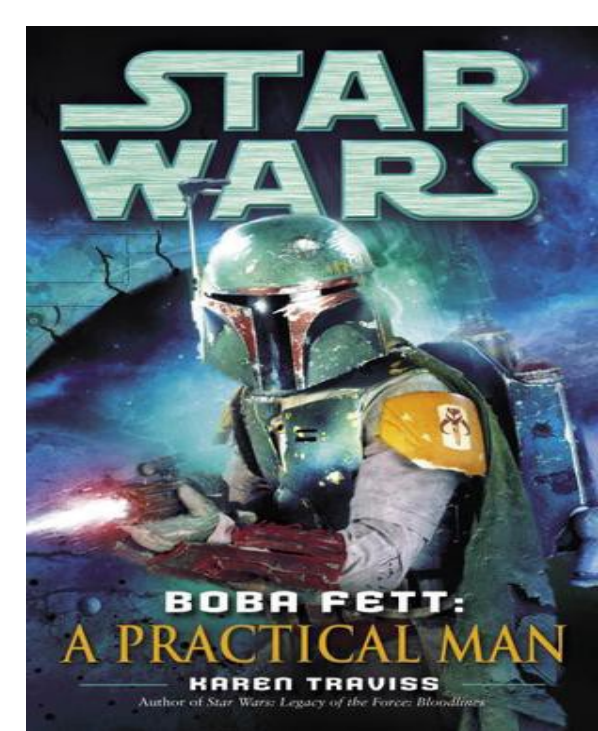


STAR WARS



BOBA FETT: A PRACTICAL MAN

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Star Wars

The New Jedi Order

Boba Fett: A Practical Man

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Boba Fett; Mandalorian Mand'alor and bounty hunter (male human) Briika Jeban; Mandalorian bounty hunter and mercenary (female human) Cham Delta; Mandalorian bounty hunter and mercenary (male human) Dinua Jeban; Mandalorian bounty hunter and mercenary (female human) Goran Bevin; Mandalorian bounty hunter and mercenary (male human) Kubariet; Jedi Knight (male humanoid)

Nom Anor; executor and spy (male Yuuzhan Vong)

Suvar Detta; Mandalorian bounty hunter and mercenary (male human) Tiroc Vhor; Mandalorian bounty hunter and mercenary (male human) Warmaster, we think too oft en in terms of dualism: Jedi or Sith, light or dark, right or wrong. But there are three sides to this blade, not two, opposed and similar at the same time. The third edge is the Mandalorian. All three sides care nothing for caste or species, only adherence to a code that unites. The Mandalorians remain: the most formidable enemy of the Jedi: but the Sith are not always their allies. The Mandatorians even worshipped war itself, then simply turned their backs on their god. You might begin to understand them one day.

-Vergere, explaining galactic politics to the Yuuzhan Vong shortly before their invasion of the galaxy, 25 A.B.Y.

Coruscant. 24 A.B.Y.: lowest level, in a quarter where nobody in their right mind would venture at night.

Boba Fett leveled the blaster and sighted up.

"You can run," he said. "But you'll only die tired." His voice rasped through an amplifier. He never needed to shout: he could always be heard. His target-a Rodian counterfeiter called Wac Bur, who was unusually over-weight for his species-had obliged him by running in ever-more-desperate maze-like circles in the depths of the quarter and had now found himself in a

blind alley.

Wac meant lucky in Rodian. Wac Bur was not a lucky example of his kind, not at all.

"Dead or alive," Fett reminded him. The thermal imager of his blaster optics picked out Wac helpfully radiating heat under a pile of discarded packing cases.

"Dead's easier. Come on. I'm a busy man."

The voice under the cases was muffled and pathetic. "Why are you doing this to me? I've never messed with you, Fett."

"I know," Fett said. "But you palmed off fake art on Gebbu. Hutts are very touchy about that."

It was just like old times. His cloned leg, courtesy of his former Kaminoan guardian Taun We, was still holding up fine in the chase. Fett never thought of himself as being in any kind of mood, good or bad, but this was as close to noticeably good as he'd been in a long time. He almost felt as if the future might hold something positive. He hadn't had that sense of general optimism since childhood.

The alley was fifteen meters wide and stretched twenty meters ahead of him, with no exits: it was just a box with a terrified Rodian rattling loose in it. A quick scan for weapons--there was no point being careless about this--showed that Wac had a hold-out blaster that wouldn't trouble him. He walked slowly toward the rustling, shivering crates.

"Get a move on," Fett said, checking the chrono in his HUD.

"You haven't got a scrap of morality in you." Wac's insult was rich coming from a criminal forger. "It's not like Gebbu's a victim. Why don't you go after real criminals?"

"Because Gebbu thinks you're special. Are you coming with me or not?" The packing cases rustled. Wac didn't emerge. It was an answer of sorts.

"Okay, nothing personal," Fett said, and raised his blaster to concentrate on the thermal-imaging target, hold his breath as he had so many times before, and squeeze... Bar Jaraniz. Nar Shaaddaa: Hutt space. 24

The infidels call it preparing the battlefield. This is the careful, patient work before an attack to ease the path for the army of the faithful that follows. I prepare well: I leave nothing to chance. I'm Nom Anor, executor, and my task is infiltration and destabilization.

And I seek allies in this filthy place.

Do Yuuzhan Vong need allies in this abomination of a galaxy? No. We will, sooner or later, glorify the Great Ones by cleansing these worlds of their machines and the corrupt creatures who willingly enslave themselves to them. But I'm a pragmatist and pragmatists never waste an advantage, nor leave a powerful army for our enemy to enlist. Vergere says a group of warriors called the Mandatorians are the most resistant enemy the Jedi have ever faced, other than the Sith. So being a prag-matist, I would rather hare them at my side than at my back. And, in the way of all abominations, these Mandatorians sell their act of faith, sacred warfare, for credits. They fight not for gods-they don't seem any more devout than I am-but for wealth.

What do they find to buy that's more important than honor, though? Why do I even sully myself by contacting them?

It needs to be done, and its more pain I gladly bear.

As the Mandatorians' skill comes so cheaply, as they have no honor, I can buy them and use them.

So this is a tapcaf. This is where I pretend to be an infidel and speak reasonably to abominations. I can look like them, and I can talk like them, but I must never become like them, and I've been hiding among them for so many years now that I fear I might. As a precaution I entreat Yun-Harla, just in case she does exist, to guide me so that my life of deception doesn't finally deceive me.

Under the table, where no infidel can see, I pass my knife through my palm and use the pain both as worship and focus. I have just one more year to endure before the fleet arrives.

I have no faith in the Great Ones, but I might be wrong; and I'm a pragmatist, so I keep my options open.

So I shall order . . . an ale. And I shall sit, and wait.

Bar Jaraniz. Nar Shaddaa: Buy-One-Get-One-Free Night, fifth month. 24 A.B.V. The sign above the blaster-charred door frame said char the jars' never closed, and despite any number of gong wars, shoot-outs, and minor armed disagreements between business partners, it hadn't yet.

Goran Bevmn walked through the open doors of the Jara*-welded open, for a reason known only to the owner-and paused to scan the unusually crowded bar.

"Over there." The bartender, preoccupied with building an elaborate cocktail, jerked his head in the direction of the badly-lit booths in the far corner. His hands were full of fruit segments, skewers, and a sky-blue spiral bottle of two-hundred-proof vosh with those nasty

little lumps of geref bobbing in it. "The handsome one in the black suit. Lookin'

for Mando help."

Beviin turned his head discreetly for an old-fashioned visual check by eyeball. Shah, the man was ugly. Seriously ugly: a face like a speeder smash and half as tidy. Beviin considered offering him a spare helmet for the good of the other customers. But they were as carefully preoccupied as the bartender, studying the foam blanketing their ale or the solid chunks in their glasses of vosh subliming into vapor. It was the kind of bar where patrons tried very hard not to stare at one another. That normally got you vibrobladed. The management was proud of the bar's strict etiquette on that Beviin held out his gloved hand for a bottle of ale, planning to drink it later. He wouldn't take his helmet off here. "We don't do beauty therapy." The bartender passed him two, and he slipped both into the pouch hanging from his belt. "Seen him before?"

"No."

"Not a face you'd forget." There was a loud whoop of female voices and laughter from the far side of the bar, and Beviin noted a human woman and a young girl in full true-style beskar'gam-Mandalorian armor-huddled over a table as if sharing a joke. There were a lot of empty glasses on the table next to their blasters. "Ladies' night again, I see."

"Look, I don't want any trouble."

"Not planning any."

"I meant them." The bartender put the finishing touches to the cocktail. "Your womenfolk can get well out of hand."

Beviin didn't recognize them. They seemed to be having a good time, and they certainly didn't seem worried about being the only females in the bar who weren't actually working. There were small Mandalorian communities in this sector, but the Jara' was one of the places mercenaries and bounty hunters touted for work, so the women could have been from anywhere. Their armor-dark red, with the same saber sigil picked out in black on the breastplate-marked them as one clan, and they looked like mother and daughter; Their helmets were stacked on the floor.

"There's only one thing that scares a Mando man," said Beviin, "and that's a Mando woman. Just make sure you don't forget their napkins."

They were still howling with laughter as he made his way across the bar to the booths. He heard the word Verd'goten. So the girl had finally completed her training as a warrior: she'd turned thirteen. then, a grown woman by Mando reckoning. trained to fight just the same as a

boy. They were celebrating her coming of age. He should have put an ale on the table at the very least, or joined in the oya manda, but he had business to take care of first. Maybe later. The girl-and she looked such a young kid, she really did, even with that unidentifiable dried scalp hanging from one shoulder plate-made him think it was high time he had a son.

Maybe later.

The man in the black suit watched Beviin's approach, unblinking; the crowd parted to let him through without a word or a glance. Even the gangster clientele here wouldn't risk offending a Mandalorian, Beviin slid into the booth across the table from his prospective client, tilting his holster clear of the scat. He caught a faint metallic whiff of blood in his environment sensor. There must have been a brawl in the bar earlier.

"I hear you people are very good at solving problems," said the man. He had watery blue eyes and a face that looked as if it were a sculptor's first effort at hacking out features from a lump of granite. Not scarred: just crude, brutal, and devoid of any living warmth. He placed both gloved hands flat on the table-top, one on each side of a glass of odorless liquid. I have a problem that needs solving."

"I'm Goran Beviin. And you are . . . ?"

"I thought bounty hunters were discreet."

"Discreet, yes. Stupid, no." Protecting client confidentiality was one thing; not knowing who you were dealing with was another entirely. "Once you've taken the risk of telling me what you want, it's either full payment up front or enough information to check that you can pay."

"That's ironic coming from a man who hides behind a helmet."

"I'm Mandalorian." Beviin was aware of movement behind him, and his helmet's wide-angle view picked the red-armored woman walking past the booths in the direction of the refreshers, "That's usually good enough references for most customers." Beviin couldn't place his accent. He was forty, maybe forty-five, and he was clearly dissatisfied at not being able to see Beviin's eyes. People always searched for meaning-gaze darting over the visor, up-down, left-right-looking instinctively for facial expressions that just weren't there. Sometimes it was harder doing business with humanoids than with other species, because they just had to see a face. Where was this guy from? Not somewhere used to Mandos, that was for sure.

Sbab, he was a grim-looking piece of meat.

And then the man made the mistake of reaching below table level. Beviin tasted the spike of adrenaline driving his mouth and instantly his hold-out blaster was in the man's face. its

indicator red with a full charge. It was pure reflex, the kind honed by years of war and assassination and just trying to stay alive. He hadn't even thought about it. His hand just did it.

The man blinked and looked to one side, but he didn't seem too worried that Beviin's blaster wasn't the only one leveled at him. The woman in red armor had drawn hers, too, and was standing frozen as if waiting for an order to open fire. The bar was-as usual at moments like this-carefully silent and totally, studiously, self-preservingly uninterested.

"Copaani gaan, burc'ya?" she asked. Need a hand, pal? For all the revelry at her table, she was rigidly sober now: brown hair in a tight braid, hazel eyes that should have had a sparkle in them but were predator-cold. The knuckles of her right hand showed white under an intricate lacework of blue tattoos. Her target stared at them in an oddly absorbed way, as if they held some

Beviin shook his head. "Naysh a'vor'e, vod." Thanks, sister, but no. "I'm just a little tense these days."

She waited two beats before bolstering the blaster and going on her way. She'd backed up a brother, even if he was a total stranger. It was the Mando way. Beviin lowered his weapon and leaned back against the wall of the booth, waiting for a response.

"My name is Udelen," said the man. Voice level, he seemed more curious about the woman, watching her until she was out of sight: no, he didn't scare easily. His gaze fell back on Beviin again. "I need to focus some-how well?"

"Permanently."

"Debt? Rivalry?"

"You don't need to know that."

"Can't price a job without a few details."

"Very well, rivalry."

"Care to specify?"

"No."

"That'll be extra."

"Are you familiar with the politics of Ter Abbes?" Beviin activated the head-up display in his

neither with a couple of quick blinks, and icons cascaded down one side of his field of view. "Ter Abbes," he repeated. The audio feed picked up the words and chewed them over, spitting out a stream of GalaxSar images and police data he shouldn't have had access to. A grim industrial planet off the main Perlemian Trade Route: a few bad boys passing through now and again, but not exactly a full ten on the Hutt scale of criminality.

What was this guy's game, then? Politics. That suddenly didn't sound quite so attractive. Gangsters, debt-dodgers, and assorted but'unes were fair game, but politicians were different bucket of chags.

So far, though, this had been a lean year. He had to eat. Bounty-hunting wasn't the kind of business that ran on five-year plans. It was feast or famine, grabbing what you could.

"What did you have in mind?" Beviin asked.

"I need a politician removed," said Udelen.

"In power or not?"

"Does it matter? I want him dead."

Well, that was a complication he didn't fancy. Beviin enjoyed arresting people, and if arresting meant dead, then he was comfortable with that, too. He didn't like subverting elected governments, though, nor as long as they hadn't done anything to him or to Mandatorians in general. That was work for spies. He had his limits. But his farm back on Mandalore was having a tough year. A subsistence, hand-to-mouth, zero-profit year.

"What's he done?"

"He takes bribes."

"No, I mean what's he done that all the others haven't?"

"He hasn't delivered on his promises." Udelen moved his hand to the opening of his jacket with slow deliberation, obviously having learned his lesson, and pulled out a datachip. He slid it across the table toward Beviin, smearing some drops of liquid that might have been condensation from a previously frosted glass. "Here's who I'd like dealt with. I'd like him to cease functioning as a politician before next month's elections. Beviin slid the chip into the port on his forearm plate, and the data fed straight through to his HUD. The display rolled. Data-numbers, letters, simple icons in one or two colors—merged easily with his field of vision, but a full-color holimage was intensely distracting. There was a lot of derail demanding attention, and—here was the really hard bit—it was hard to look clean through a face and keep the view beyond under scrutiny when his human brain was wired to concentrate on features. He found himself staring into the eyes of a man who looked straight

concentrate on features. He found himself staring into the eyes of a man who looked straight at him but would never see him.

"Osik ..." No, he hadn't been expecting that face at all. This was no ordinary target, no party drone doing dodgy deals in smoke-filled tapcafs. "This is their opposition leader. Tholote B'Leph? Okay, he was known for his unnatural generosity in awarding government contracts when he was in power, but killing him will start riots across the planet. Wouldn't you prefer me to break his fingers or something? It usually works." Udelen's grim face cracked slightly. "The aftermath is Ter Abbes's problem." He held out his palm for the darachip. "A hundred thousand credits. Usual deal-half in advance when you accept, half on completion, which must be a few days before the election." Timing like that meant it wasn't about wasted bribes. But a hundred thousand was a lot of credits. It was enough to stop him worrying about crops and where the next bounty was coming from for the next few

It was also a lot of potential trouble, and maybe more than he could handle alone. His finely-tuned sense of self-preservation grappled with his need to

"I might need to recruit backup. How long have I got?"

"Until the end of our hosts shift," said Udelen. "Dawn-I'll be here until then."

"I'll be back before then."

The Verd'goten celebration was still in full swing when Beviin left, and he kept an eye on the tattooed red-armored woman in his visors 360-degree sensor. She seemed to be keeping an eye on him, too.

He should have stopped by and wished her kid well. If they were still whooping it up after he'd finished talking to the Mand'alor, he'd do just that.

Yes, this job needed to be run past Boba Fett.

Nom Anor: daily report.

Nearly eighteen years; I've been away from my own people for too long. But we make home wherever we are, because we have no homeworld now. I hear the Mandalorians have been wanderers, too, and that they were conquerors like us, and their god was war itself. And now-now they are not, and their worship of war itself has vanished because one of their leaders wanted things to be more civilized. They fight other nations' wars for money, if they fight at all.

When I saw the tattoos on that females band, I thought for a moment that there might be a vestige of the true warrior left in the Mandatorians and that they might be like us in valuing their own pain and death. But no-this is vanity decoration, nothing more. They have no

castes, no order, no aspiration to improve the universe or save it. They care only about surviving day to day. Their culture's borrowed, and they no longer impose it on others. They can have no faith in it, then.

What you value and respect, you must make others respect, too. But no matter. They'll still be useful.

Nar Shaddaa: Gladiator assault ship Beroya, air speeder parking lot.

"Losing your nerve?" Fett asked.

The Mandalore, ruler of the clans, was a shimmering blue holoinage floating above the console of Beviin's assault tighter, cleaning his blaster.

"It's not my usual contract, killing an opposition politico," Beviin said.

"What's bothering you?"

"The civil unrest it'll cause."

"There's always civil unrest," Fett said. "The day you start deciding who's got the moral high ground before you take a bounty, you might as well join the New Republic Army. And they don't let you pick and choose your battles there, either." Beviin buried his annoyance. Fett had a point: yes, he could be over-picky about contracts and he probably drew too many lines about which assassinations and executions were okay and which weren't. "But this still feels like something beyond punishment for failing to come good for his paymaster."

"Go on."

"It's too strategic. It's the timing."

"It's a hundred thousand creds. When did you last see that kind of money?"

"Okay, let's go through this." From the Gladiators cockpit, Beviin noted the nervous glances as passersby took sly glances at the dimly-lit canopy of the fighter and realized not only that it was a Gladiator, but also that it was occupied. When he turned his head they scuttled away, fast. Even in a criminal hot spot like Nar Shaddaa, a cannoned-up assault vessel with a Mando pilot on board was a rare sight in the parking lot. "He doesn't just want me to do a bit of leg-breaking or whacking. He wants an opposition politician taken out just before the election. That's not a reminder that his invoice is overdue for payment."

"So it's political. So is dealing with Hutts."

"No, it's all very . . . impersonal." Beviin, one eye still on the trickle of lowlives gawping at the Gladiator, gave the navigation lights a quick blip and sent the sightseers running. "I'll exercise . . . prudence."

Fett was still rolling the EE-3's scope in one hand, clearly distracted. "You need those credits."

Beviin realized that he must have sounded as if he was asking for help. "Not the best year I've had, no."

"I get more offers than I can handle at my age." The hologramic Fett began clamping the optics back to the blaster's barrel. "Take a couple off my hands sometime."

"Mand'alor-"

"Fett out."

As Beviin walked back to the Jara's to seal the deal with Udelen, he pondered Fett's odd blend of scrupulous detachment punctuated by rare acts of what in any other man might have been regarded as pure sentimentality. More offers than he could handle at his age? He was still top of his game. Offereing to put work Beviin's way had nothing to do with the fact that Fett had a fortune and Beviin was snuggling most years, no sir. Fett had done a few selfless things-and even if he never admitted it, word got around-because he thought it needed doing.

Because it was right. Fett had his moments. And in the next one he'd blow your head off because it was strictly business.

Beviin reentered the Jara". Udelen was still there, almost as if he hadn't moved. Beviin glanced to the tables on the other side of the bar: the mother and daughter in red armor were still there, too.

"Deal," he said to Udelen.

The man still had a full glass of clear liquid in front of him, and it didn't appear to have moved, either. He reached inside his jacket-slowly and deliberately - and pulled out a credit chip.

"You'll know when you've completed the task," he said, "and I'll know how to get hold of you again to pay the balance. If I like the results, I'll have plenty of work for you and your comrades."

Beviin liked the sound of that. He took the chip and slotted it into the dataport on his forearm plate to check that it was valid: fifty thousand creds, enough to transform his family's life for a while. The pinpoint of blue light verified it.

"Pleasure doing business," he said.

Udelen bowed his head a fraction, then walked out of the bar with the slow dignity of a funeral hearer. His gait reinforced Beviin's feeling that this wasn't just scumbag-on-scumbag violence. There was more to it.

A coup. It had to be a coup. Funny way to go about it, but sometimes the easiest way to grab power was the least direct. Udelen didn't look like a man who believed in the power of the ballot box. Beviin watched him go, and in a moment of curiosity he pulled off his crushgaunt and dipped a cautious finger into Udelen's appar-ently untouched drink. It felt like water. He tasted it.

It was water.

Alcohol and business didn't mix anyway. Beviin's business was done, though, so he ordered drinks for the women in red armor and wandered over to their table to put the glasses in front of them. It was just good manners. Some of the patrons lining the bar watched Beviin as if he were trying a pickup line, but they were aurette, outsiders, and they didn't understand his obligation.

"Oya, vod'ika" he said to the girl. Non-Mandalonans thought it was just a way of saying cheers, but it was much more than that: Survive, little sister: Hunt, enjoy life, celebrate your people. "Ova manda."

"Oya," said the girl. "I'm Dinua."

"And my name's Briika," said her hard-eyed mother. Her name came from the word for

"smile," and Beviin enjoyed that kind of irony. She could shrivel anyone with that stare.

"Those crushgaunts are illegal. But you know that."

"I just like antiques," Beviin said. He patted the scabbard on his belt, rattling an ancient saber in its sheath. "I've got a proper beskad, too. On the road for a reason?"

"Got to make a living now my old man's dead."

No Mando ever left a widow or orphan to struggle. They shared luck when it came their way, because life was hard and there was no telling when you would be the one in need of some.

"Might be able to help there."

Beviin had enough credits in his pocket already to see him and Medrit through the coming year. If Udelen had more work to offer in the weeks to come, there was plenty to go around for Briika and Dinua.

Just like Fett, he couldn't always handle all the work he might be offered. Nom Anor: intelligence report to Prefect Da'Gara. Yuuzhan Vong fleet. Time to invasion: eight standard weeks. 25 A.B.V. In the Infidel calendar.

The Mandalorians appear to be best suited for infiltration, retrieval, assassination, and sabotage. In the year I've been using them, they've proved reliable, i Their small numbers make them worthless as an army, although they might make an excellent enslaved division at a future date.

Goran Beviin did an efficient job of removing B'Lepb, and a civil war is still in progress. He recruits equally efficient comrades: even their children are sav-age fighters. When I spoke to their leader, the one they call Mandalore-Boba Fett-I feared for a while that he might want more answers than I could give him. But the kind of destabilization and execution they excel at is a normal, everyday occurrence within this corrupt galaxy; he has no reason to wonder why I ask what I do of his people.

He's seen and fought wars before. Like me, he's a realist. A practical man. I almost look forward to meeting him.

Mandalore is already on my list as a world that will be harder to subdue. Keldabe. capital of Mandalore: outskirts of the city.

Keldabe looked like a run-down factory complex that someone had dumped in a forest and abandoned because it was too much trouble to dispose of it properly. I don't even live here. And I'm the head of state.

Fett took Slave I low over the Mandalore forests forty-five degrees north of the equator and reminded himself that it was at least a good planet to defend if push came to shove. The resident population hovered around a modest four million; Coruscant had small neighborhoods with more citizens than that. Like Concord Dawn and the rest of the sector, this was hard frontier country, just jungle, forest, desert, and plains on which farmers made little impact. In galactic terms, it was a small city that outsiders mistook for a world.

That's fitting. A few Mandalotians are an army, after all

The comm on the console chirped. "Mand'alor, Udelen's ship just landed at the spaceport."

"I'll be right behind him," said Fett. "Keep an eye on him in the meantime."

"We keep an eye on everyone."

Slave I could navigate for herself, but Keldabe was one location that even a novice pilot could fly by sight. It was—in basic terms—a very large hill-fort ringed by a bend in the Kelita River and beyond that woodland studded with settlements. The sprawl of buildings that made up MandalMotors was the biggest feature in the landscape, and if Fett used the plant's hundred-meter rower as a navigation transit with the comm mast for the spaceport, he could line up and drop neatly onto the landing strip.

Mandalore was MandalMotors, thousands of tiny engineering workshops, subsistence farms, ore mining, and an awful lot of trees—and that was the sum of it. Without the beskar deposits, the unique Mandalorian iron ore, there was nothing remarkable about the place except the people. And the beskar had been largely stripped by the Empire. Maybe if they were more formally organized . . . no, Fett shook away the thought. Mandos were as organized as they needed to be to survive.

And, being Mandos, they didn't lay on a red carpet and a band to welcome their leader either. Fett settled Slave I on her dampers in a designated bay like anyone else, and walked across the strip.

He opened his comlink to the tower. "Which ship?"

"The blue one that looks like a T-77." There was a pause, as if the control room skipper had leaned out of earshot to consult someone else. "There's a grenade launcher trained on it, ret'lini—just in case."

Fett didn't take offense at anyone thinking he needed backup. He'd never needed anyone to cover his back, but Mandalorians always had a plan B "just in case." It was almost a reflex, the kind that was ingrained in a militarized society. Fett thought it was a courteous precaution even if he didn't need it. He activated Slave I's weapons panel via his helmet link, calculated the coordinates of Udelen's ship, and let her do the rest. The icon in his HUD told him the port laser cannon had swiveled to the forward position to rest its aim on the blue airspeeder. His jet-pack was primed for evasive action. Just in case was deeply ingrained in Fett, too. He stood in front of the vessel at a sensible distance and waited for his potential client to come down the ramp.

"I hadn't expected Mandalore to be so . . . unspoiled," said Udelen. "Somehow I thought it would be more industrialized. You even have some dwellings set in trees."

"We have all kinds of housing," Fett said. What is he, a tourist? "Some locals still prefer trees to ground level."

"What are you doing here?" "What are the odds?" "What do you want?"

"who runs your government? who are the administrators? why do you care?" "Mandalorians like things informal and friendly. What did you want to discuss?"

Udelen stopped for a fraction of a heartbeat so barely noticeable that even Fett nearly missed it. Maybe he didn't like his questions being dismissed. He recovered instantly. "I came to tell you that your people can expect to be busy in the next few months. A war is coming."

"You must be new in this galaxy," Fett said, totally unsurprised. "There's always a war going on somewhere, always has been, always will be. It's why Mandalorians have never gone out of business."

"It could escalate."

"Will it affect the Mandalore sector?"

Udelen paused, and Fett didn't care for his suddenly satisfied expression. "We can hope that it won't."

Don't play mind-games with me. I know blackmail when I hear it. "Whoever might be thinking of fighting here better hope so, too."

Fett didn't think Udelen was quite as ugly as Beviin had described; there was a faint but distinctive smell about him, though. It reminded Fett of the sea spray churned up by the storms on Kamino in his childhood. Smells could always take you back.

"I assume our arrangement extends to mercenary work, then," Udelen said. "Usual rates."

"Not all Mandalorians are mercs. They choose the work they take."

"Then I'll be asking you and a few troops of your choosing to stand by for rendezvous in two weeks' time."

"Better tell me what to expect, so we bring the right tools for the job." I'm not your army, chum. I'm my own boss. "We reserve the right to decline your offer, as always."

"You haven't asked who the combatants will be."

"You weren't going to tell me."

"True."

"So I'll assume the worst."

THE END OF THE FIRST PART OF THE MANDALORIAN TRILOGY

Udalen almost smiled. Fett didn't like that, either. Even while the credits kept coming, he decided he'd keep an open mind about his client's largesse. The core of Mandalorian bounty hunters and troops Udalen seemed to like to have on call were doing okay financially. That was fine-as long as Udalen understood that the legendary Mandalorian discipline wasn't dumb obedience. Even a Mandalore had to understand that. Fett watched the airspeeder lift off and disarmed Slave 1's cannon via his helmet link. But he knew the spaceport control tower would be tracking it until it left Mandalore's orbit. Just in case.

Nom Anor's notes: final intelligence assessment. ETA for vanguard of Yuuzhan Vong fleet: two days.

Some days I almost find kinship with Mandalorians. Some of them actually prefer living homes, not built-things like other infidels. They create homes on platforms in the branches of trees. And then I see them as they are, with their passion for wholly artificial tech-nology. Yes, I blow hot and cold over them, as the infi-dels say. But I don't need to like them, only to under-stand how useful they are for the subtle things in war that the sheer force of our fleet can't always achieve. They've helped me prepare the battlefield: now we'll see how they respond to the prospect of the battle itself. I've asked Fett to rendezvous with me at a point on our invasion route. I want the Mandatorians to be among the first to see their new masters as we enter this galaxy. The fleet is nearly here. I won't have to disguise myself and hide any longer. Rendezvous point with Udalen's forces, strength and type unspecified, for a briefing at Outer Rim 25 A.B.V.

"If anything happens to me, will you take care of Dinua?" Briika Jebar's voice broke the silence on the shared comlink as the squadron waited for Udalen to appear. Beviin, fed up with waiting and reduced to staring through the Gladiator's canopy at the veil of stars and gas clouds, jerked back to the here and now.

"Yes," he said. "But nothing's going to happen to anybody. Anyway . . . yes."

"Do I get a say in this?" asked Duma. Beviin wasn't sure if she was reminding them she was a fourteen-year-old adult who could speak for herself, thanks, or if she preferred the idea of gat bal manda-adoption, literally name and soul-by someone else. It was usually the former. "And no, nothing's going to happen to anyone." Death was the ever-present reality in this business. Beviin knew Dinua missed her father, and even if he could never be more than a friend and brother to Briika, his duty was to make sure her daughter-even as an adult-would never be an orphan. If only Fett had been truly part of the Mandalorian community, Beviin thought: someone would have adopted him so that he always had a family whether he needed one or not. But nobody had raised the issue with him. They probably never would. He wasn't a family man, and there was still no room for anyone in his life except Jango's ghost.

"I'll take that as agreement," said Beviin. "And I promise that if I ever adopt you, I won't make you wear frilly dresses."

Loud guffaws, Dinua's included, filled his audio link, but Fett was silent: there wasn't even a rebuke. On station around him, clustered around Slave 1, were the two women in their Aggressor fighters and the Detta brothers-Cham and Suvar-with Tiroc Vhon, all in Gladiators.

"The only thing anyone's going to die of today is boredom," Cham said. "We haven't missed the time window, have we?"

"No," Fett's voice cut in. "We haven't. He has-nearly." Beviin powered up his thrusters. "I'll go scout around. The Gladiator turned 180 degrees and looped away Coreward before coming back in a U-turn. It wasn't boredom, although nothing was happening. The others might not have said it, but everyone was feeling that moment of doubt when you considered how little you knew for sure about your client, and more to the point-how little you knew about the situation your client was about to get you into. The rendezvous was simply for a briefing. That was the point: not a battle, sight unseen, enemy unknown, but a briefing, so that they could regroup afterward with their new Intel and prepare themselves properly. If you took mercenary work, Beviin reasoned, you accepted that clients sometimes put you lower on their need-to-know list than their regular troops.

Yes, I'd adopt Duma. Medrit would agree.

But it wouldn't come to that. Beviin flew back along the route he'd taken, checking his long-range scans for fast-moving objects or vehicles exiting hyperspace. Gai bal manda: like all the Mandalorian ceremonies, it was short and to the point. Nobody had the time, patience, or credits to waste on lavish events. Get the business over, and hope still to be alive for a few bottles of narcolethe or net'ra gal later . . . The proximity sensor blipped, and Beviin switched his attention from his HUD to the transparent canopy of the Gladiator.

He always preferred visual confirmation. For a moment he thought the scan was acting up, because the unknown ship-and it had to be a ship, given the speed at which it was moving-was showing a profile more like an asteroid, a mass of mineral readings, and it was big, well over a thousand meters and maybe two. But this wasn't an asteroid belt. Sbab, the Glad's instruments needed calibrating again. Some of his newly-earned credits would already be hemorrhaging from his pocket.

The ship appeared to be aft of him, and he didn't trust the scan to keep him clear of trouble. Banking to starboard with a quick burn, he came about in a wide arc to get a visual on whatever was on his tail.

And there was a large object in range. That was about the best he could manage. What he saw made no sense. It glittered in places where the harsh white light of the star caught it and . . .

... no, it was an asteroid after all. The shape was more regular and oval than the usual shattered chunks, and it wasn't rotating and tumbling like the big ones usually did, but it-Oh. No, that's not happening.

In that way of glimpsing things out of context, Beviin had a split second of total illogical illusion: his brain told him explosion, debris, brace for impact. He almost ducked before he realized the massive lump of rock was following a course with all the purpose of a warship. Almost without thinking, he flicked his visor to maximum magnification and saw a craggy gray rock with unusually regular bands of black glossy material like some igneous mineral or tektite. Trailing from its bows, almost like the barbels of an ice-river vaban, were brilliant scarlet and blue branch-like growths, some with tapered purple sac-like pods attached to them.

The pods seemed about the size of an X-wing.

Beviin flicked open the comlink in his helmet. "Mand'alor," he said. "Patch into my video circuit, will you?"

"I can see it fine from here." Boba Fett's voice was perfectly calm. "In fact, I can see more of them ..."

"That's navigating." It was Briika's voice on the comlink now. All their helmets and systems linked to share data. "That's a fleet."

"We've seen fleets before."

"Not like that one, Mand'alor."

"We don't know if it's hostile or just freight passing through ..." Beviin, doing what he'd been drilled to do without question or argument all his life, moved into formation with the other fighters to flank Slave I. "But it isn't in my Mandos' Big Book of Friendly Warships, so let's not get caught with our kut'ike around our ankles, shall we?" A battle formation was usually four Gladiators linked to a Pursuer, yet this motley squadron slotted together, wordless and automatic. Beviin watched his comrades' weapon icons illuminate almost simultaneously in his HUD. Slave I already had missile, cannon, and torpedo lock on the vanguard ship. No, Fett wouldn't get caught with his pants down either.

The other asteroid vessels were now visible, line astern, both on the scan and in visual range. One eased out to port and broke from the line, heading for the Mandalorian squadron.

"Steady," said Fett. "Whites of their eyes ..." Cham's snort was audible. "They better have eyes." The lead ship-if that was what it was-would have stretched from one end of Beviin's farm boundary to the other. It was monstrous in every sense of the word, and all the worse for being so monstrously recognizable as a threat. The entire fleet in his helmet flicked as Fett

for being frankly unrecognizable as a vessel. The audio feed in his helmet clicked as Fett transmitted.

"Unidentified vessels, this is Slave One." Fett should have been anxious, Beviin thought, but there was never a trace of it in his voice. Maybe after you survived the Sarlacc, nothing ever really scared you again. "I have no transponder code for you. Identify yourself."

There was softly-hissing silence, and Beviin somehow expected nothing else. Which one would respond? His attention moved between his cockpit scan and the void beyond his canopy, now both full of targets that could only be a fleet of vessels. No natural phenomenon behaved with that much purpose. He tightened his fingers around the control stick and rolled his thumb across the tilting ball that would fire one or all of the four cannons. If they could make more than a dent in the fleet-well, he'd take out what he could.

Why do I automatically assume they're hostile?

Why didn't I call home and talk to Medrit when I had the chance? I knew I'd never die in my sleep, but this isn't how I thought it'd be. He'd lost count of the behemoths now. His scan screen was so full of points of light tagged UNIDENTIFIED that he couldn't put a pin between them. The void of space that filled the transparisteel canopy was peppered with stars of reflected light, as if a new galaxy had suddenly arrived.

The cloud of objects-of-ships-was on course for Belkadan.

"Mandalotians," said a familiar voice over the comlink. "We come to free you and your entire galaxy from the heresy of technology and teach you respect for the Great Ones."

"Udelen ..." Beviin said.

"I am Nom Anor, executor, and what you see is the vanguard of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet. It has taken decades to reach here, and now your galaxy will be reformed. Transformed." Beviin heard Fett's slight intake of breath. Coming from him, that was a yelp of surprise.

"I think some people might want to discuss that first." Fett's weapons were still locked on. "Depending on what you mean by reformed."

"You would call this an invasion. And you have the privilege of being among the first infidels to witness our arrival."

Beviin hung on a frozen second, unsure whether to open fire or wait for Fett's orders. Yes. It really was a new galaxy that had come to visit. He struggled to take it in. On the open comlink, everyone's breathing was audible, and it sounded urgent, shallow-afraid.

"Fett, follow these coordinates and enter my ship. We'll show you the future of your galaxy."

and how you'll play your part in achieving this much-needed transformation." Fett's response would normally have been a well-aimed ion-cannon round and a fast escape. Nothing changed or charged up on the shared HUD display. Beviin heard him swallow before responding.

"I'll leave my troops to await my safe return, then."

"No need for you all to enter, I agree. And you'll vouch for them."

"Given the size of your fleet, what could a few small ships do anyway?"

"Mand'alor, I'll escort you," Beviin interrupted. Planning and thought never came into it. He heard himself react. We rally to the Mandalore. This is how we survive. I'll follow you in."

"When I find out what it means," said Fett, "then do it." Beviin powered down his weapons and swung the Gladiator in behind Slave I as the vessel edged forward toward the giant scarred rock of a warship, "Ke'pare," he whispered down the comlink. Fett didn't speak Mando'a, but neither would these Yuuzhan-whoever-they-were. Almost no aruetii did. "Ke baslana meh mhi Kyraye." Stand by, and get out if we don't make it.

They'd know what to do, and when to do it. It was hard-wired and hard-trained into all of them.

The gray asteroid became a mountain range that filled his field of view as he trailed behind Slave I's thrusters at a safe distance into a mouth-like opening of the warship.

"Oya," Suvar responded. Go get 'em. And stay alive. Funny word, oya. It adapted to any situation. Oya. Beviin seized it for courage. He had the feeling he had seen nothing yet. Nom Anor: docking bay of the miit ro'ik.

The warriors ask if the Mandatorians are the droids the infidels use. They cluster around the little fighter craft and stare at the metal figures that climb out. They might as well be, because they seem to have surprisingly little fight in them for professional soldiers; we'd have fought back by now.

They are excellent saboteurs, though.

I hope Fett avoids using his jetpack. The warriors would be enraged to see artificial combustion, the first abomination. They're already disgusted that I let these infidel Mandatorians bring their machines into this miit ro'ik, and they dislike my use of the infidel comlink, but I'm an Executor, and they don't dare argue with me. I can't see these infidels' faces, but I know they're amazed by the perfection they see. Fett is looking everywhere, studying everything, if the movements of his head are anything to go by. I hear he has

impressive scars: but they were merely an accident. His lackey, Beviin . . . he follows his master.

They might well fit into the natural order of things, after all. Yuuzhan Vong müt ro'ik warship.

Beviin couldn't be heard outside his helmet, but he still whispered as he walked along the living corridor behind Fett into the heart of the ship.

"How was I supposed to know what he was?"

"You weren't." That ugly barve Udelen-Nom Anor-had fooled everyone. How he disguised a mutilated face like that was a miracle. Fett had a good look at his real face now. "And better that we find out what we're dealing with than get a surprise like the rest of the galaxy."

"This isn't going to be like the good old Sith and Jedi puppet show, is it?"

"I don't know. All that matters is if there's something in it for Mandalorians." Fett didn't expand, not then. He had his father's nose for trouble, and he smelled it this time like never before. The ship itself was bad enough: for all the vibrant color on every surface and crew member, it was like being in a stinking cave infested with unrecognizable vermin. There wasn't a smooth, spotless durasteel bulkhead or reassuring piece of normal cleanly-oiled engineering to be seen.

Yes, it had a distinct scent, the smell of damp forest and weed drying on beaches and a hint of blood.

It was like being in something's guts. It was like being back in the Sarlacc. And it was the smell of Udelen when he met him at Keldabe spaceport. I didn't see this coming. I should have. And now I know-well, maybe this is the best position to be in. Fett ran every recording and analysis device in his helmet as he walked through the ship, from penetrating radar to thermal imaging. Every so often he stopped and touched the-no, not bulkheads, walls. He couldn't shake the idea of stomach walls. He wiped his finger-tips along them, feigning awe and curiosity, and then discreetly transferred whatever organic traces he'd picked up on his gloves to one of the pouches on his belt.

"Samples," he said quietly. "Anything small-any bits of this thing you can steal-pocket it. Okay?"

"Got you," said Beviin.

What he needed most of all, though, was a slice of the Yuuzhan Vong invader who walked ahead of him, a snake-like thing coiled up one arm. It was alive.

"Pet?" he asked. Jabba always kept some weird wildlife that amused him. Maybe Yuuzhan Vong did the same. "A familiar?"

"Weapon," said Nom Anor. He shook it off his arm in one elegant gesture; it stiffened immediately into a rod before writhing back into coils and slithering back onto the executor's arm. "A living weapon called an amphistaff." Fett had done business with the worst of life-forms, and it never seemed to matter either way who was running the galaxy. Small lives went on in the social undergrowth, a grim quest for daily survival, and the power floated to the top and was misused and sucked dry for advantage. Fett just took his cut and satisfied himself with living by his own code, because he was a practical man and knew what he could and could not change about the galaxy.

But the Yuuzhan Vong seemed to think there was nothing they couldn't change about it. Nom Anor, stripped of his human disguise and black business suit, strode along pointing out organic technology with a pride bordering on arrogance and then stepping clean across that line.

"I've been among you infidels eighteen years," he said. "Not once have I found a pure culture with fully organic technology."

Beviin muttered, audible only to Fett. "Aruttetii. We're not his best buddies any longer, then."

"We do our best," Fett said to Nom Anor. "You'll have to teach us how to do things right." As they ambled through the ship, Beviin appeared to trip and steady himself against a wall from time to time, or pick up something of no consequence from the deck. Good man.

"We will," said Nom Anor. The warriors were giving him a wide berth.

"So you're a senior officer." Investigate, record, understand. Intelligence saves your life sooner or later. "Commander?"

"I'm intendant caste," said Nom Anor. "An executor. My caste are administrators. That makes me superior in the hierarchy to a warrior."

It was almost as if the Yuuzhan Vong had set out to compile a list of things that Mandalorians found repellent and then ram them down their throats to make a point of how alien they were. A bureaucrat and spy, lording it over a soldier, looking down his nose-Fierfek, the barve didn't even have a nose.

Fett stared at the warriors he passed. They were covered in the most impractical armor he'd ever seen, literally encased from head to foot, with huge, savage, claw-like projections on shoulders and knees, wrists, and even the backs of their legs. They never sat down on duty, that was for sure. As one soldier passed, what Fett thought was a brilliantly-varnished scarlet

decoration on his chest suddenly moved. It was a beetle, a huge beetle.

Fett switched to voice projection. Now wasn't the time to get prissy about cultural differences. "What's that armor made from?"

"Not made," said Nom Anor. "Bioengineered. A living vonduun crab, and technology is a poor second to it. Blasters won't penetrate the shell." Go ahead, tell me all your trade secrets. If I make it out alive-"They'd fetch a good price."

"And they kill anyone but the warrior for whom they were grown." Nom Anor might have smiled as he turned his head to glance at Fett, but with a mutilated face like that it was hard to tell. His mouth was set in a permanent rictus of a humorless grin, devoid of lips.

"We've come to claim this galaxy and colonize it. I did say invasion, did I not?" There were millions of planets in the galaxy and someone was always invading and colonizing someone else. It was inevitable. But Fett hadn't come across anyone with ideas about taking over the whole galaxy before, unless he counted Palpatine. "And you think we'll help you do it."

"You have little choice."

"And you're going to have to fight your way across this galaxy, a world at a time, and you know it. Why did you recruit us if you thought you could do it alone?"

"Are you asking for more credits?"

Fat lot of good the creds would do us if these things succeed. "Maybe."

"You attempt to blackmail me?"

"I'm telling you that it's easier to do it with us than without us."

"You're being paid."

"It's not enough."

"You're in no position to bargain."

"I think I am."

Beviin sounded as if he was holding his breath. Fett could see him, arms slightly away from his sides, and he could also see where he was directing his visual scan from the shared icon in his own HUD. Beviin was checking out the deckhead of the ship. Fett reverted to the closed comlink. "Don't even think about it."

"Just checking."

"Just recce."

There was a time for shooting your way out of trouble and a time for reasoning an escape. Survival depended on finding out as much about the enemy as you could. Besides, were these creatures any more of an enemy than a Sith empire or a Jedi republic? He'd done business with a lot worse. Right now, they were still customers-but only just. He could get something out of them.

"I want to know exactly what you want from us," Fett said, moving his gaze slowly left to right and back again as he walked. The sensors in his helmet range finder and the penetrating radar built up a more detailed three-dimensional plan with each sweep. A med scanner and a mining probe might have done the job better, though. "And what do you want from the galaxy?"

Nom Anor stopped at a ragged opening in the bulk-head and gestured them inside. "I thought I'd made this clear. Surrender and obedience."

Dream on, barve. "Be specific."

"We'll cleanse your galaxy of technology and replace it with ours. Organic technology. Living technology. No machines, no artificial combustion, no artifacts. These are, you'll come to understand, an abomination and an insult to the Great Ones. To the gods themselves."

Fett had a sudden image of having a crab-suit grown on him. No. That was not going to happen. "And our role in this great scheme?"

"Intelligence gathering and the more subtle work we require." Fett still didn't have a clear idea of what Nom Anor meant by organic technology. Some species made limited use of it, but it looked nothing like what he was seeing, smelling, and hearing now: grotesque men encased in living crabshell, weapons that were animals, ships that were miniature planets.

"Show me," said Fett.

What did you call an enclosed space in a Yuuzhan Vong ship? A cabin, a compartment, a hangar? They walked into a chamber that felt to Fett like a stomach. The bulkheads might have been set with glowing, moving, beetle-like lumps, but he couldn't shake the analogy now. Another bizarre figure-a warrior, possibly, but maybe a different specialty or caste judging by the lack of clawed armor-crouched on the deck, arms clasped over his head. When he moved, there was some kind of armor gorget at the base of his throat. But the trouble with staring at something you didn't quite recognize was that it suddenly shifted into perspective and context, and you could see it for what it was with shocking clarity. Fett

realized he wasn't looking at a Yuuzhan Vong.

"What the shab have you done to him?" Beviin asked. It was a human male, more or less.

The nape of his neck skin was covered in grimy pink lumps that looked at first like knobbly vertebrae that disappeared under a rough gray shirt but on second glance appeared more like stone. It was hard to tell how old he was or where he came from; the visible skin was olive and smooth. His head was shaven. But he was human, or humanoid, all right. Nom Anor looked down at the figure with detached interest.

"We took this prisoner on Ter Abbes. The yorik-kul implant is an experimental one, a new strain."

He caught the man's shoulder with one hand and jerked him half-upright so that his head lolled back as if drunk. The object that Fett had taken for a gorget, an armored throat piece, was the same bone-like pink mass as the knobs on the back of the prisoner's neck. Ridges in it aligned with the knobs. Fett suddenly saw the lumps as the ends of projections from the gorget that somehow passed clean through the prisoner's neck, and it was one of those images that he put out of his mind the moment it formed. The man didn't seem to be in pain. His eyes were glazed and fixed on the mid-distance. Fett concentrated on staying detached even though the animal core of him was revolted and telling him to run for it.

"You going to explain that?"

"It's coral," said Nom Anor. "It colonizes the body and enables us to control captives and turn them into productive slaves. This specimen was a little different and so our shapers are observing how the yorik-kul adapts to him. The process is . . . incomplete."

"And that's what you have in mind for the whole galaxy, is it?" Don't say a word, Beviin.

"All of us."

Nom Anor's eyes darted across Fett's visor. They still looked like the trapped remnants of a human, and Fett kept thinking cyborg, and how ironic that would be for a species that found machines an abomination. Abomination. Religious word. And he didn't trust cults any more than he trusted politicians and accountants.

"Not necessarily as slaves," said Nom Anor.

"Good. Because it's going to be a tough sell."

"Some will see the truth and become Yuuzhan Vong."

"And those who don't? I let me guess."

"They'll be Yuuzhan Vong, or they'll be dead."

This was the point at which NomAnor ceased to be simply unpleasant business and became something Fett hadn't really seen before: a threat he might not be able to handle. It was as if the executor changed before his eyes, shifting subtly from just a hideously disfigured face made worse by its few vestiges of normality into something totally alien he had to be able to kill. It felt personal for a moment, and that was anathema. The trick was to understand the enemy without identifying with him. Now he'd name his higher price. He knew exactly what he had to demand.

"As long as we work for you," Fett said, "you leave the Mandalore sector alone." NomAnor stared into Fett's visor and Fett stared back, his helmet cam recording, even if the executor couldn't tell that. The creature's face was a nightmare, a corpse from a battlefield: nose and lips missing, leaving a hole in the center of his face set above teeth that were every bit as human as his own. His skin was a mass of puckered but regular scars and intricate tattoos. A thick ridge of bone or scar tissue—Fett wasn't sure which—ran from under his sunken eye sockets to the back of his hairless, scarred, tattooed scalp. It was just the eyes and the teeth.

They were utterly human, as if someone were trapped in a monstrous suit and trying to get out. The image clicked into place almost like an overlay on a holochart. Fett suddenly imagined what NomAnor might have looked like with a nose, and a mouth, and regular skin. He imagined what the warriors would look like: because these invaders all had the same terrible faces. They mutilated themselves deliberately.

Fierfek. If that's what they do to themselves. . .

"You still try to bargain with me," said NomAnor.

"That's my price. It goes up when I find clients haven't been totally open with me." Like not mentioning a galactic invasion. Fett was the one doing the buying now, though: he was buying time. "You're going to have to fight for every meter of ground here. Thousands of sentient species, countless worlds, and every one will put up a fight. You need us. If only to deal with the Jedi."

"And I could kill you now, of course."

"I'm one man. The clans will find a new Mandalore right away, and then they'll fight. Your call."

Beviin muttered irritably, "Thanks, 'Alor."

The prisoner began moaning incoherently and slumped back on the deck, convulsing, eyes

rolled back in his head. Nom Anor watched him with apparent fascination, making no attempt to help, and for a second Fett seriously considered drawing his blaster and putting the wretched man out of his misery. He decided it wasn't his business, but he also knew he would regret not doing it for the rest of his life.

Another Yuuzhan Vong entered the compartment, as tattooed and mutilated as Nom Anor but wearing a draped charcoal-gray robe-for want of a better word-that seemed to be stapled to his flesh, from shoulders to scalp. These people liked pain. Fett could grit his teeth and take it, but there was endurance, and then there was the sick, disturbing fondness for it; and pain looked like it was central to the Yuuzhan Vong way of life. He'd seen enough. Or at least he thought he had.

The new Yuuzhan Vong bent over the prisoner slumped on the floor and took a firm grip of the coral gorget to wrench it out of his neck. The captive looked dead: Fett was pretty good at spotting dead now.

Beviin, standing with fists on hips and outwardly impassive, swore angrily in the privacy of the helmet comlink. "I want to hunt down every last crab-boy in the galaxy," he muttered. Beviin was usually the most easygoing of men, and the venom in his voice surprised Fett. "Whether you have a deal with them or not, Mand'alor." Two freakish creatures with far less exotic scars and tattoos than Nom Anor arrived with a new prisoner, a thin male Twi'lek in late middle age, and he was terrified, struggling, screaming. Fett wasn't squeamish, but his code of honor said that you killed cleanly, and pain was a side-effect, not a hobby. It happened fast: the hired help held down the Twi'lek and the creature in the stapled robe simply rammed the yorik-kul that had been tipped from the dead victim up into the sternum of the new prisoner, so hard that the nodules broke through the skin of his neck, leaving him gurgling and choking. The surgical shock should have killed him, but somehow the crab-boys-Beviin had a gift for well-crafted abuse-could keep him alive.

Fett made a point of not looking at Beviin in case it started him off. He could hear him grinding his teeth and swallowing hard. If Beviin gave in to his urge to sort things out with a blaster for one victim, there would be an awful lot more in the Mandalore system who paid the price.

"Easy, Goran," he whispered into the HUD comlink. Fierfek, I've never used his first name, ever. "Time for that later."

Fett couldn't begin to imagine the pain. He knew now that he despised the Yuuzhan Vong, not for their apparent asceticism and brutality, but for their greedy indulgence of a perversion. It was as weak in its way as drunkenness and glitterstim addiction. He also despised Nom Anor for crude theatrics designed to show him what would be in store for Mandalore if he didn't comply.

Your threats will only motivate me more.

NomAnor considered Fett's price with visible slowness. "The Mandalore sector will not be touched," he said.

Liar. You'll swarm across the galaxy and when it suits you, you'll come back for us. You lived among us for eighteen years, so one more lie just rolls off that tongue of yours... Fett swallowed his revulsion. "Then based on that, we have a deal." And I'm a liar too, because we don't.

No, Fett was keeping his word. It mattered to him to phrase his acceptance carefully so he could thwart these monsters every step of the way and retain his sense of honor. My word is my bond, and you lied to me. Beviin reached down and picked up a fragment of the living coral that had broken off from the dead prisoner, casual as a man gathering firewood.

"Your next task is to secure a landing zone for us at Birgis," said NomAnor. He handed Fett a data-chip, and that must have rankled: filthy technology. "Here's the reconnaissance data we've just received, in a format that you can use. We could simply destroy the surface from orbit, because the planet will be reshaped and reengineered to our requirements anyway, but we wish to take the inhabitants alive to work for us."

"When?" Fett asked.

"Five days' time."

"We'd better get moving, then."

It was hard not to break into a jog down that gullet of a corridor. Beviin strode alongside him, one hand on his belt pouches as if protecting their contents. They split up in the docking bay area and went to their respective vessels, watched by silent Yuuzhan Vong warriors, a forest of grotesque thorn-trees with snakes clinging to them, the cold black future of the galaxy, and suddenly everything he detested. Beviin powered up the Gladiator's ion drive. Armored warriors stepped back; one stood his ground and watched, arms folded across his chest. Fett tapped Slave I's console, and the Firespray came alive with a rising whine that settled into a steady note. The Gladiator lifted a few meters clear of the deck and hung back. Beviin was waiting for him to maneuver.

"You first," said Fett. "We've got some planning to do."

"You can't believe they're serious about the deal." Beviin was loyal to his Mandalore, ever the traditional Mando'ad, but that also meant he reserved the right to tell the Mandalore to go stuff himself if he'd made a visibly suicidal choice. "Not after what we saw."

Fett took Slave I on manual toward the irregular opening that passed for the main hatch.

"No. And neither am I, and let's assume he knows it."

"If he knows anything about Mandos, he has to realize we're polar opposites to the crab-boys." Beviin cleared the bay, the drives flaring faintly violet as he picked up speed. The Gladiator looked like a flattened oval until it climbed steeply, suddenly becoming the characteristic shape of a saber thrust through a shield. "Slaves, caste systems, crazy gods-the shabuir said you were either Yuuzhan Vong or you were dead."

"I like my armor the way it is. Cold metal."

Beviin sounded like he was struggling to sound disenchanted rather than consumed by loathing. "Credits don't matter anymore. Nothing worth buying in a vong'yc galaxy anyway."

"I know that. So we're going to spoil their grand plan." No Mandalorian would have taken the Yuuzhan Vong credits if they'd known them for what they were. But Fett had done the deal, and now he had to choose: turn on them and fight, as the rest of the galaxy would, or use the precarious inside track they now occupied to do as much damage to the invaders as possible.

"What do you have in mind? It'll take time to mobilize a whole army on Mandalore."

"And we'll take massive casualties if we make a move before we know exactly what we're dealing with here. This is technology we've never seen before."

"Sit and wait? You must be-"

"They fooled us. Now we fool them. We play nice and look like we're on their side while we gather Intel until we have enough to hit them hard. We pretend to be in it for the money." Fett didn't know how much time they had. In the end, the Yuuzhan Vong would come for Mandalore to remake it as a world of living machines and parasitized slaves like every other planet. It was only a question of when. Fett took off his left gauntlet and ran his fingertips over the smooth composite of Slave I's console, one of the few original parts of the ship left from his father's time. Refit after refit had changed her capabilities almost beyond recognition, but if Jango Fett were to return now, he would snap the pilot restraint into a sitting position, check the console for dust and smears like he usually did, and feel right at home. He wouldn't feel at home in an enslaved galaxy with one brutal culture that had erased any trace of Jaster Mereel's heritage. Fett checked his fingertips for dust. Slave I was spotless. She didn't look like what she really was, either. This was going to be a little war of deception. He hoped Nom Anor appreciated irony.

Beviin was observing it over. "We still can't find the crab-boys. What about the Navy

Beviin was chewing it over. We still can't fight the Craos alone. What about the New Republic? They'll need whatever intel we get."

"Can't trust them. We didn't spot Nom Anor. Those disguises they use mean they could be anybody."

"We might have to trust them."

"We could slip them the data we've got now. Test the water. Find out the hard way."

"And if the New Republic blows our cover, for whatever reason, and the Vongese take their revenge on Mandalore..."

"-then we fight to the last, or we go and find those other galaxies the Yuuzhan Vong say are out there."

"It's too far."

"And death's too final. So we'd better win."

"Your father would be proud of you, Bob'ika" Beviin was younger than Fett, but he still called him by the kid's form of his name. Sometimes it irked Fett and sometimes it didn't. Right then, it was fine. "For a man who says he doesn't care about anyone else, you always come good for the Mando'ade when you're needed."

"I'm Mandalore. It's just my job."

"Course it is," said Beviin. "I believe you." The Aggressors and Gladiators holding position at the rendezvous point looked pathetically small. Behind them, the waves of Yuuzhan Vong ships speckled the void. It was as eloquent a summary of the odds as Fett had ever seen: bad, and not even worth counting.

It wouldn't have bothered Jango Fett, though. And so it wouldn't bother him. Nom Anor: notes for assault on Birgis.

Fett refuses to use villips and insists on keeping his own communications derives. I regret I must keep this infidel technology too. then.

I didn't expect him and his mercenaries to accept them, I admit. And trying to use villips in isolation, without yorik-kul or vonduum, would be unsatisfactory anyway. The Mandalorians seem especially repelled by enslavement by the yorik-kul, which I find ironic for a race whose history is full of pillage, occupation, and daughter. But slavery is something that seems to haunt them: it must have played a painful role in their own history. They obviously fear it.

They don't fear death, though. They don't embrace it, but they say that you live for as long as someone remembers your name. They never remove those helmets, so I can't judge from their expressions, but the tone of their voices tells me that the erasure of their culture by ours will be worse than death for them.

I suspect this is the key to keeping them loyal. Mandalore will remain untouched for as long as I need them. But enslavement will be the only way to handle them in the end. Birgis: perimeter of spaceport, one standard week after invasion of Helska 4. Beviin had to assume the Vongese knew what they were doing when it came to overrunning galaxies, but they didn't seem to care about stealth.

The main spaceport on Birgis-which served both civil and military vessels on this small planet-was the most obvious asset they could have targeted. From the observation point on the far perimeter, hidden in long grass, he could see the assault speeders patrolling the landing strips in a flurry of flashing lights. Others showed no lights at all but were detailed green targets in his night-vision visor. The military vessels and vehicles were an eclectic mix of the squadron based here and the remnants of others that had escaped the relentless invasion fleet and regrouped onsite.

Destroying those assets on the ground would be the hardest task Beviin could imagine. Playing the double agent was fine until you had to preserve the illusion by hitting your own side convincingly-lethally.

And the New Republic didn't even know yet that the Mandalorians were now their allies.

"I still say we should have hit the main civilian power station if they wanted a diversion," Cham muttered, propped on one elbow as he lay in the cover of the grass calibrating a portable missile-launcher. "Still, they're paying. Their call." Fett tapped a pouch on his belt. "Good opportunity to hand over this data. Especially now that we've got our next two mission briefings on it. Something the New Republic can act on."

"There must be something I'm missing. The folk here won't exactly be in a teachable moment."

"You got a better idea for making contact with the New Republic with the Vong crawling all over us?"

"No, Mand'alor."

"So let's go and look like a credible commando raid." Fett gestured to take up positions.

"Try not to kill everyone until we know if there's an officer we can make contact with, and leave a tighter or two intact. Got that, everyone? Somebody has to escape this to pass on the

data."

Beviin kept one channel on his comlink on intercepted New Republic voice traffic. Of course, obvious, all right: they were expecting a Yuuzhan Vong landing of the kind that had breached the Outer Rim, massive aerial bombardments of magma and burning rock followed by troops spewed from what could only be described as gigantic worms. The psychological factor—vessels and weapons that looked like freakishly deformed organs—was hitting almost as hard as the sheer destructive power of the Vongese's fleet. He could hear the ops staff tasking early warning craft and fighters over five cities in the northern hemisphere, collating reports of enemy warships spotted and bases on worlds toward the edge of the galaxy that had simply stopped responding to signals. The Yuuzhan Vong advance could be plotted by the wake of silent comm stations it left behind. The personnel here certainly wouldn't be expecting to find Mandalorians infiltrating their port and taking out the control hub, though.

Fett synchronized his chrono readout with the six of them and knelt back on his heels, occasionally tapping a control on his forearm plate. Dinua kept observation on the control tower. As she moved her head slowly, scanning, Beviin caught the green-lit tracking shot in the line of icons just to one side of his field of vision. Briika had done a fine job of training the kid. The girl was in that awkward gap between becoming an adult at thirteen and a wife at sixteen, but she was certainly a completely competent soldier. Mando society had always been that way, but Beviin sometimes looked at aruetii kids of the same age and felt that thirteen was far too young to take on that kind of responsibility.

And if he'd told her so, he was sure she'd have slugged him without a second thought. She was as tough as her mother. He wondered what fate had befallen her father and decided to wait for her to tell him in her own time.

At least he'd been able to leave a message for Medrit. Don't worry. It's not the way it looks. Sit tight.

"Now remember," said Fett. "I want to see good acting. Hit hard enough to look convincing, but don't wipe everyone out because we need at least one survivor." He paused and Beviin heard him swallow. "Thirty seconds."

They counted down on the synchronized timer projected on their HUDs. At fifteen seconds Cham knelt on one knee and balanced the missile launcher on his right shoulder, pressing his cheek plate against the tube, left hand steadying the brace. He had a habit of bobbing his head slightly as he counted but it never affected his aim. His head finally stopped bobbing for three seconds and a flare of yellow fire shot backward with a fweeesh of gas. Moments later the top of the spaceport tower exploded in a ball of white flame that climbed into the night sky, bringing instant and temporary daylight to the landing strip.

Fett didn't need to say a word. As debris rained down and vehicles and personnel scattered

Fett didn't need to say a word. As doors slammed down and vehicles and personnel scattered, the Mandalorians began the hundred-meter sprint to the main building, each making their move a few seconds apart and taking different paths, while Cham kept the anti-aircraft battery distracted for a few moments with a wildly launched missile that punched through a water tower, sending a torrent smashing onto the canopies of parked speeders.

It was harder than it looked to feign an attack when your whole life had been about ruthlessly efficient killing. It was especially hard when the target really believed you wanted them dead and fought back with the strength of desperation. Beviin blew open a pair of security doors into the brightly lit main complex and followed Fett through with Briika and Dinua at his heels. Suvar and Tiroc covered the exit and a corridor leading off it to protect their escape route. They ran down the main passage to a pair of doors marked with POWER HAZARD signs.

Normally, it would have been the obvious place to enter and do as much damage as possible—the generator room. This time it wasn't. Fett ran on and they reached an intersection in the corridor where they were met by blaster fire. Beviin jumped back and took the opportunity to reload. "Good. Someone's at home."

"Now to get them to stop shooting long enough to explain we have an errand for them." Fett and Briika leaned out of cover and laid down fire. Another volley of hot blue-white bolts skimmed the crown of Fett's helmet, adding another black streak to the green paint. "If they won't answer the door, we have to get in."

"We're good at that."

"Without killing them."

"Now there's the awkward hit." Beviin pulled a holo-probe out of his sleeve pocket and edged it cautiously around the angle of the wall. The image it relayed back to their HUDs showed a galley area: tables, stacks of metal trays, a couple of upended chairs, abandoned plates. People had scrambled. This had been a meal-break for aircrew, maybe. They'd have made a run to the airstrip to get the fighters airborne.

Someone was still there, though. He saw a flash of orange movement. Flight suit. Pilot. Pilots could get word out. Pilots needed not to be left too injured or stunned to fly out of here under Vong attack. "Bob'ika,

"I can do that myself."

"Who's got durasteel armor, and who's got the beskar version? As in almost lightsaber-proof beskar?"

"If he gets a lucky shot in that fancy antique won't save you."

He got a heavy shock as the bulky machine man came to save you.

"I never understood why you didn't go for beskar" said Beviin. "But save that for later. In three ..."

Beviin jumped to his feet and ran for all he was Worth towards the blaster fire. He had a detached moment of thinking that Medrit would go crazy at him for taking such a risk and worrying about that more than the bolt that hit him in the chest plate and sent searing hot air into the breather in his visor. Adrenaline was a wonderful thing. He thought that just as he threw himself on the flurry of orange-suited limbs and was deafened by his own voice yelling, "Drop it! Shut up and listen!"

Armor crashed against his. Dinua and Briika landed on top of him. He was almost at the bottom of a heavy pile subduing one pilot.

"Get off, we'll crush him."

"Got his blaster?"

"I got it."

"Got his arms?"

The pilot yelped. Dinua had certainly grabbed something. That was a trick he hadn't seen used in quite a while. Beviin eased back and hauled the pilot into a sit-ting position to find he was in fact a she, an angry-looking blonde with razored hair and now a welt on her right cheekbone that was turning into a black eye.

"Mandos," she spat. "You're fighting for those things} You filthy-"

"Yeah, we love you, too. Now listen to the Mandalore." Beviin jerked her around to face Fett. "Where's your helmet? You've got some flying to do."

"Why?" There was a helmet on a nearby table, and it was going to fit her whether she liked it or not. "For you?"

"Get this data to your nearest command," Fett said. He pulled the data chip from his belt and held it in her face, too close for her to focus. "You need this data on the Vong. Ship layout, some bio-data, and two mission plans that show where they're headed next and their op orders. It's whatever we could grab. Just get it to someone who'll make good use of it. And we don't have time to do the theatrical gaze of stunned silence. Shift it. Now." Fett helped her up and she zipped the chip into the pocket on the thigh of her suit, eyes wide and wary. "So whose side are you on?"

"Ours," said Briika. "I want my daughter to have daughters. She won't be doing that with the Vongese running the show."

"Cham, get her to her fighter or whatever's still flying, and see her past the Vong," Fett said, indicating the exit with his blaster. "If there's nothing airworthy on the strip, purge your Gladiator's security data and give her the keys. I'll buy you a new one."

"Better make it look like we're pursuing her, then." Cham handed the pilot her helmet and pushed her ahead of him. "And I'll be wanting a yellow one to match my plates this time. Custom job."

There was nothing left to do now but get out. The crab-boys wouldn't know it they'd been beaten back or not: the squad was only supposed to shut down the tower and cause a diversion anyway. They'd done that. Dinua set off at a sprint, rifle in both hands, and when they emerged from the building they saw why they hadn't come across any resistance inside.

The Yuuzhan Vong ground forces were swarming toward the spaceport, with small craft that looked like disembodied organs flying over them. Facing them along the perimeter was a wall of shattered speeders, repulsor trucks, and anything that could be commandeered to provide a defensive barrier. Fleet personnel in a variety of uniforms—even catering corps—were taking position next to civilians, armed with a selection of weapons that smacked of desperation.

In the green images of Beviin's night visor, the clawed armor of the advancing Vongese warriors looked like a walking forest. There was nothing more he or his comrades could do. But fighting alongside those New Republic troops—yes, his gut not only wanted him to do that, it demanded that he did. But he turned away to follow the others back to their fighters and hated himself for it.

"And what happens when the New Republic praises its brave Mando allies for slipping intel to them?" he asked Fett. "Its going to happen. And 'oops' won't cut it with the Vong."

"Then I'll swallow my nausea, and payday with the Vong is over." Fett put his glove to his visor, and for a second Beviin thought he might actually take his helmet off. Instead he just wiped away a scrap of debris. "But we grab as many opportunities as we can to beat them. A day at a time."

"At least the New Republic can evacuate the next target before they show."

"Yes," Fett said. "Let's see what happens at New Holgha."

"When the crab-boys finally decide to remodel Mandalore, we'll be the last to know."

"That's what they'll think, too," said Fett. "Now let's see if Cham got that pilot away safely."

The pilot had, and they rendezvoused with Cham a few hours later. But Beviin couldn't stop himself checking the status of Birgis. He knew he shouldn't, but he had to find out. He found out. There were no survivors.

NomAnor: evaluation of the New Republic's reaction to the invasion. I hadn't realized how much the New Republic despises the Mandalorians. Their role in the attack on Birgis is known to the New Republic command, judging by a message we intercepted, and the infidel seem to find greater release in bating their own kind even than in hating us. They seem to think this is just another mercenary group, though. They don't know that Fett is leading them. That may be an extra psychological weapon I can exploit later.

Shirb system. Outer Rim. New Holgha. three standard months into the invasion. The Five Holy Cities of New Holgha should have been evacuated by now, but it was clear that the New Republic hadn't acted on the warning, even though they'd denounced its source. Could have been worse, Fett thought. They could have lauded us as Republic heroes and spoiled the fun.

With its long-range planetary defense radar sabotaged overnight, New Holgha became another world to fall to the Yuuzhan Vong almost without a struggle. Its troops had been diverted elsewhere, but Fett had the feeling that they would have made very little difference in the long run.

He watched the Yuuzhan Vong warship, another miit ro'ik type, as it moved across the shattered city skyline looking as if it was . . . feeding.

"Sbab, it is," said Beviin, uncomfortably close to reading his thoughts. "It really is." A giant dark-speckled tube—at least double the length of the vessel—hung from the ship's hull and trawled through the city below, sucking up everything in its path. It reminded Fett of a tornado. He watched through his macrobinocular setting as it inhaled buildings, trees—and people. The more he watched, the less he could take in what he was seeing. In a galaxy full of bizarre ways to die, this was a whole new level of the grotesque.

"They're refueling," Beviin was transfixed. "The thing is actually digesting everything. Disgusting."

The Sarlacc parallels were strong. Fett had been convinced he'd shrugged off the nightmare of being digested alive. Now he wasn't so sure. But if he was appalled in any way by what he was watching, he suspected it was for himself and not for the New Holghans.

"The New Republic didn't believe us. Well, maybe they'll believe us now."

"They redeployed troops to defend Pedd Four," said Beviin. He had his helmet under one

arm and rubbed his forehead with the back of his gauntlet. He looked tired, probably from spending too much time flying back and forth to Mandalore between missions, where he seemed to be making preparations for the worst scenario—that although the "crab-boys" he'd come quickly to hate had pledged to leave the sector alone, they were going to break their word sooner rather than later. "So they think we gave them misinformation." Fett realized the New Republic didn't know as much about Mandalorians as it thought. It'd judged them wrong. "And they'll think a little bit of accurate intel was lobbed in for effect." He checked the charge level on his blaster. "I'll find a better way to convince them. I'm not giving up on the barves yet..."

"How long does it take to evacuate a planet anyway? Where do you put displaced worlds at a few weeks' notice?"

"I don't need you to make me feel better about it."

"Just saying it wouldn't have made much difference numerically if the Republic had believed the intel we gave them. Millions were still going to die either way." Fett thought of the other information he'd handed over to the New Republic, the plans of the warship and analyses and samples of the random scraps of biological material he and Beviin had grabbed. The Republic could have been working on ways to counter the Yuuzhan Vong's organic technology. But they'd ignore it. He just knew they would.

"We keep handing it over until they get the message."

"As long as Pretty-Boy Nom doesn't catch on," Beviin said. "And sooner or later he's going to realize we ought to be more efficient and that there should be Fett was still pondering a better way to pass intelligence to the New Republic when his comlink chirped.

"Infidel! This is Subaltern Bur'lorr. I need your assistance. I hunt a Jeedai."

"Jedi?" Fett ignored the warrior's jibe and clung to the one word he never thought would give him hope. "You sure about that?"

"He has a light weapon. He leapt from a high built-thing and was not harmed."

"Leave him to me." said Fett. "Jedi are my specialty. They killed my father." Beviin shoved his helmet back on and adjusted his belt, scabbard and sheaths rattling.

"Oya. Yes, indeed, oya..."

"I shall drive him toward you," said the subaltern. "His light weapon made no impression on my armor, which seemed to surprise him."

I'll bet. "Send me the coordinates."

"Have your troops cut him off. Our shapers want a live Jeedai to examine." Fett relayed the coordinates to the rest of the squad and switched to the secure comlink channel. "We need him alive more than they do. A Jedi will be able to tell we're not lying, and he can take the data back."

"I've never seen a Jedi before," said Dinua.

Beviin cut in, playing his father role. He seemed to like it. "He won't be too pleased to see us, so don't take any chances with his lightsaber."

"What's a Jedi doing here anyway?"

"He's here. That's good enough. Now let's get to him before they do." The subaltern's coordinates took them to a long road branching off what had been the main marketplace of the Five Cities. Large parts of it were now scoured down to the soil as if the buildings and trees had never been there, evidence that the dread weapon-as the Yuuzhan Vong called the warships scavenging tube-had passed this way. Fett's penetrating radar and sensors picked up erratic movement and an organic target with human body temperature, moving in a row of bombed houses that were still smoking from the fires started by magna weapons.

"Okay, we can crack him, but he can sense us, remember," said Fett. He gestured the Detta brothers to the south end of the alley and Briika and Dinua to the broken roof overlooking it. "Beviin, go and stall the subaltern. Buy us some time. Tiroc, with me." The Jedi was in a section of alley about ten meters long that ran along the rear of the houses. Rubble had partly blocked it; Fett tracked him with his motion sensor almost to the end of the alley. Then the movement stopped.

"Briika?"

She patched her view of the scene through to Fett's HUD. Judging by the angle, she was lying flat on the roof with her head hanging over into the alley. "See him? He's in a bad way."

The Jedi was a middle-aged, solidly square man in dark gray civilian pants and a battered blue jacket. He was slumped against a wall, eyes closed, face blackened and burned. Clutched in one hand was the hilt of a lightsaber.

Fett primed his jet pack and slipped a stun round into the dart thrower on his wrist. With any luck, the shock would be enough to subdue the Jedi without killing him. Fett needed the man to be fit enough to make it back to New Republic lines. Fett hit the burner controls and soared over the scorched wall as the Jedi looked up and went for his weapon. For an injured man, his reflexes were sobering: his lightsaber was humming a heartbeat before Fett dropped into the alleyway and fired the stun round. The projectile streaked past the Jedi's clashing

into the airway and into the sun round. The projectile sucked past the Jedi's blazing lightsaber and stuck fast to his chest, sending a disruptive charge through his body. It dropped him instantly and the lightsaber fell to the ground, but he still struggled to reach for his weapon, fingers splayed, hand shaking uncontrollably.

"Don't push your luck," Fett said. He kicked the lightsaber hilt into the air with the spiked toecap of his boot and caught it one-handed. "I'm short of a green one for my collection."

The Jedi wasn't in any shape right then to use it anyway. Fett beckoned Cham over to give him first aid, but the Jedi tried to fight him off. It took Suvar and Tiroc to hold him down while Cham sprayed bacta over his face and hands. Gratitude wasn't his strong suit: he brought his knee up hard in Suvar's groin. Briika stepped in to subdue him with an armlock around his neck.

"Show some respect," she said, gritting her teeth. "The Mandalore's talking to you." The Jedi's burned face managed a sneer. "So you're Boba Fett. And I didn't believe that Manda-"

"For once, I need a live Jedi," Fett interrupted. "You'll do. Cut the speech and listen up."

"Shoot me. You know what the Vong will do to me."

"I said shut up." Fett squatted over him. "We gave you a heads-up on this attack and Vong technology but your people ignored it. I'm offering again. Set up a secure message system and we'll supply the intel until our luck runs out."

Cham, still administering first aid, rammed a one-shot of painkiller into the man's exposed neck. Fett had to hand it to the Jedi. He didn't even flinch.

"You're slipping, Fett," he said hoarsely. "Feeding us misinformation is amateurish."

"I'm risking the life of every Mandalorian to get you this, barve-face." Fett was so exasperated that he pulled open the Jedi's jacket and stuffed the latest data chip into his belt. "Do your magic tricks. See what your precious Force tells you about our intentions. Now take it and run. We'll stall the Vong, but get it back to your intel people and don't blow our cover. We're traitors, okay? As long as we're traitors, we can get intel. Keep your source secret."

The Jedi struggled to prop himself up on his elbow. His nose was millimeters from Fett's visor. Fett still didn't like Jedi, not even real soldiers like this one. "But you're crippling us. You're killing people. Why not just fight?"

"Because the mindlessly heroic last stand is great for holovids but it's not how wars work." Fett hauled the Jedi to his feet. He was a solid man, vividly gray-haired in the way of those

who'd once had jet-black curls. Fett pressed the lightsaber into his hand; the hilt seemed dwarfed by it. "The crabs have to believe we're serious. A few lives against the whole galaxy, including keeping them away from the Mandalore sector. Do the math."

The Jedi stared at his weapon. "You finally grew a conscience?"

"No. I took the job of protecting Mandalore, and a contract is a contract. There's no future for any of us if the Vong take over."

"I never-"

"No speeches. Move it. We'll get you past the Vong." Tiroc nudged him. "Crab approaching, Mand'alor. Check your HUD."

"I see him. Got a vessel, Jedi?"

"That's where I was headed."

"Tiroc, see he gets to it and escort him out of the sector." The Jedi stopped dead in the narrow exit from the alley, almost jamming Tiroc in it. He turned his head to Fett.

"Kubariet," he said. "I'm a Jedi Knight. Kubariet. Only the one name." Then Tiroc shoved him in the back and they were gone.

So far, so good. But it couldn't last, and it didn't. In the next breach Beviin came in through the rubble-strewn breach in the wall with exaggerated slowness, a custom Merr-Sonn heavy blaster in one fist and the Yuuzhan Vong subaltern on his heels. The creature pushed past Beviin and one of the claws protruding from his armor caught his shoulder plate, scoring a line in the blue paint.

It could have ripped Beviin open like a canister. But his armor was forged from beskar, real Mandalorian iron that even Yuuzhan Vong weapons might not penetrate. He reached into his belt and drew his ancient beskad, a short razor-edged saber forged from the same. This is going to get ugly fast. There'd be a body, and he'd have to hide it. Fett's linked icons showed that Cham and the two women had made the same call and started powering their armor-mounted weapons.

"Where is the Jedi?" the warrior demanded. His head weaved from side to side and his amphistaff writhed along his forearm. "He ran in here. I tracked him here."

"Not here, friend." Briika stepped between him and Dinua. "Want us to go look for him?"

"What have you done with him? Tell me!"

The warrior wheeled around and nearly hit Beviin with his claw-spiked arm again. The bounty hunter slid his blaster casually into its holster and clasped the leather-wrapped hilt of the beskad.

"Careful, now," he said. "You could have someone's eye out with that thing." Viliips weren't like comlinks that needed opening and operating. Viliips were like being there in person, always on, always watching. The warrior had to be silenced, and fast. Fett didn't even have to give the signal.

Beviin went for the villip hooked on the warrior's shoulder and sliced it across its base with a single sweep, sending it flopping to the ground in a spray of fluid. For a split second the warrior just stared, jaws parted-his lipless mouth seemed permanently open-and then the narrow alley plunged into bedlam.

'Trait-"

It was the last word the warrior said. The living armor shifted before their eyes to protect his neck and head, but Beviin managed to hit him in the jaw with his return swing, and a beskad was a heavy weapon. The blade embedded itself in the warrior's jaw, leaving him gurgling and thrashing as his amphistaff changed briefly from snake to iron bar. As the warrior dropped to his knees, the amphistaff slipped free and Fett threw himself on it instinctively, punching his glove-mounted vibroblade through it and pinning it to the ground. Its tail thrashed. Suvar rushed over to decapitate it with his own blade. It was a couple of seconds that felt like hours. The subaltern was still screaming and writhing as Beviin struggled to pull his saber free. Briika leapt on the warrior between the scythe-like claws to drive her vibroblade deep into him but it skidded off the Vonduum crab armor. She let out a grunt and stabbed again. And still he kept struggling.

"Shut him up for fierfek's sake-"

"Shabla claws. Look out."

Beviin let go of the saber and grabbed the warrior's armored throat with his crushgaunts.

"Let's play a game, shabuir." He squeezed, and the subaltern's eyes stared. His mouth opened wide. "It's called beskar beats crab-shell." Crushgaunts had been illegal for centuries. The micronized beskar in them meant they could exert enough pressure to shatter thick bone and maybe more. The shell armor seemed to be putting up a fight, but Beviin-a mild man most of the time, in Fett's experience-hung on, cursing in completely incomprehensible Mando'a, until there was a sound like cracking ice and the warrior let out a long gurgle. The armor twitched, its claws snapping impotently a couple of times before stopping.

A second's silence followed.

Beviin, slightly breathless, gazed at his gloves with a distracted smile. "We were crazy to ban these."

"Remind me to rescind that when I get back," Fett said. It was a good thing that nearby cannon barrage had drowned the screams. Beviin struggled to pull the saber out of the body and finally had to put his boot square on the warrior's chest to do it.

"So the armor dies when the soldier does?" Suvar grabbed the dead amphistaff, sliced chunks off the subaltern and his armor, and stuffed the remains into his pouches and pockets until they bulged. "Bio samples, not trophies, okay? We need to get as much information on these . . . things as we can."

Beviin reached over and sliced off some scalp complete with wispy black hair. "Trophy. Now let's go, shall we?"

It took five Mandos to tackle one Yuuzhan Vong this time. But they'd learned a lot about how to kill them in just that one brief tussle. They'd learn plenty more. Briika scrambled to her feet, a little unsteady. The explosions were getting closer. "All we have to do is start up a crushgaunt factory. Easy. I mean ... oh ... " She seemed breathless. She looked down at herself, and then sank to her knees again, hands pressed against her chest plate.

"Buir? Buir!" Dinua grabbed her mother's shoulders and as her arms dropped the dark blood welling from under the armor plate was suddenly visible. It was pooling between her knees. It was all over the dead subaltern. "She's been stabbed. The crab armor spike went right through her suit. Get bey plates off!"

"No, that might be holding her together," Cham said. "Get her back to Slave I, fast."

"She's bleeding out-"

Beviin picked her up in his arms with no apparent effort.

"You promised ..." she said.

Fett was about to say something brutally pragmatic but he was wrong, and he knew it.

"Faster if we both lift her with jet packs."

"That'll take some doing."

"Do it. Dinua, burn that body. If the Vong find him they'll know it wasn't a lightsaber that

sliced him up."

Dinua looked close to protest. But she simply nodded and adjusted the flamethrower on her wrist, then looked back at her mother.

"K'oyacyi, Buir." Hang in there. Mama.

It was one thing carrying a wounded comrade between two-Fett couldn't recall ever doing that, of course-but maneuvering a jet pack in addition was hard. He thought she'd die before they touched down: she kept repeating "You promised ..." ever more weakly, and when they reached Slave 1, she was barely

Beviin eased off her helmet while Fett activated the emergency med droid that he kept and had never needed to use. The unit, a round-ended cylinder the length of his arm, darted around her like an insect, attaching sensors.

"Transfusion needed," it announced. "Hypovolemic shock. Stabilize, tie off blood vessels in-

"Transfuse, then, you hut'uun' said Beviin. Droids had no bedside manner. "I got you, Briika, it's okay. You're fine."

"You promised," she said, suddenly very lucid. "Dinua. Gai bal manda."

"I did," he said. He took off his helmet. "I swear. Don't you worry about that. K'oyacyi. Hang in there."

The med droid slipped catheters into Briika's arm and neck, and Beviin kept looking to the hatch as if willing Dinua to show up. Fett reflected on the variable nature of penetrating wounds, and how unreliable stabbing was as a method of stopping an enemy. Beviin stood by the hatch, blinking rapidly and occasionally shaking his head as if arguing with himself. The med droid started bleeping.

"No pulse," it said. "Unable to resuscitate." It hadn't even started the incision. Beviin didn't say a word; he simply pushed himself away from the hatch to begin cleaning up the blood that was drying in dark patches on Slave 1's scrupulously clean deck. Dinua arrived at a run, boots clattering in the hatchway, a matter of minutes too late.

"Dinua ..." Beviin always kept his word. He caught her by the arm before she got to the body. "Ni kyr'tayl gai sa'ad." He glanced briefly at Fett, and the translation was for him, not her. "I know your name as my child."

He didn't have to say that her mother was dead or that he was sorry. The instant adoption told the girl all she needed to know.

Dinua held her helmet upside down in both hands and gazed into it, eyes fixed and glassy, as if frozen in the act of putting it on. And Fett could suddenly feel hard metal in his own hands: crouched in the shadows, bone-dry red dust stinging his eyes, staring at a silver-and-blue helmet and both utterly destroyed and totally numb at realizing his father was gone forever. He knew better than anyone how she felt, and for a brief moment he experienced a rare connection.

"It's okay to cry," Beviin said quietly. "We all cry sooner or later. I have, that's for sure."

He was talking to Dinua, but it still made Fett start. She sniffed loudly and flipped the helmet upright between spread fingers.

"I'm ready," she said.

"That's my girl."

There were no orphans in Mandalorian society-not for long, anyway. Except me. Fett was fine with that. Nobody could ever replace his father. It was better that they didn't try.

Nom Anor: observations.

The Mandalorians are just like any other infidel, it seems. They are as weak and corrupt; they traded their entire galaxy for a few years of immunity for their wretched little sector. In a way, I'm... disappointed. I had higher hopes of them. A few years? Perhaps less than that. Perhaps a few months.

I had expected them to be better warriors, I admit. Their reputation for savagery has been exaggerated from what I've seen of them in this war. But they still remain very useful for intelligence gathering and sabo-tage, and I shall keep them very much undercover even from our own warriors. They think their culture is eternal, but they'll be erased when I have no further use for them. The more I look at them, the more weakness I see. Armor. Iron armor. Lifeless shells.

How... weak.

Slave I: crossing Mandalore sector, two standard weeks later. Fett was impressed by the ability of the average Mando to keep his mouth shut and close ranks even without being asked.

The regular overnight intelligence summary transmitted to Slave J recorded two contacts between Mandalorian vessels and the New Republic, where noncombatant Mandos were treated as hostiles just as Fett needed them to be. Both pilots obliged in keeping up appearances by returning fire and in one case destroying the New Republic fighter.

appearances by returning fire and in one case destroying the New Republic tugster.

"Carry on hating us," Fett said aloud. "Now we'll keep the intel we get and use it ourselves."

Mandalorian engineers were already working on developing enhanced weapons specifically for use against the Yuuzhan Vong. Word had spread within the Mando community about the real nature of the deal with the invaders, but that was as far as it got. Nobody else's business, of course: outsiders wouldn't understand anyway. Aruetiise. He saw no reason to learn the language, but the odd word was useful.

The invaders continued their advance across the galaxy, albeit more slowly than he expected. If-when-they turned on the Mandalore sector, he'd be ready for them. Until the next call, or the next opportunity to gather information, he opted to remain the Boba Fett that everyone expected him to be, more bounty hunter than Mandalore, because life still went on where the Yuuzhan Vong hadn't yet reached. Fools. Life won't be going on much longer.

Some of the Mandalorian clans told him they planned to dig in and resist the Yuuzhan Vong, and some planned to do something called ba'slan sbev'la, which Beviin translated as

"strategic disappearance." It was hard to wipe out a people who could vanish for years and then show up again as an avenging army, all without the guiding hand of a conventional government.

Yes, they'll show up again. Don't doubt it.

Fett respected their ability to sort out their own affairs. He was contemplating the nature of identity, with one eye on the movement of share prices displayed on the console, when Slave I picked up a vessel on an intercept course. It was a New Republic X-wing, just like old times. For once, this one wasn't in his database, like every other individual ship catalogued by thermal signature, electromagnetic profile, and other telltale characteristics that helped him identify it. It was genuinely unknown. He didn't have its pilot on his list. And it meant business, judging by the speed it was approaching. He monitored Slave I's automatic defense system and decelerated to watch its reaction on the scan. When it came within a thousand kilometers, it slowed and Slave I's comm beeped for attention, displaying the source and router.

Ah. The message was coming via one of the nodes he'd listed on the intelligence datachip. Fett opened the link.

"Target practice, or do you want to talk?" he asked. The voice didn't surprise him. He'd never admit that it relieved him, though.

"It's Kubariet," said the pilot. "I'd never fire on an

"Think of yourself as my enemy's enemy."

"Close enough for me. Rendezvous point?"

"Go about and follow me into Vorpa'ya."

"Concord Dawn's closer."

"I can't return there. And you don't need to know why."

"That's okay, Fett, because I already do. I work with New Republic Intelligence."

"And you still found your way here. Impressive." The Jedi didn't laugh; they never did. But he followed Fett.

Vorpa'ya was a dump. There was no other accurate description. Nerf farming and had land management had left it as a Tatooine waiting to happen. The two vessels landed at a careful distance on an overgrazed plain that threw up clouds of gritty dust, and Fett waited for Kubariet to open his canopy and jump out. When he did, he wasn't in Jedi robes but a regular pilot's flight suit.

"It's a deal," said Kubariet.

Fett couldn't recall any Jedi who talked like that. "About time."

"It was useful information. I'm sorry we didn't crack on to that right away."

"Fine."

"So, what's your fee?"

"I don't want your credits. Just kill more Vong."

Kubariet looked studiously blank. "My apologies. But now we can at least keep the fleet off your back and put them in the picture."

"No."

"But--"

"Every time we meet the New Republic, we'll remind them we fight for the Vong. It has to be that way for this game to work."

"But you're fighting two wars at once. Fighting for the New Republic and defending yourself

against us, too."

"We'll manage okay."

"Too proud to admit you're our ally?"

"No, wary of leaks in your organization that might blow our cover. Nom Anor's been right here for eighteen years and we never spotted him." Fett decided he could do business with this Jedi at least. "And we're not on your side. We're on our side. The longer the Vong think I'm their pal, the more time I buy for Mandalore."

"They'll come for you in the end."

"I know that."

"Then you'll have to show your hand."

"I know that, too, and if and when that happens, we'll show them what Mandos can really do. It'll be a nice surprise for them. They'll hardly recognize us." The _we_ slipped out. For a moment Fett wondered about all the times he used I and the very few occasions when he said we, and accepted that he now felt a communal sense of responsibility for Mandalore and whoever passed for Mandalorian.

"Can I ask you to consider something, Fett?"

"It's free, but make it quick."

"Your father did something once that you might be able to do for us today." Spare me the amateur psy ops. "What?"

"He recruited a group of training sergeants for the Old Republic's commando forces-the Cuy'val Dar. Maybe we could use some of your experienced commandos to train planetary militias to fight the Yuuzhan Vong."

Fett recalled the Cuy'val Dar, all right: he'd grown up surrounded by them on Kamino. "The multiplier effect." He paused a beat. It was a good idea, but he didn't want to look too enthusiastic. "I'll see who's interested."

Kubariet reached inside his suit and took out a data chip. "Use this to configure secure links from your comlink system to mine. I'm your portal, so to speak. Nobody knows this comes from you."

"Let's swap. I've got a bag of Vong spare parts in the conservator if you need them."

"I've take whatever you've got." Kubariet seemed on the brink of grabbing Fett's hand, or slapping his shoulder, or some other display of comradeship that made Fett recoil. Kubariet wasn't giving up on redemption, though, spy master or not. "Fett, don't you care that people despise you all as traitors." Can you really swallow it when the New Republic tries to kill you

Fett tried to recall what it felt like to be a hero but nothing came to mind. He couldn't speak for his troops or the clans in general, but no, he lost no sleep over it. He had his own code of honor: and abiding by it meant he could live not only with himself, but also with his father's still-present scrutiny.

"We'll survive," he said.

"If you think of something I can do to make your lives easier, you'll let me know, won't you?"

Fett couldn't think of anything that the New Republic could give Mandalore other than a wide berth when the war was over. He turned to walk back to Slave I and retrieve the samples. The irony of the Jedi's offer wasn't lost on him, but now was the time to keep a lifetime's hatred on a leash and do the pragmatic, practical thing-to behave as Jango Fett would have.

Get the job done. Don't give in to emotion.

Fett could no longer think of a single thing that another person could possibly give him. Maybe that was the point. He turned on one heel.

"Jedi, there's one thing you can do."

"Okay. Name it."

"Make sure everyone knows that a Mandalorian called Briika Jeban died to save a citizen of the New Republic."

"Of course. Who was she? Can you tell me any more? Who did she save?" Fett tilted his head slightly to one side, then resumed his walk to his ship.

"You, Jedi," he said. "You."