

# STAR WARS THE OLD REPUBLIC

## SMUGGLER'S VANGUARD



ROBERT CHESTNEY

## ***The Old Republic: Smuggler's Vanguard***

**Written by Robert Chestney**

A fiery comet blazed past the moons of Talus, leaving a trail of amber dust. It spent only moments in view of the pilot's seat, but it caught the attention of Hylo Visz. A comet was a sign of change -- an omen that could be either good or bad. She wanted to consider its meaning later, when she had more time. Just now, the Crimson Fleece had dropped out of hyperspace, and Hylo was steering the ship toward its destination, the still-distant form of Corellia. Normally, she enjoyed the peaceful moments between completing a hyperspace jump and entering a planet's atmosphere, but not today. Today, the Fleece was carrying valuable cargo, and two passengers Hylo would just as soon have left back on Nar Shaddaa. The flight from Hutt Space had taken no longer than planned, but Hylo had been counting the minutes. The goon camping in her co-pilot's seat--his name was Musk--gabbled incessantly in his own form of crude Basic. Musk was trying to show off his knowledge of the inner politics of the Hutt Crime Cartel. Based on his naïve analysis, he was criticizing his boss, Barrga the Hutt, for making all the wrong decisions. Hylo had no basis for knowing the wisdom of Barrga's actions, but she was willing to bet that Musk didn't either. Of course, this kind of talk was no surprise; most of the Hutts' hired guns spent their time gossiping about their bosses' behaviors. She could have forgiven him this; Musk was a Nikto, not exactly known for their brilliance. But he hadn't stopped there.

"Good for me to get off Nar Shaddaa." Musk scratched his scaly chin. "Ever since we pull Star Cluster Cantina job, I always have to be watching my back."

Hylo stifled a laugh.

"You weren't in on that operation."

"What do you know, girl?" Musk bristled at having his lie challenged. "You think Barrga the only boss I work for?"

The Star Cluster Casino job was one of the most notorious operations in years. Professional thieves had broken in and fixed the casino's computers. The thieves returned the next business day and made a fortune in a series of inconspicuous bets. It was weeks before the Star Cluster's owners discovered the glitch, and by then, the thieves had vanished. Like anyone else even slightly "plugged-in" on Nar Shaddaa, Hylo knew the Star Cluster job was too delicate to have been pulled off by anyone from the usual underworld circles. Apparently, Musk didn't realize the absurdity of his claim. He was obviously trying to impress her, though, and that was a card she wanted to keep in her hand for now. She decided to back down.

"I figured whoever pulled that job was long gone by now." She shrugged in acceptance of his lie. "If you say it was you, I have no cause to doubt it."

"Yeah, I made many credits on that deal. Soon I'll be running my own gang. You'll see." Musk tightened his lips, probably wondering if she really believed him.

Turning back to the controls, Hylo unconsciously slid her hand down the side of her blue leather pants to touch the holster strapped to her thigh. There was no reason to think she'd need her blaster, but it was always nice to know it was there if she did.

After a few minutes of silence, Musk started off on another rambling monologue, apparently as glad as she was to let the Star Cluster conversation die.

Hylo closed her eyes and tried to drown out Musk's guttural droning. She focused on the sound of the Fleece's engines -- a sound she knew better than the sound of her own voice. Hylo had often claimed that she could pinpoint any of the ship's technical problems just by spending a few minutes listening to the engine. Her claim usually drew a skeptical laugh, but it was the truth. She knew the sound of the ship's engines well enough to notice the slightest skip or stutter. She had repaired the Fleece en-

ough times to know what most of these aberrational sounds meant as well.

The Crimson Fleece was nothing like the ship she originally purchased. In the decade since she scraped together enough credits to buy the old wreck, she had replaced nearly every part, some of them more than once. Because of its age, most of the original parts were no longer available, but Hylo had improvised -- buying scraps from other ships and rigging them together. After her latest round of upgrades, the Fleece was probably worth triple its original value, but it would take an expert mechanic to recognize that fact. She'd never be able to get even half of what the ship was worth if she tried to sell it, so she didn't bother. It suited her needs well enough for now, but she knew someday she'd have to replace it, just to give herself another renovation project, if nothing else.

"Unidentified vessel, please transmit identification and clearance codes." A business-like voice blared from the communication console, stunning Musk into a welcome silence. Hylo looked out the window, quickly locating the orbital security station from which the request came.

"Transmitting now," Hylo replied, as her fingers danced across the control panel to send the information. She then leaned back in her seat, knowing it would take a few minutes for Corellian security to cross-check the codes. Musk grunted as he reached up to cockpit ceiling. "Power down the hyperdrive generator?"

"No!" Hylo sat up in a flash and slapped his hand away from the switch. "Leave it on standby. I never turn it off until the job's done. Bad luck."

Musk's first reaction to having his hand slapped was anger, but he decided to laugh it off instead.

"You Mirialans crazy." He shook his head and chuckled before standing up and leaving the cabin.

Hylo watched him go, feeling more than a little uncomfortable. Leaving the hyperdrive generator on had nothing to do with her being Mirialan, of course. Like having her blaster on her side, having the hyperdrive generator on

standby was just something that felt reassuring.

She presumed Musk left the cockpit to update his partner, a Weequay with a name Hylo couldn't even pronounce, let alone remember. Unlike Musk, the Weequay was quiet, darkly quiet. Hylo knew the type well; his deadly, cold-blooded stare told her all she needed to know. He was the type she'd typically avoid working with at all cost. In this case, however, she'd had no choice. Barrga the Hutt had sent the two thugs as her "escorts." What that really meant is they were watching to make sure Hylo didn't try to cheat the boss. When the stakes were high, this was standard operating procedure.

In general, Barrga, like most of the other Hutts, actually trusted Hylo. She had worked for the Cartel on and off for years now, and before that, she had practically grown up as a grease rat working in the Cartel's cargo docks.

Hylo lived on Nar Shaddaa most of her life, but she was born on Balmorra. Her father worked as a droid designer until the war started, when he was caught in the crossfire during an Imperial raid. Only a child at the time, Hylo fled the planet with her mother and hundreds of other refugees.

Weeks later, during a pit stop on Nar Shaddaa, her mother had fallen ill and the refugee transport had left them behind. Her mother died soon thereafter, leaving Hylo with nothing but a handful of credits and the clothes on her back.

She wound up running with a gang of similarly-orphaned alien street urchins, sneaking through Nar Shaddaa's ducts and alleyways, stealing and scrounging to survive. Most of those kids wound up getting killed or becoming thugs for one of Nar Shaddaa's numerous crime lords.

Hylo had been lucky, though. As a teenager, she discovered her natural skill with machines and became a mechanic in the grimy shipyards deep in Nar Shaddaa's Undercity. It earned her enough to get by. From the first time she actually sat in the pilot's seat, though, Hylo knew she wanted to spend more time flying starships than fixing

them.

She saved every credit she earned until she had enough to buy the Crimson Fleece, and then she began hiring herself out as a freighter captain. The Hutt Cartel didn't hire just any ship available, though. She'd had to take any work she could get those first few years. That's when she made the mistake of picking up a job from the Sith Empire -- a mistake she'd never make again. She had learned the hard way that the only time the Imperials hired freelancers is when they were looking for expendable labor. Fortunately, working her connections among the mechanics, and earning a reputation for success, Hylo finally got the attention of the Hutts, and never looked back. Running black market goods and technology all over the galaxy, the Hutts had no shortage of work for freelancers. Hylo made a decent living and still got to be her own boss. Hylo was, in fact, thinking about how she was going to spend the credits for this job when Musk returned to the cockpit with a new air of urgency.

"Why we still waiting?" He didn't sit down, but looked through the window at the orbital security station with irritation.

"Well, somehow I suspect they won't let us enter Corellia's atmosphere until they give us clearance," Hylo smiled, confident that Musk wouldn't detect her sarcasm.

"Tell them we need to land now," Musk ordered angrily.

"We have business." He looked at her expectantly.

She reminded herself that Musk was just hired muscle.

He couldn't know the stupidity of his suggestion. "This isn't Nar Shaddaa, Musk. They have rules here," she smiled patiently.

"We break no rules." Musk shrugged and looked at Hylo suspiciously. "They should be expecting us. You call now."

"Listen friend, just because I let you up here doesn't make you co-pilot." She looked him in eye with firm resolve.

"This is my ship, and I'm in charge."

Hylo leaned her chair back against the console, projecting an air of relaxed confidence. "We wait until they call us."

That's the way it works." Go ahead and push it; I dare you. She was ready to reach for her blaster, if necessary. She watched the wheels turn slowly in Musk's head as he considered how to react. His puzzled expression suggested he would back down, but then it ceased to be an issue.

"Crimson Fleece, your codes have been verified. Welcome to Corellia." The voice of Corellian security was no friendlier than it had been before. "Please proceed directly to landing pad A-17 at the Rendili Corporate facility. Sending coordinates."

Now it was Hylo's turn to look puzzled. She sat up with a start and keyed into the communication console.

"You mean we're not landing at a military spaceport?" Barrga had never specified where the deal would take place, but Hylo knew the drives were going to the Republic military. She had assumed they'd land at a military facility.

"Says here you're delivering a shipment to the Rendili Vehicle Corporation." The voice sounded irritated, expressing some degree of humanity for the first time. "All Republic military facilities are strictly off-limits to non-military personnel. We are at war, you know."

"I'm not stupid," Hylo sighed and shook her head. "All right, fine, just tell them we're on the way."

"You're welcome." The security agent spat sarcastically and closed the connection.

Hylo laughed and settled back in her seat. She looked back and noticed that Musk had again left the cockpit. She didn't bother to wonder why. She enjoyed the moment of solitude and simply reminded herself this would all be over soon. This might be the last job I do for the Cartel, she reminded herself.

Recently, Hylo had been finding work elsewhere. She had done some corporate deliveries and even some jobs for the Republic. Though Republic policy had previously been to hire only licensed and certified freighter captains, the Republic military had been having trouble finding help to



transport supplies. Imperial influence had spread far and wide, and working for the Republic had become a risky enterprise. Most pilots shied away from such work, but not Hylo.

Not only did Hylo's sympathies lie with the Republic, but she enjoyed taking risks. From her time flying, she had come to firmly believe that anything was possible, as long as she had faith in herself. It was doubt and fear that caused people to fail. So Hylo consciously projected a relentless confidence and trusted fate. There was one major exception, though, and that was when she saw the signs of impending misfortune. Bad luck began in the small things, things that were seemingly unimportant. Her father's landspeeder had broken down on the last day he left for the lab. Her mother had stained her favorite robes just before she fell ill. Hylo had concluded that these weren't coincidences, but were actually the universe's way of warning people. From this, she had deduced that small troubles and accidents would be followed by deadly catastrophes if she didn't act on the warnings. Hylo would have been embarrassed to share this idea with anyone else, but such beliefs had saved her life enough times; she no longer questioned them.

On the positive side, if there were no warning signs, then there was no danger. She could fly fast and loose, and come out without a scratch. It was the Invisible Law of the Universe. So far on this excursion, the signs had all been good.

As the Crimson Fleece descended into Corellia's atmosphere, Hylo studied the landscape, taking it all in. She had lost count of the number of planets she had visited, but she had never seen Corellia. She was surprised to find herself feeling a childlike sense of curiosity and adventure. Corellia had a reputation for individuality. It had all the amenities available on any of the other core worlds, but great care had been taken to ensure it did not become a city-world. Large green spaces dominated the planet's surface, efficiently laid out between industrial and residen-



tial sectors. Surprisingly, Hylo had heard that such environmentally responsible planning had come from Corellia's corporations. She was glad to see proof that not all financial enterprises were as greedy and destructive as those she was familiar with on Nar Shaddaa.

As the Rendili facility came into view, Hylo drew in a breath. The architecture was a dazzling combination of elegance and efficiency. The upper levels of several towers were interwoven with tiered promenades and spacious offices with large viewports. Beneath the towers was a labyrinth of modern-looking industrial facilities. There was even a green space that appeared to serve as testing grounds for the company's projects. She saw a fascinating assortment of vehicles in various places on the corporate campus, from mainstream-looking airspeeders to other types of transport she hardly recognized. Her mechanically inclined mind was consumed in theorizing on the function and purpose of these mysterious machines.

Hylo's sense of wonder was smashed, however, when Musk re-entered the cockpit and climbed back into the copilot's seat. His blaster rifle was now slung over his back, and it clumsily bumped the side of her chair. Musk didn't even notice. What paranoid ruffians we'll probably look like to these people, she thought. The idea crossed her mind to actually leave her blaster behind, but she laughed it away. These people knew she was working for a Hutt. They wouldn't think much of her whether she was wearing a blaster or not.

"A-17. Right there." Musk was scrutinizing the maze of architecture below them. "What are you waiting for?" He was clearly ready to get this over with.

"I know. I'm going." Her spirits boosted by the environment, Hylo flashed Musk a genuinely friendly smile. As she eased the Fleece down toward the landing pad, Hylo started thinking about the credits again. Though she

had found flying for the Republic to be exhilarating and at least somewhat morally rewarding, the pay wasn't all that good and the jobs were still scarce. She had taken this job from Barrga the Hutt because she needed the credits. Her commission for this job would be sizeable, and for good reason -- the cargo was a crate of prototype ion drives.

Despite the fact that Nar Shaddaa was one of the shadiest places in the galaxy, and partially because of that fact, it was where many of the galaxy's most advanced technologies were developed. Unscrupulous corporations seeking to avoid Republic regulations set up labs deep in the moon's lower city and developed technologies that were both very dangerous and very valuable. Most of these corporations marketed their technologies through the Cartel and other crime syndicates to avoid liability. Hylo didn't know who had developed the ion drives she was carrying in her cargo hold, but she knew why they were valuable. Such drives would increase a ship's sublight thrust capabilities, giving starfighters a major advantage in battle. Both the Republic and the Empire would pay top credit for any edge they could get in the war, and this would be a big one. Hylo was glad that the ion drives were going to the Republic's military. They could use a little help, she knew.

She also knew that these prototypes were just a teaser shipment. If the Republic military tried out the drives and liked them, they'd order hundreds, if not thousands. If Barrga remained the middle-man, this could be the best deal the Hutt had ever made.

Unable to resist her own curiosity, Hylo had slipped into the main cargo bay during the flight and taken a peek. From what she could tell, the drives were the real thing. That was good, because if Barrga was trying to cheat the Republic military, Hylo didn't want any part of it. She knew all too well that the courier was the one who usually paid for a client's betrayal.

As the Fleece finally came to rest on the landing pad,

Hylo ran a quick check on her sublight engine--the ignition system, in particular. The ignition system had been giving her trouble and she wanted to make sure she could fire the Fleece back up without a problem. The ignition system checked out fine, though, and she powered down the sublight engines. As long as she left the hyperdrive generator on standby, she could quickly divert power over and be out of Corellia's atmosphere in seconds if the need should arise. As she scanned the control panel, however, she noticed the ship's rear stabilizer was slightly offset. She frowned. There's another part I'll need to replace soon. For now, it just meant she needed to recalibrate the stabilizer outside the ship.

As she rose from her seat, she nearly bumped heads with Musk who had chosen the exact same moment to get up from the co-pilot's seat. He gave her a leering grin and leaned back to allow her to leave the cockpit first. She could feel his eyes on her backside as she hurried through the ship's lounge to lower the landing hatch. Keep dreaming, pal, she smiled to herself. She pulled the release and watched as the gangplank slowly lowered to the ground.

As she stepped down through the hatchway, a cool breeze assaulted her senses with relief. Being cooped up in the cockpit with a Nikto had given her new appreciation for the value of fresh air. Preoccupied with her thoughts and the task at hand, Hylo was caught completely by surprise when she heard the high-pitched voice of a protocol droid address her from across the platform.

"Excuse me, miss, but I'm afraid there's been some mistake. This is landing pad A-17. You're not cleared to land here and you'll need to move your... starship right away."

The protocol droid spoke with a polite demeanor, but Hylo recognized a note of disdain. Hylo didn't dislike droids, but she didn't trust them either. She suspected it was a subconscious hang-up related to her father's death, but she could see no reason to try to overcome it.

"The mistake is somewhere on your end, because this is

where Corellian security told me to land." She deliberately turned her attention toward a steam exhaust port on the bottom of the Fleece that was dripping liquid. She knew it was just water, but she made a show of catching a few drops and looking at them in the light.

She sensed that the protocol droid was about to politely persist, but the droid stopped short as Musk walked heavily down the gangplank.

"We come from Barrga the Hutt. We have special delivery for Rendili Company. Go check computer." His blaster rifle still slung across his shoulder, Musk smiled cruelly at the droid, daring it to protest.

"Very well. I'll reconfirm," the droid chirped compliantly, "but I can assure you that no deliveries were on the schedule for today. I'll be right back." The droid turned and teetered back across the platform toward the tower's cargo doors.

Send someone back who actually has a personality, Hylo thought to herself. She smiled at her own prejudice and looked up to see Musk shoot her a short, skeptical glance before walking back up into the ship.

Enjoying the moment of quiet and the fresh air, Hylo casually held her finger up to trace the contour of the Fleece's underbelly as she made her way back to the rear stabilizer. She looked around, noting the efficient and immaculate nature of the landing pad. Suspended dozens of meters above the ground and connected to the tower only by a thin platform, there was far less danger of the thievery common to the Cartel landing pads on Nar Shaddaa. Other than a few empty cargo containers stacked neatly at the edge of the platform, the landing pad was perfectly bare.

Reaching the rear stabilizer, Hylo popped open the external control box and released the pressure valve. A puff of steam burst from the vent and the stabilizer made an almost imperceptible adjustment. Hylo gently closed the control box and sauntered back over to gangplank. After one last look at the outside world, she turned to walk back

up into the ship and suddenly froze. She heard something.

She turned around in a flash, scanning the area again to try to identify the source of the sound. Seeing nothing, she cocked her head to the side and craned her neck, hoping to more accurately identify what she heard. Then she realized; it wasn't what she was hearing, it was what she wasn't hearing. Something was missing: a small, faint buzzing, very familiar and very important. The hyperdrive generator had been turned off.

Infuriated, Hylo dashed up the gangplank. She charged into the ship's lounge to find Musk sitting on a bench, leaning back against the bulkhead with his eyes closed. Sensing her angst, his eyes popped open and without moving a muscle, he raised his eyebrow to casually question her demeanor.

"What have you done, you blasted monkey-lizard?" She choked out the question through gritted teeth. "I am the captain of this ship. You have no right to even touch the controls..." she trailed off, recognizing his truly mystified expression.

"Don't know what you're talking about." Musk looked her directly in the eye. He almost looked a little afraid.

"Don't tell me the hyperdrive generator shut down by itself." Even as she was saying the words, she realized from Musk's expression that this was probably the case. She headed to the cockpit to check the control panel.

An icy chill ran down her spine and sucked the wind out of her stomach. The indicator for the hyperdrive generator had a hollow, dead look that clearly signaled a significant problem. This is bad. In an instant, Hylo's spunky energy was sapped completely and she felt at once like a little girl, lost and alone in Nar Shaddaa's streets. As she stood there, transfixed by the dead indicator, Musk stepped up behind her. He leaned into the cockpit to see the indicator himself, brushing up against Hylo in a way that she would never have allowed a few minutes before. At this moment, though, Musk's offensive presence was not even a dis-

traction compared to the sheer terror she was feeling. "Probably just need recharging," the Nikto observed casually. He ducked back out of the cockpit and started walking down the corridor toward the lounge, but he stopped cold upon hearing Hylo's reply.

"No. This is a sign." She was still staring at the dead indicator, but her inner reserves of strength were calming the shakiness she felt inside. It all made sense now -- the corporate landing pad, the rude protocol droid, the fact that their delivery wasn't on the schedule -- it was a trap. The suspicious nature of these facts hadn't been lost on Hylo, but they were irrelevant until the hyperdrive generator broke. Now they added up to positive proof that something bad was about to happen.

"It's better we get off-planet," Hylo mumbled to herself as she sat back down in the pilot's seat. "We'll lay low on one of Talus's moons. I can check and see what happened to the hyperdrive generator." She glanced out the window to see that the landing pad was still completely empty, even as she pressed the button to raise the landing ramp.

"They're definitely planning something." She reached up and powered on the sublight engines.

"What you doing?" Musk was bewildered.

"You're just going to have to trust me on this." Hylo kept her eyes on the cargo doors. Any moment she expected the doors to burst open and blaster cannons to be aimed at the Fleece. She gripped the controls to lift off, but then she felt the hard barrel of Musk's blaster rifle jab into the back of her neck.

"No no. We go nowhere, crazy girl." Musk's voice wasn't angry or mean, but it carried a note of something far more dangerous, fear. It was clear that he thought Hylo had lost her mind, and was likely willing to shoot her if he had to. Hylo's mind spun. I should have known Musk would react this

way. I might be playing right into the catastrophe I'm trying to avoid. She loosened her grip on the controls and slumped forward in the seat. She felt Musk relax slightly, but

his rifle was still pointed at the back of her head. It was risky, but she knew what she had to do next. She dropped her head into her hands and feigned a sob. Instinctively wanting to comfort her, Musk took a step forward.

Hylo's elbow came up fast and hard, knocking the barrel of Musk's blaster rifle into the ceiling. She spun out of her seat to come up beneath it. Realizing he'd been tricked, Musk bared his teeth, but then gasped breathless as Hylo dealt him a powerful kick to the groin.

Falling to his knees in the tight corridor, Musk tried to lower his blaster rifle to point it at Hylo's face, but she was too quick. In one fluid motion, her right hand caught the barrel of his rifle, and her left hand flashed by her holster and came up holding her blaster to Musk's forehead.

"Drop it." Give me an excuse and I will shoot you, she thought, but Musk let go. She jerked the rifle from his hand and tossed into the pilot's seat, but she had no idea what to do next. Improvising, she kept her blaster at Musk's head and slid around behind him in the corridor.

"You crazy, crazy dumb girl." Musk kept his hands up, but he was shaking his head. "Barrga gonna kill you for this." He thinks I don't have the guts to pull the trigger.

"I'll take that risk." She grabbed the back of Musk's shirt and jerked him along toward the lounge.

She glanced back and recognized the smell, but she never had a chance to react. Musk's Weequay partner had finally decided to emerge from wherever he had been. The stock of the Weequay's blaster rifle smashed into Hylo's face before she could even register what was happening. Everything went black.

Hylo's eyes fluttered open. Only seconds had passed since the Hutt's thugs had knocked her unconscious. She could hazily make out the two figures standing over her.

"She's not safe. She's crazy. Better we just kill her." Embarrassed at having been rescued from such a position, Musk's Nikto voice was overflowing with frustration.

Though still only half-conscious, Hylo started to protest, but she found her mouth was numb from having the Wee-



quay's rifle butt slammed into it. Her swollen lips couldn't form the words.

Fortunately, the Weequay didn't even consider her a credible threat. "No. If Barrga wants her dead, he'll want to do it himself." He flashed Musk a broken-toothed smile.

The Weequay reached down and grabbed one of the straps on Hylo's vest. "We'll lock her in the second cargo bay. We'll bring Barrga the credits and the traitor. He might even pay us a bonus."

As the Weequay dragged her back to the second cargo bay, Hylo allowed herself to go limp. She looked back through half-closed eyelids to see Musk's face wrinkled with doubt. He wasn't happy with the fact that Barrga was going to hear the details of this story. I don't blame him, she thought. She would have felt sorry for Musk, but she knew the Weequay would soon have something to be embarrassed for as well.

Musk wasn't the brains of the operation, but neither was his partner. If either of the two had thought their decision through, they might have realized their error. Hylo had been smuggling people and goods in the Crimson Fleece for years. She would have been caught and killed long before the trip to Corellia if she hadn't installed escape hatches in her cargo holds.

Within minutes of the Weequay closing and locking the door to the second cargo bay, Hylo had squirmed through the small drop-panel and was sliding out the escape hatch on the bottom of the Fleece.

The cool, clean air again assaulted her senses, calming her nerves. It did nothing, however, to soothe the stinging pain of her battered lips. She gently nursed her jaw as she looked around the landing pad to make sure that it was indeed still devoid of life. That could change any second. She scrambled across the landing pad to the only place she could hide -- the empty cargo containers sitting at the edge of the platform.

Stashing herself between two of the containers, Hylo wracked her brain for a plan. She worried that the thugs

would check the cargo hold and discover her escape. She needed to act quickly. She needed to get her ship back and fly away from this place as fast as she could. Without a blaster, though, this wasn't going to be easy.

Hylo's racing thoughts slammed to a stop when she heard the hiss of the cargo doors opening at the other end of the platform. She peeked out, not knowing what to expect, but was still startled to see a stately-looking businessman step out onto the platform with the protocol droid at his side. Wearing a red-sequined suit with tails and a high collar, he was clearly a well-paid corporate representative. Though his brisk pace and furrowed brow suggested he was worrying about something, his distant look suggested it had nothing to do with the task at hand. The Rendili representative walked across the platform toward the Crimson Fleece with the protocol droid desperately trying to keep up.

Behind them emerged two utility droids hauling what appeared to be boxes of credits. A single armed guard accompanied them, his pose suggesting this was just another day at the office. Way too relaxed to be anticipating a fight, she observed. Hylo was trying to study the entourage more closely, but her view was blocked when the landing hatch from the Fleece popped open and lowered to the ground. Hylo saw the edge of Musk's form tramping down the gangplank, and she ducked back into her hiding spot.

She unconsciously began biting her swollen lip as she considered this turn of events. Despite her suspicions, the group appeared to be exactly what it was supposed to be. Maybe this deal is totally legitimate. She was starting to doubt her instincts. For a brief moment, Hylo even considered just coming out and apologizing to everyone, but she knew it was too late for that. Besides, she had never gone wrong when reading the signs, and if there had ever been a clear sign of impending bad luck, the broken hyperdrive generator was it. She resolved to wait a little longer.

Her heartbeat speeding up in fear, Hylo dared to steal another look at the scene on the landing pad. The thugs and the Rendili representative had stepped to the side of the landing ramp. The utility droids had set down the boxes of credits and rolled up into the Fleece. Hylo knew they'd be emerging any moment with the ion drives, and the deal would be done. She closed her eyes and found she could barely hear the conversation taking place by the landing ramp.

"You're not the first," the Rendili representative was saying in a friendly way, "this happens every now and then. We have mechanics here, but they're much better at building starships than repairing them." The representative's voice sounded like he was pleased with himself for something.

"Tell you what," the representative continued, "once we're done here, you can hop right over to Coronet City. I'll call ahead and make arrangements for your hyperdrive to get looked at right away."

"Your kindness is appreciated." Hylo flushed with fury to hear the Weequay making arrangements to have her ship repaired. She started nervously grinding her teeth as she watched the utility droids roll down the gangplank with the ion drives.

"The drives are all accounted for, sir," the protocol droid chirped. The representative nodded, and the three droids proceeded across the platform toward the entrance to the building.

"Very well then," the Rendili representative nodded at armed guard, "the credits are all yours." The guard stepped back from the credits and turned to follow the droids. "A pleasure doing business with you." The Weequay was bowing to the representative. "I will tell Barrga of your hospitality."

"Thank you." The representative didn't bother to return the Weequay's gesture. "I'll have flight control transmit the coordinates to the repair facility in Coronet City."

The representative walked away, resuming his brisk pace,

and likely heading toward his next appointment.

Musk and the Weequay each took a box of credits and walked up the gangplank into the Fleece. They would have to make a few trips, Hylo realized.

She ducked back down into hiding and weighed her options. She could try to sneak back onto the ship before they took off, but she couldn't go back through the escape hatch. She'd have to walk right up the gangplank, and it was unlikely she could do that without being seen. Even if she did pull it off, what would she do? Hide until they get back to Nar Shaddaa? Sneak back into the hold and plead her case to Barrga? The options weren't attractive. If she stayed here, though, what would she do? Go inside and ask someone from Rendili to help her? Somehow that seemed even worse than facing Barrga, but maybe she was just being paranoid.

Still wrestling with what to do, Hylo stole another peek out on the landing pad and was startled to realize that her choice had already been made. Barrga's thugs had already loaded up all the credits, and the landing hatch was closing as she watched. Hylo was dumbstruck.

Before she could react, she heard the Fleece's sublight engines engage. Moments later, she watched in shock as the ship lifted off the landing pad. I just lost my ship, she realized. She had never felt so powerless. Her throat ran dry, and she choked back a desperate sob. She held herself in tight control, but a tear escaped her eye and rolled down her cheek as she watched the Crimson Fleece fly away. She knew she needed to figure out what to do next, but she couldn't take her eyes off the ship as it reached a safe altitude and lurched away. Get a grip on yourself. She forced herself to look away.

A thunderous boom shook the landing pad.

She looked up. The Crimson Fleece had exploded.

Flames shot out like fireworks, only to evaporate into large wisps of smoke. She watched in awed silence as the cloud of dust that was her ship slowly dissipated. Minutes passed, and Hylo just continued to stare at the

empty space.

Finally recovering from her shock, she realized that the signs hadn't lied. Those boxes of credits must have been wired with explosives. She had been right.

Hylo looked back at the cargo doors, half expecting the representative and the protocol droid would be standing there, smiling at their successful act of treachery. No one was there, though, just the cold, clean emptiness of the landing pad. Perhaps the representative didn't even know about the explosives. Hylo tried to sift through the facts to figure out the truth, but then she realized it didn't matter. The Rendili Vehicle Corporation had betrayed Barrga the Hutt and blown up Hylo's ship -- the truth was that she was lucky to be alive.

Hylo dropped back down into her hiding place heavily, and began to cry. The Crimson Fleece had been her ticket to freedom, her means of making a living, and really, her best friend. She had invested all her credits and all her heart into the Fleece. She had known it would be hard to sell, but in all her dreams and nightmares, she had never imagined that she'd lose the Fleece like this. She wasn't ready. It just didn't seem right. Hylo continued to sob quietly for some time, but when she stopped, she felt at peace.

Despite the loss of her ship, her painfully swollen lip, and the terrible predicament she was in, Hylo was comforted by the knowledge that she had seen and recognized the signs. She had trusted her instincts, and survived because of it. It was a confirmation of her ability to take care of herself. Somehow, she knew that the danger was past. She was now clear to take whatever risks were necessary without fear of disaster. Truly, this was more important than anything.

Hylo stayed in her hiding place until sundown, simply relaxing, making no effort to come up with a plan, not even really thinking. She rested her swollen lip up against the cold metal wall of the cargo container, and watched the sun slowly make its way toward the horizon. When she fi-

nally sat up, darkness was settling in. She gently touched her face. The swelling had gone down. It was time to move.

Despite the onset of night, there was no plausible way to hide on the empty landing pad, so Hylo didn't bother trying to be subtle. She dashed across the platform at top speed, counting on her luck to keep her from being seen. When she reached cargo doors, she was relieved to find they weren't locked. The doors slid open silently, and Hylo cautiously stuck her head in to discover a wide, colorless hallway, as immaculately barren as the landing pad outside.

After ensuring there were no guards and no security cameras, Hylo stepped lightly into the hallway. She had no sense of the building's layout, so she simply started walking down the hallway, looking for any indication of an exit. She soon found a stairwell, and headed downstairs. After descending several flights, she emerged on the lower level to a comforting sensation. The stairwell exited onto a catwalk elevated over a massive garage. The familiar smells of lubricant oil, burning metal, and fresh paint put her at ease. This was somewhere she could fit in. Hylo was further pleased to hear the sounds of work going on across the garage. Dozens of starfighters in various states of construction were laid out in rows along the garage floor. Judging by the variety of models and the strangeness of some of the parts, these were all prototype projects. Hylo took a deep breath -- what would she give to be able to spend a few days tinkering around in here. Only a handful of the vehicles were being worked on at the current time, but she sensed there were at least a few dozen mechanics at work, measuring, welding, and bolting together parts in different areas of the garage. From the catwalk, Hylo could clearly see the garage floor, but she would be hard to make out from the floor, so she stepped out and crossed the catwalk to another set of stairs that took her down to the garage floor right beside an open office.

Seeing through the observation window that the office was empty, Hylo slid through the door and found exactly what she was looking for, a rack of overalls. No garage would be complete without them. Hylo rifled through the rack until she found the smallest suit, and quickly put it on over her leathers. It was a little large, but after she tightened the belt it wasn't too awkward looking. Seeing her reflection in a piece of junk durasteel, Hylo realized that her short, red-highlighted hair, though fashionable on Nar Shaddaa, might look a little strange here. She found a welding helmet and put it on, raising the visor. As heavy and clumsy as it might be, a good disguise was more important right now. Confident that she now looked the part, she turned to leave the office.

She was almost out the door when it occurred to her to check the holo-terminal on the desk. She was expecting it to be secured, but she was pleased to find that she was able access to the network quickly. She was hoping to find a blueprint for the entire Rendili facility, but she had to settle for a layout diagram for the building she was in. 'Building A' was apparently dedicated to the research and development and of light starships. Makes sense this is where they'd want the ion drives delivered, she thought to herself.

She hadn't given it much thought earlier, but now she realized the corporation's motives for double-crossing Barrga. Rendili had no interest in buying ion drives from Nar Shaddaa. They simply wanted to examine the prototypes and figure out how to replicate them. If Rendili had pulled something like this with a Republic-aligned corporation, legal safeguards would have prevented them from stealing the technology. Ripping off one of Hutts, however, had no legal implications whatsoever. Hylo might have smiled at the irony the Hutts getting their own game played against them, but it wasn't funny when it had cost her the Fleece. She wondered if the Republic military would have known about the plot. She decided to give them the benefit of the doubt and assume that the plan



had been purely corporate. At this point, though, it would be impossible to expose Rendili's treachery. If she was certain of one thing, it was that a corporation this size would have taken care to cover its tracks.

As Hylo searched the building's blueprints for an inconspicuous exit, her eyes were drawn to flashing schedule reminder on the holo-terminal. Apparently, a test flight was scheduled on landing pad A-23 for the "Vanguard" project. Intrigued, Hylo opened the datafile and discovered the "Vanguard" was a high-speed corvette starfighter that Rendili had been developing for several years. As impressive as the ship's specifications were, though, what truly shocked Hylo was the name of the client. The Vanguard was developed for the Jedi Order.

Hylo had flown from one side of the galaxy to the other. She had delivered contraband to several Republic-aligned military facilities, but she had never once met a member of the infamous Jedi Order. She had heard all the stories, of course. The Jedi had been regarded as the most feared warriors in the galaxy until the Sith Empire returned. The long war had provided ample evidence that the Jedi were as mortal as anyone else. Hylo had grown up in this environment, but she had been told of a time when bounty hunters and mercenaries spoke about the Jedi in hushed tones, and when no one would have dared to challenge the Jedi order. These days, it was not uncommon to hear lowlifes like Musk make claims at having slain Jedi. Hylo knew these were bold-faced lies, though, and she had always maintained a healthy fear of the Jedi. At the same time, she found the self-sacrificing and the fearlessness of the Jedi to be intriguing. She had always wanted to meet one. Today, however, her only interest was in escape. A plan formed in Hylo's mind. She almost suppressed the notion out-of-hand, but her curiosity was too strong. If she could get up to A-23 before the test flight got off the ground, she just might be able to take a test flight of her own. She smiled to think of the satisfaction it would give her to steal a ship from the Rendili Corporation. Who

knows? She might even be able to barter the ship for Barrga's forgiveness. The thought of trying to steal the ship terrified her, but the upside was too attractive. This was a good risk, and right now the signs were in her favor. Knowing that every second would only make the task more dangerous, Hylo left the office in a flash. She was about to head back into the stairwell when she noticed a convenient elevator. Confident in her disguise, she stepped in and discovered that landing pad A-23 was on the roof of the building.

The elevator reached A-23 and opened up to an environment completely different from the rest of the building. Classy looking carpet and expensive artwork -- this was clearly where Rendili executives entertained their most respectable clients. Quiet music was playing over a speaker system, preventing Hylo from hearing any nearby activity, but she didn't hesitate in walking down the hallway. As she walked, though, she realized how out-of-place she probably was, even in disguise. She was just thinking about ditching the overalls when she turned a corner and nearly knocked down a sharp-dressed, skinny woman in a suit similar to the Rendili representative from the landing pad. The woman was preoccupied studying a datapad, but looked up in shock at almost having been run over. Hylo recognized immediately that she had walked into an observation room for landing pad A-23. She could see a large window on the far wall, but from her vantage point, she couldn't see the landing pad itself.

The interior of the observation room was well-appointed, featuring luxurious reclining chairs near the window, and a circular table in the rear with chairs carefully arranged for a friendly business meeting. It was from this table that the skinny businesswoman had arisen before coming face-to-face with Hylo.

"You can't be in here," the skinny businesswoman blurted out. "What are you doing?"

The thought of trying to knock the woman unconscious flashed through Hylo's mind, but her mouth opened instead.

"Boss sent me up here to check the alluvial dampers on the Vanguard one last time before the test flight." She hoped desperately that the woman lacked the mechanical knowledge to realize this was highly unlikely.

"Sorry, it's my first time to come up here." Hylo added hastily, trying to explain why she was completely lost.

A frustrated expression appeared on the woman's face.

"Why is everything always last minute?" She nodded her head in the direction of a door down the corridor that Hylo assumed led to the landing pad.

Hylo smiled nervously at the woman despite the relief she felt inside. She nodded politely and headed down the corridor.

"Make it fast," the skinny businesswoman snapped at Hylo's back. "The client's going to be here any minute." Hylo didn't look back but sped up. She stepped out the doors onto the landing pad and her breath caught in her throat. The most beautiful piece of machinery she had ever seen was right in front of her. The Vanguard was all shiny silver and red paneling flowing seamlessly back to a set of circular twin thrusters in the rear. The front of the ship expanded into a hammerhead, similar to the bridge design from the Republic's modern Star Cruisers, but turned horizontal, allowing for what Hylo expected would be an extremely spacious and comfortable cockpit. Of course, anything would be spacious compared to the closet-sized cockpit she was used to from the Fleece.

Remembering that she was still in a precarious situation, Hylo shook away the awe and strode across the platform to the ship. She ran her finger along the immaculate underbelly as she mounted the landing ramp and ascended into the ship.

Whatever sense of wonder Hylo had experienced upon seeing the exterior of the Vanguard was doubled on the inside. The electrical system had been powered up to wel-

come the client, and the ship's lounge was a museum of accessories Hylo had only dreamed of. From a state-of-the-art holocommunications terminal in the center of the room to the inviting red swivel seats placed around the room, no detail had been overlooked. If an upgrade was available, the Vanguard had it. Hylo reminded herself that she'd have plenty of time to explore the ship later and proceeded directly to the cockpit.

She was worried that the control configuration would be too advanced for her, but she was relieved to discover that the traditional set-up had been implemented. The most notable difference was that all the controls were backlit to allow for dimmer lighting in the cockpit. In addition to the pilot and co-pilot's seats at the helm, there were two bucket seats in the rear corners of the cockpit for additional passengers.

Hylo was so excited she leapt over the chair-back to slide in the pilot's seat. In so doing, though, she snagged her overalls on the seat's acceleration strap, and the snag tore a rip down the leg of her suit. In an instant, Hylo's childlike optimism evaporated, and she sat in the pilot's seat petrified with horror.

She hadn't wanted to reflect on her exceptional good luck for fear of sabotaging it, but now it didn't matter. Since the moment the Fleece exploded, everything had gone her way. From conveniently finding a disguise in the garage to bluffing her way out onto landing pad 23, nothing negative had happened. The tear in her suit, however, reminded Hylo of the stain on her mother's dress, and every other sign of ill omen she had experienced in her entire life. Hylo closed her eyes and swallowed hard. She decided she was going to pretend it hadn't happened. At this point, she had come too far to turn back. I'm going to steal it anyway. She tried to convince herself that all the good luck she had been having surely outweighed a simple tear in her overalls.

She gripped the Vanguard's controls and squeezed. If she was going to steal the ship, this was her chance. She loo-

ked over the dashboard and quickly located all the dials and switches she'd need to get out of Corellia's atmosphere. She reached up to ignite the sublight engines and stopped. The ignition switch wasn't there. She madly studied the overhead panel for it and gave up. She felt panic rising through her stomach as she carefully started examining the dashboard for the ignition.

In the next moment, her exasperation turned into adrenaline. She heard the sound of footsteps on the landing ramp. Without thinking, she dove across the cockpit and ducked behind the rear seat. Hidden in the shadows, she froze. She knew it would never happen, but she hoped against hope that the footsteps would turn and leave. No such luck.

Scrunched into a ball behind the rear seat, she couldn't get a clear view, but she made out the shadow of a man as he breezed into the cockpit and sat down in the pilot's seat. He was out of breath. He was in a hurry. She was glad of this. Otherwise, if he had looked around he might have seen her leg sticking out from behind the rear seat. Hearing the pilot flip a few switches, Hylo decided he was probably preoccupied enough that she could prop herself up for a better view. Coming around the edge of the seat, she tried to size the pilot up. Though she couldn't see what he was wearing, she could see a corner of cloth that suggested he wasn't in any fancy test-pilot gear. She could also tell from his shoulder-length brown hair that he probably wasn't in the military.

Whoever he was, he was preparing for liftoff. As he raised the landing ramp, Hylo's hopes were rekindled. If it was just one man, she could probably take him out, especially if he was focused on the ship's controls. She considered waiting until after the ship had lifted off, but she decided that was too risky. If they were in the air, he'd be able to send the Vanguard into a nosedive if she didn't take him out in one blow. She watched for one more second and saw him reach underneath the dashboard to turn a knob she hadn't seen before. The sublight engines ignited. So

that's where the ignition is.

Hylo quietly slid out from behind the seat on the floor directly behind the pilot.

"All systems online." He spoke into a headset.

She hadn't seen the headset before, so just hearing his voice caused Hylo's heart rate to skyrocket. His voice sounded friendly, non-business-like.

"Standby, Vanguard." A dispatcher's voice was responding into the headset, just loud enough that Hylo could hear.

"We want to clear out some nearby air traffic so we can get a clean read on your liftoff velocity."

Hylo knew this moment's delay was her only opportunity. She glanced around quickly for something heavy with which to bash the pilot's head. The cockpit was as clean and efficient as everything else at Rendili, though, and there was nothing but the welding helmet that had fallen off Hylo's head when she vaulted into the rear seat. The helmet certainly wasn't ideal, but the crown was durasteel-reinforced, so it was better than nothing. Hylo gripped the helmet in both hands and rose up silently behind the pilot's seat.

Her hands froze. Hylo was looking down on a Jedi. She might not have deduced it simply by looking at the robes, but standing up, she could now see the lightsaber on his belt. She had never seen one, of course, but she had been intrigued enough to read up on the technology when she was still working as a mechanic. There was no mistaking it. A million thoughts collided in Hylo's mind. How could she not have guessed this possibility? Why hadn't he sensed her? Would she be able to knock him out? Would he skewer her on his lightsaber?

Her thoughts were swept away, though, when the Jedi turned to look over his shoulder with a puzzled expression and found himself looking straight into Hylo's eyes. His surprise must have slowed his reflexes, because he seemed to sit still even as Hylo's instincts kicked in. She smashed down with all her might, slamming the helmet into the Jedi's face at an awkward angle. She raised the hel-

met for a repeat blow, but was startled to see it wasn't necessary. Miraculously, the Jedi's eyes had rolled back and his body was limp. He tumbled out of the pilot's seat and onto the floor headfirst.

Hylo didn't waste a moment considering the improbability. She first jerked the lightsaber off his belt and tossed it back into the corner. For some reason, that weapon terrified her. She gripped the Jedi's robes and hauled him out of the seat, laying him flat on the cockpit floor. She knew she couldn't risk leaving him restrained in the back. That would be pure insanity. The only safe thing is to kill him while he's unconscious, she realized. Hylo was about to look for something more lethal than the helmet to finish him off, but she looked at the Jedi's face instead.

He was pale for a human, but his skin had an ageless beauty to it that Hylo couldn't help but notice. If she had run into this guy in a cantina somewhere, she might have even been attracted to him. Strangely enough, he looked like he had fallen into in a peaceful slumber. Killing a Jedi will probably bring me a lifetime of bad luck, she thought. She noticed where the Jedi's lip was swelling from being decked by the helmet. His injury was the mirror image of her own. She couldn't kill him.

"All right, we've cleared out that air traffic, Vanguard. You're clear for liftoff." The controller's voice emanated from the headset, reminding Hylo of the urgency of the moment.

She couldn't kill the Jedi, and she couldn't risk taking him with her, so she did the only thing possible. She reached up and hit the button to lower the landing ramp. I hope I don't regret this.

She grabbed his cloak behind the shoulders and dragged the Jedi across the clean floor of the ship. She almost stumbled when she reached the gangplank, but used the Jedi's dead weight to keep herself from falling and continued pulling him down to the landing pad. At the bottom, she dragged him clear of the gangplank. She almost laughed. As crazy as she felt, she knew she was doing the



right thing. She took one last look at the sleeping Jedi, and then she kissed her fingers and touched them lightly to his forehead. For good luck.

She dashed back up the ramp, into the cockpit and vaulted into the pilot's seat. This time, she took care not to snag the coveralls.

"Vanguard. What's going on out there?" She heard the tiny voice from the fallen headset.

She raised the landing ramp, and before it was even fully closed, she pulled the controls and lifted the Vanguard off the landing pad. The ship felt light and nimble, unlike anything she had ever flown before. Trusting her skills, she turned the ship skyward and engaged the thrusters full-throttle in one fluid motion. The Vanguard rocketed into the sky and out of sight.

Faster than Hylo would have dreamed it could go, the Vanguard sliced through the air and into space. Knowing that Rendili would move quickly to pursue, Hylo quickly punched in the coordinates to Nar Shaddaa, coordinates she had long since committed to memory. She powered up the hyperdrive generator and then experienced one last scary moment when she didn't hear the familiar whine. She realized quickly, though, the sounds of Vanguard would be totally different from the Fleece. When she punched it, the Vanguard leapt into hyperspace without hesitation.

She dropped out of hyperspace within sight of Hutta. Nar Shaddaa was on the far side of the planet right now, but a few minutes cruise, and she'd have a straight trajectory to her home.

She sighed as she considered how she would explain the situation to Barrga the Hutt. There was really nothing she could say that would make this any easier. Then a revolutionary thought crossed her mind.

No one knows I'm even alive. Barrga the Hutt would eventually discover she had been betrayed. He would learn that the Crimson Fleece had exploded moments after taking off. Barrga would assume, of course, that Hylo had

died.

The Vanguard rounded the edge of Hutta and came within view of Nar Shaddaa. Hylo knew she couldn't just avoid the moon for the rest of her life, but returning now would be no easier than returning later. Besides, she reasoned, the Vanguard still needs its test flight. She made up her mind.

The thrill of a new adventure tickled her spine. There was an old friend she had promised to visit on Ord Mantell. As she turned the Vanguard around, she spied a small silvery comet in the distance. She decided it was a good sign.