfreda. Let her go!" Han demands.

"Sorry, Solo. I made a big investment in you, and your bluffs are not enough to deter me." She turns her blaster pistol toward him.

He ducks beneath the table and fires at the aliens. He does not want to risk Leia's life by firing at Alfreda. The room erupts into whistles, flashes, and dull crumps as the aliens pull their blaster triggers. Patrons scream in terror and dive for cover.

"Where's Sodarra?" Han cries.

Chewbacca shrugs and fires another round at Alfreda's aliens.

The crash of overturning furniture fills the room and the smell of burning cloth begins to permeate the air. Han pulls his trigger again.

Then, noticing a distinct lack of fire from Alfreda's direction, Han checks on Leia's welfare. Leia has leapt backward and trapped Alfreda against a wall. The princess is kicking at Alfreda's lower legs in an attempt to sweep the bounty hunter's feet from beneath her. Alfreda struggles unsuccessfully to tighten the leash around Leia's throat.

A blue bolt slices into the room from the transwall. Han glances up and sees two stormtroopers using their blasters to open a passage in the unbreakable window. Chewbacca bellows and points at the door. Two more troopers stand in the doorway, sweeping the back corner with sizzling energy bolts. Han still does not see Sodarra.

He scrambles toward the stockroom to help Leia. In the same instant, Leia knocks Alfreda's feet from beneath her and both females tumble to the ground. Leia rolls away from Alfreda, only to be caught by the choking leash. Alfreda aims at Han with her blaster hand and pulls on Leia's leash with the other. Although the princess cannot breathe, she continues to struggle against Alfreda's death-hold.

Han sights his blaster pistol on Alfreda's chest, but he does not fire yet. If he pulls the trigger, he stands a fair chance of hitting Leia instead of Alfreda. But if he does nothing, Alfreda might choke Leia to death.

- If Han holds his fire, turn to section 129.
- If Han fires, turn to section 146.

STAR WARS[®]

Scoundrel's Luck

by Troy Denning

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ISBN 0-87431-112-8



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