

siderable." He glanced down at Tarkin. "It will be some time before we can extract any useful information from her."

"I've always found the methods you recommend rather quaint, Vader."

"They are efficient," the Dark Lord argued softly. "In the interests of accelerating the procedure, however, I am open to your suggestions."

Tarkin looked thoughtful. "Such stubbornness can often be detoured by applying threats to something other than the one involved."

"What do you mean?"

"Only that I think it is time we demonstrated the full power of this station. We may do so in a fashion doubly useful." He instructed the attentive Motti, "Tell your programmers to set course for the Alderaan system."

Kenobi's pride did not prevent him from wrapping an old scarf over nose and mouth to filter out a portion of the bonfire's drifting putrid odor. Though possessed of olfactory sensory apparatus, Artoo Detoo and Threepio had no need of such a screen. Even Threepio, who was equipped to discriminate among aromatic aesthetics, could be artificially selective when he so desired.

Working together, the two 'droids helped Kenobi throw the last of the bodies onto the blazing pyre, then stood back and watched the dead continue to burn. Not that the desert scavengers wouldn't have been equally efficient in picking the burned-out sandcrawler clean of flesh, but Kenobi retained values most modern men would have deemed archaic. He would consign no one to the bone-gnawers and gravel-maggots, not even a filthy Jawa.

At a rising thrumming Kenobi turned from the residue of the noisome business to see the landspeeder approaching, now traveling at a sensible pace, far different from when it had left. It slowed and hovered nearby, but showed no signs of life.

Gesturing for the two robots to follow, Ben started toward the waiting craft. The canopy flipped open and up to reveal Luke sitting motionless in the pilot's seat. He didn't look up at Kenobi's inquiring glance. That in itself was enough to tell the old man what had happened.

"I share your sorrow, Luke," he finally ventured softly. "There was nothing you could have done. Had you been there, you'd be dead now, too, and the 'droids would be in the hands of the Imperials. Not even the force—"

"Damn your force!" Luke snarled with sudden violence. Now he turned and glared at Kenobi. There was a set to his jaw that belonged on a much older face.

"I'll take you to the spaceport at Mos Eisley, Ben. I want to go with you—to Alderaan. There's nothing left for me here now." His eyes turned to look out across the desert, to focus on something beyond sand and rock and canyon walls. "I want to learn to be like a Jedi, like my father. I want . . ." He paused, the words backing up like a logjam in his throat.

Kenobi slid into the cockpit, put a hand gently on the youth's shoulder, then went forward to make room for the two robots. "I'll do my best to see that you get what you want, Luke. For now, let's go to Mos Eisley."

Luke nodded and closed the canopy. The landspeeder moved away to the southeast, leaving behind the still-smoldering sandcrawler, the Jawa funeral pyre, and the only life Luke had ever known.

Leaving the speeder parked near the edge of the sandstone bluff, Luke and Ben walked over and peered down at the tiny regularized bumps erupting from the sun-baked plain below. The haphazard collage of low-grade concrete, stone, and plastoid structures spread outward from a central power-and-water-distribution plant like the spokes of a wheel.

Actually the town was considerably larger than it

appeared, since a good portion of it lay underground. Looking like bomb craters from this distance, the smooth circular depressions of launch stations pockmarked the cityscape.

A brisk gale was scouring the tired ground. It whipped the sand about Luke's feet and legs as he adjusted his protective goggles.

"There it is," Kenobi murmured, indicating the unimpressive collection of buildings, "Mos Eisley Spaceport—the ideal place for us to lose ourselves while we seek passage offplanet. Not a more wretched collection of villainy and disreputable types exists anywhere on Tatooine. The Empire has been alerted to us, so we must be very cautious, Luke. The population of Mos Eisley should disguise us well."

Luke wore a determined look. "I'm ready for anything, Obi-wan."

I wonder if you comprehend what that might entail, Luke, Kenobi thought. But he only nodded as he led the way back to the landspeeder.

Unlike Anchorhead, there were enough people in Mos Eisley to require movement in the heat of day. Built from the beginning with commerce in mind, even the oldest of the town's buildings had been designed to provide protection from the twin suns. They looked primitive from the outside, and many were. But oftentimes walls and arches of old stone masked durasteel double walls with circulating coolant flowing freely between.

Luke was maneuvering the landspeeder through the town's outskirts when several tall, gleaming forms appeared from nowhere and began to close a circle around him. For one panicked moment he considered gunning the engine and racing through the pedestrians and other vehicles. A startlingly firm grip on his arm both restrained and relaxed him. He glanced over to see Kenobi smiling, warning him.

So they continued at a normal town cruising speed, Luke hoping that the imperial troops were bent on business elsewhere. No such luck. One of the troop-

ers raised an armored hand. Luke had no choice but to respond. As he pulled the speeder over, he grew aware of the attention they were receiving from curious passersby. Worse yet, it seemed that the trooper's attention was in fact reserved not for Kenobi or himself, but for the two unmoving robots seated in the speeder behind them.

"How long have you had these 'droids?" the trooper who had raised his hand barked. Polite formalities were to be dispensed with, it appeared.

Looking blank for a second, Luke finally came up with "Three or four seasons, I guess."

"They're up for sale, if you want them—and the price is right," Kenobi put in, giving a wonderful impression of a desert finagler out to cajole a few quick credits from ignorant Imperials.

The trooper in charge did not deign to reply. He was absorbed in a thorough examination of the landspeeder's underside.

"Did you come in from the south?" he asked.

"No . . . no," Luke answered quickly, "we live in the west, near Bestine township."

"Bestine?" the trooper murmured, walking around to study the speeder's front. Luke forced himself to stare straight ahead. Finally the armored figure concluded his examination. He moved to stand ominously close to Luke and snapped, "Let me see your identification."

Surely the man sensed his terror and nervousness by now, Luke thought wildly. His resolution of not long before to be ready to take on anything had already disintegrated under the unwinking stare of this professional soldier. He knew what would happen if they got a look at his formal ID, with the location of his homestead and the names of his nearest relatives on it. Something seemed to be buzzing inside his head; he felt faint.

Kenobi had leaned over and was talking easily to the trooper. "You don't need to see his identification,"

the old man informed the Imperial in an extremely peculiar voice.

Staring blankly back at him, the officer replied, as if it were self-evident, "I don't need to see your identification." His reaction was the opposite of Kenobi's: his voice was normal, but his expression peculiar.

"These aren't the 'droids you're looking for," Kenobi told him pleasantly.

"These aren't the 'droids we're looking for."

"He can go about his business."

"You can go about your business," the metal-masked officer informed Luke.

The expression of relief that spread across Luke's face ought to have been as revealing as his previous nervousness, but the Imperial ignored it.

"Move along," Kenobi whispered.

"Move along," the officer instructed Luke.

Unable to decide whether he should salute, nod, or give thanks to the man, Luke settled for nudging the accelerator. The landspeeder moved forward, drawing away from the circle of troops. As they prepared to round a corner, Luke risked a glance backward. The officer who had inspected them appeared to be arguing with several comrades, though at this distance Luke couldn't be sure.

He peered up at his tall companion and started to say something. Kenobi only shook his head slowly and smiled. Swallowing his curiosity, Luke concentrated on guiding the speeder through steadily narrowing streets.

Kenobi seemed to have some idea where they were headed. Luke studied the run-down structures and equally unwholesome-looking individuals they were passing. They had entered the oldest section of Mos Eisley and consequently the one where the old vices flourished most strongly.

Kenobi pointed and Luke pulled the landspeeder up in front of what appeared to be one of the original spaceport's first blockhouses. It had been con-

verted into a cantina whose clientele was suggested by the diverse nature of transport parked outside. Some of them Luke recognized, others he had only heard rumors of. The cantina itself, he knew from the design of the building, must lie partially underground.

As the dusty but still sleek craft pulled into an open spot, a Jawa materialized from nowhere and began running covetous hands over the metal sides. Luke leaned out and barked something harsh at the sub-human which caused it to scurry away.

"I can't abide those Jawas," murmured Threepio with lofty disdain. "Disgusting creatures."

Luke's mind was too full of their narrow escape for him to comment on Threepio's sentiments. "I still can't understand how we got by those troops. I thought we were as good as dead."

"The force is in the mind, Luke, and can sometimes be used to influence others. It's a powerful ally. But as you come to know the force, you will discover that it can also be a danger."

Nodding without really understanding, Luke indicated the run-down though obviously popular cantina. "Do you really think we can find a pilot here capable of taking us all the way to Alderaan?"

Kenobi was exiting from the speeder. "Most of the good, independent freighter pilots frequent this place, though many can afford better. They can talk freely here. You should have learned by now, Luke, not to equate ability with appearance." Luke saw the old man's shabby clothing anew and felt ashamed. "Watch yourself though. This place can be rough."

Luke found himself squinting as they entered the cantina. It was darker inside than he would have liked. Perhaps the regular habitués of this place were unaccustomed to the light of day, or didn't wish to be seen clearly. It didn't occur to Luke that the dim interior in combination with the brilliantly lit entrance permitted everyone inside to see each newcomer before he could see them.

Moving inward, Luke was astonished at the variety

of beings making use of the bar. There were one-eyed creatures and thousand-eyed, creatures with scales, creatures with fur, and some with skin that seemed to ripple and change consistency according to their feelings of the moment.

Hovering near the bar itself was a towering insectoid that Luke glimpsed only as a threatening shadow. It contrasted with two of the tallest women Luke had ever seen. They were among the most normal-looking of the outrageous assemblage of humans that mixed freely among alien counterparts. Tentacles, claws, and hands were wrapped around drinking utensils of various sizes and shapes. Conversation was a steady babble of human and alien tongues.

Leaning close, Kenobi gestured toward the far end of the bar. A small knot of rough-looking humans lounged there, drinking, laughing, and trading stories of dubious origin.

"Corellians—pirates, most likely."

"I thought we were looking for an independent freighter captain with his own ship for hire," Luke whispered back.

"So we are, young Luke, so we are," agreed Kenobi. "And there's bound to be one or two adequate for our needs among that group. It's just that in Corellian terminology the distinction between who owns what cargo tends to get a little muddled from time to time. Wait here."

Luke nodded and watched as Kenobi worked his way through the crowd. The Corellians' suspicion at his approach vanished as soon as he engaged them in conversation.

Something grabbed Luke's shoulder and spun him around.

"Hey" Looking around and struggling to regain his composure, he found himself staring up at an enormous, scruffy-looking human. Luke saw by the man's clothing that he must be the bartender, if not the owner of this cantina.

"We don't serve their kind in here," the glaring form growled.

"What?" Luke replied dumbly. He still hadn't recovered from his sudden submergence into the cultures of several dozen races. It was rather different from the poolroom behind the Anchorhead power station. "Your 'droids," the bartender explained impatiently, gesturing with a thick thumb. Luke peered in the indicated direction, to see Artoo and Threepio standing quietly nearby. "They'll have to wait outside. We don't serve them in here. I only carry stuff for organics, not," he concluded with an expression of distaste, "mechanicals."

Luke didn't like the idea of kicking Threepio and Artoo out, but he didn't know how else to deal with the problem. The bartender didn't appear to be the sort who would readily respond to reason, and when he looked around for old Ben, Luke saw that he was locked in deep conversation with one of the Corellians.

Meanwhile, the discussion had attracted the attention of several especially gruesome-looking types who happened to be clustered within hearing range. All were regarding Luke and the two 'droids in a decidedly unfriendly fashion.

"Yes, of course," Luke said, realizing this wasn't the time or place to force the issue of 'droid rights. "I'm sorry." He looked over at Threepio. "You'd better stay outside with the speeder. We don't want any trouble in here."

"I heartily agree with you, sir," Threepio said, his gaze traveling past Luke and the bartender to take in the unfriendly stares at the bar. "I don't feel the need for lubrication at the moment anyway." With Artoo waddling in his wake, the tall robot hastily headed for the exit.

That finished things as far as the bartender was concerned, but Luke now found himself the subject of some unwanted attention. He abruptly became aware of his isolation and felt as if at one time or another every eye in the place rested a moment on

him, that things human and otherwise were smirking and making comments about him behind his back.

Trying to maintain an air of quiet confidence, he returned his gaze to old Ben, and started when he saw what the oldster was talking to now. The Corellian was gone. In its place Kenobi was chatting with a towering anthropoid that showed a mouthful of teeth when it smiled.

Luke had heard about Wookies, but he had never expected to see one, much less meet one. Despite an almost comical quasi-monkey face, the Wookie was anything but gentle-looking. Only the large, glowing yellow eyes softened its otherwise awesome appearance. The massive torso was covered entirely with soft, thick russet fur. Less appealing cover consisted of a pair of chromed bandoliers which held lethal projectiles of a type unknown to Luke. Other than these, the Wookies were little.

Not, Luke knew, that anyone would laugh at the creature's mode of dress. He saw that other denizens of the bar eddied and swirled around the huge form without ever coming too close. All but old Ben—Ben who was talking to the Wookie in its own language, quarreling and hooting softly like a native.

In the course of the conversation the old man had occasion to gesture in Luke's direction. Once the huge anthropoid stared directly at Luke and let out a horrifying howling laugh.

Disgruntled by the role he was evidently playing in the discussion, Luke turned away and pretended to ignore the whole conversation. He might be acting unfairly toward the creature, but he doubted that spine-quaking laugh was meant in gentle good-fellowship.

For the life of him he couldn't understand what Ben wanted with the monster, or why he was spending his time in guttural conversation with it instead of with the now-vanished Corellians. So he sat and sipped his drink in splendid silence, his eyes roving

over the crowd in hopes of meeting a responsive gaze that held no belligerence.

Suddenly, something shoved him roughly from behind, so hard he almost fell. He turned angrily, but his fury spent itself in astonishment. He found himself confronted by a large squarish monstrosity of multiple eyes and indeterminate origin.

"*Negola dewaghi wooldugger?*" the apparition bubbled challengingly.

Luke had never seen its like before; he knew neither its species nor its language. The gabbling might have been an invitation to a fight, a request to share a drink, or a marriage proposal. Despite his ignorance, however, Luke could tell by the way the creature bobbed and wove unsteadily on its podal supports that it had imbibed too much of whatever it considered a pleasing intoxicant.

Not knowing what else to do, Luke tried turning back to his own drink while studiously ignoring the creature. As he did so, a thing—a cross between a capybara and a small baboon—bounced over to stand (or squat) next to the quivering many-eye. A short, grubby-looking human also approached and put a companionable arm around the snuffling mass.

"He doesn't like you," the stubby human informed Luke in a surprisingly deep voice.

"I'm sorry about that," Luke admitted, wishing heartily he were somewhere else.

"I don't like you, either," the smiling little man went on with brotherly negativity.

"I said I was sorry about it."

Whether from the conversation it was having with the rodentlike creature or the overdose of booze, the apartment house for wayward eyeballs was obviously growing agitated. It leaned forward, almost toppling into Luke, and spewed a stream of unintelligible gibberish at him. Luke felt the eyes of a crowd on him as he grew increasingly more nervous.

"Sorry," the human mimicked derisively, clearly deep into his own cups. "Are you insulting us? You

just better watch yourself. We're all wanted." He indicated his drunken companions. "I have the death sentence on me in twelve different systems."

"I'll be careful, then," Luke muttered.

The little man was smiling broadly. "You'll be dead."

At this the rodent let out a loud grunt. It was either a signal or a warning, because everything human or otherwise which had been leaning up at the bar immediately backed away, leaving a clear space around Luke and his antagonists.

Trying to salvage the situation, Luke essayed a wan smile. That faded rapidly when he saw that the three were readying hand weapons. Not only couldn't he have countered all three of them, he had no idea what a couple of the lethal-looking devices did.

"This little one isn't worth the trouble," a calm voice said. Luke looked up, startled. He hadn't heard Kenobi come up alongside him. "Come, let me buy you all something . . ."

By way of reply the bulky monster chattered hideously and swung out a massive limb. It caught an unprepared Luke across the temple and sent him spinning across the room, crashing through tables and shattering a large jug filled with a foul-smelling liquid.

The crowd edged back farther, a few grunts and warning snorts coming from some of them as the drunken monstrosity pulled a wicked-looking pistol from its service pouch. He started to wave it in Kenobi's direction.

That spurred the heretofore neutral bartender to life. He came charging clumsily around the end of the bar, waving his hands frantically but still taking care to stay out of range.

"No blasters, no blasters! Not in my place!"

The rodent thing chattered threateningly at him, while the weapon-wielding many-eye spared him a warning grunt.

In the split second when the gun and its owner's

attention was off him, the old man's hand had moved to the disk slung at his side. The short human started to yell as a fiery blue-white light appeared in the dimness of the cantina.

He never finished the yell. It turned into a blink. When the blink was finished, the man found himself lying prone against the bar, moaning and whimpering as he stared at the stump of an arm.

In between the start of his yell and the conclusion of the blink, the rodent-thing had been cleft cleanly in half down the middle, its two halves falling in opposite directions. The giant multiocular creature still stood staring, dazed, at the old human who was poised motionless before it, the shining lightsaber held over his head in a peculiar fashion. The creature's chrome pistol fired once, blowing a hole in the door. Then the torso peeled away as neatly as had the body of the rodent, its two cauterized sections falling in opposite directions to lie motionless on the cool stone.

Only then did the suggestion of a sigh escape from Kenobi; only then did his body appear to relax. Bringing the lightsaber down, he flipped it carefully upward in a reflex saluting motion which ended with the deactivated weapon resting innocuously on his hip.

That final movement broke the total quiet which had enshrouded the room. Conversation resumed, as did the movement of bodies in chairs, the scraping of mugs and pitchers and other drinking devices on tabletops. The bartender and several assistants appeared to drag the unsightly corpses out of the room, while the mutilated human vanished wordlessly into the crowd, cradling the stump of his gun arm and counting himself fortunate.

To all appearances the cantina had returned to its former state, with one small exception. Ben Kenobi was given a respectful amount of space at the bar.

Luke barely heard the renewed conversation. He was still shaken by the speed of the fight and by the old man's unimagined abilities. As his mind cleared and he moved to rejoin Kenobi, he could overhear bits

and snatches of the talk around him. Much of it centered on admiration for the cleanness and finality of the fight.

"You're hurt, Luke," Kenobi observed solicitously.

Luke felt of the bruise where the big creature had struck him. "I . . ." he started to say, but old Ben cut him off. As if nothing had happened, he indicated the great hairy mass which was shouldering its way through the crowd toward them.

"This is Chewbacca," he explained when the anthropoid had joined them at the bar. "He's first mate on a ship that might suit our needs. He'll take us to her captain-owner now."

"This way," the Wookiee grunted—at least, it sounded something like that to Luke. In any case, the huge creature's follow-me gesture was unmistakable. They started to wend their way deeper into the bar, the Wookiee parting the crowd like a gravel storm cutting canyones.

Out in front of the cantina, Threepio paced nervously next to the landspeeder. Apparently unconcerned, Artoo Detoo was engaged in animated electronic conversation with a bright red R-2 unit belonging to another of the cantina's patrons.

"What could be taking them so long? They went to hire one ship—not a fleet."

Abruptly Threepio paused, beckoning silently for Artoo to be quiet. Two Imperial troopers had appeared on the scene. They were met by an unkempt human who had emerged almost simultaneously from the depths of the cantina.

"I do not like the looks of this," the tall 'droid murmured.

Luke had appropriated someone else's drink from a waiter's tray as they made their way to the rear of the cantina. He gulped at it with the giddy air of one who feels himself under divine protection. That

safe he was not, but in the company of Kenobi and the giant Wookiee he began to feel confident that no one in the bar would assault him with so much as a dirty look.

In a rear booth they encountered a sharp-featured young man perhaps five years older than Luke, perhaps a dozen—it was difficult to tell. He displayed the openness of the utterly confident—or the insanely reckless. At their approach the man sent the humanoid wench who had been wriggling on his lap on her way with a whispered something which left a wide, if inhuman, grin on her face.

The Wookiee Chewbacca rumbled something at the man, and he nodded in response, glancing up at the newcomers pleasantly.

"You're pretty handy with that saber, old man. Not often does one see that kind of swordplay in this part of the Empire anymore." He downed a prodigious portion of whatever filled his mug. "I'm Han Solo, captain of the *Millennium Falcon*." Suddenly he became all business. "Chewie tells me you're looking for passage to the Alderaan system?"

"That's right, son. If it's on a fast ship," Kenobi told him. Solo didn't bridle at the "son."

"Fast ship? You mean you've never heard of the *Millennium Falcon*?"

Kenobi appeared amused. "Should I?"

"It's the ship that made the Kessel run in less than twelve standard timeparts!" Solo told him indignantly. "I've outrun Imperial starships and Corellian cruisers. I think she's fast enough for you, old man." His outrage subsided rapidly. "What's your cargo?"

"Only passengers. Myself, the boy, and two 'droids—no questions asked."

"No questions." Solo regarded his mug, finally looked up. "Is it local trouble?"

"Let's just say we'd like to avoid any Imperial entanglements," Kenobi replied easily.

"These days that can be a real trick. It'll cost you a little extra." He did some mental figuring. "All in

all, about ten thousand. In advance." He added with a smile, "And no questions asked."

Luke gaped at the pilot. "Ten thousand! We could almost buy our own ship for that."

Solo shrugged. "Maybe you could and maybe you couldn't. In any case, could you fly it?"

"You bet I could," Luke shot back, rising. "I'm not such a bad pilot myself. I don't—"

Again the firm hand on his arm. "We haven't that much with us," Kenobi explained. "But we could pay you two thousand now, plus another fifteen when we reach Alderaan."

Solo leaned forward uncertainly. "fifteen . . . You can really get your hands on that kind of money?"

"I promise it—from the government on Alderaan itself. At the worst, you'll have earned an honest fee: two thousand."

But Solo seemed not to hear the last. "Seventeen thousand . . . All right, I'll chance it. You've got yourselves a ship. As for avoiding Imperial entanglements, you'd better twist out of here or even the *Millennium Falcon* won't be any help to you." He nodded toward the cantina entrance, and added quickly, "Dock-sling bay ninety-four, first thing in the morning."

Four Imperial troopers, their eyes darting rapidly from table to booth to bar, had entered the cantina. There was muttering from among the crowd, but whenever the eyes of one of the heavily armed troopers went hunting for the mutterers, the words died with sullen speed.

Moving to the bar, the officer in charge asked the bartender a couple of brief questions. The big man hesitated a moment, then pointed toward a place near the back of the room. As he did so, his eyes widened slightly. Those of the officer were unreadable.

The booth he was pointing to was empty.

□ VII

LUKE and Ben were securing Artoo Detoo in the back of the speeder while Threepio kept a lookout for any additional troops.

"If Solo's ship is as fast as his boasting, we should be all right," the old man observed with satisfaction.

"But two thousand—and fifteen more when we reach Alderaan!"

"It's not the fifteen that worries me; it's the first two," Kenobi explained. "I'm afraid you'll have to sell your speeder."

Luke let his gaze rove over the landspeeder, but the thrill it had once given him was gone—gone along with other things best not dwelt on.

"It's all right," he assured Kenobi listlessly. "I don't think I'll need it again."

From their vantage point in another booth, Solo and Chewbacca watched as the Imperials strode through the bar. Two of them gave the Corellian a lingering glance. Chewbacca growled once and the two soldiers hurried their pace somewhat.

Solo grinned sardonically, turning to his partner. "Chewie, this charter could save our necks. Seventeen thousand!" He shook his head in amazement. "Those two must really be desperate. I wonder what they're wanted for. But I agreed, no questions. They're paying enough for it. Let's get going—the *Falcon* won't check itself out."

"Going somewhere, Solo?"

The Corellian couldn't identify the voice, coming as it did through an electronic translator. But there was no problem recognizing the speaker or the gun it held stuck in Solo's side.

The creature was roughly man-sized and bipedal, but its head was something out of delirium by way of an upset stomach. It had huge, dull-faceted eyes, bulbous on a pea-green face. A ridge of short spines crested the high skull, while nostrils and mouth were contained in a tapirlike snout.

"As a matter of fact," Solo replied slowly, "I was just on my way to see your boss. You can tell Jabba I've got the money I owe him."

"That's what you said yesterday—and last week—and the week prior to that. It's too late, Solo. I'm not going back to Jabba with another one of your stories."

"But I've really got the money this time!" Solo protested.

"Fine. I'll take it now, please."

Solo sat down slowly. Jabba's minions were apt to be cursed with nervous trigger fingers. The alien took the seat across from him, the muzzle of the ugly little pistol never straying from Solo's chest.

"I haven't got it here with me. Tell Jabba—"

"It's too late, I think. Jabba would rather have your ship."

"Over my dead body," Solo said unamiably.

The alien was not impressed. "If you insist. Will you come outside with me, or must I finish it here?"

"I don't think they'd like another killing in here," Solo pointed out.

Something which might have been a laugh came from the creature's translator. "They'd hardly notice. Get up, Solo. I've been looking forward to this for a long time. You've embarrassed me in front of Jabba with your pious excuses for the last time."

"I think you're right."

Light and noise filled the little corner of the cantina, and when it had faded, all that remained of the unctuous alien was a smoking, slimy spot on the stone floor.

Solo brought his hand and the smoking weapon it held out from beneath the table, drawing bemused stares from several of the cantina's patrons and cluck-

ing sounds from its more knowledgeable ones. They had known the creature had committed its fatal mistake in allowing Solo the chance to get his hands under cover.

"It'll take a lot more than the likes of you to finish me off. Jabba the Hut always did skimp when it came to hiring his hands."

Leaving the booth, Solo flipped the bartender a handful of coins as he and Chewbacca moved off. "Sorry for the mess. I always was a rotten host."

Heavily armed troopers hurried down the narrow alleyway, glowering from time to time at the darkly clad beings who hawked exotic goods from dingy little stalls. Here in Mos Eisley's inner regions the walls were high and narrow, turning the passageway into a tunnel.

No one stared angrily back at them; no one shouted imprecations or mouthed obscenities. These armored figures moved with the authority of the Empire, their sidearms boldly displayed and activated. All around, men, not-men, and mechanicals were crouched in waste-littered doorways. Among accumulations of garbage and filth they exchanged information and concluded transactions of dubious legality.

A hot wind moaned down the alleyway and the troopers closed their formation. Their precision and order masked a fear of such claustrophobic quarters.

One paused to check a door, only to discover it tightly locked and bolted. A sand-encrusted human shambling nearby visited a half-mad harangue on the trooper. Shrugging inwardly, the soldier gave the crazy human a sour eye before moving on down the alley to join up again with his fellows.

As soon as they were well past, the door slid open a crack and a metallic face peered out. Below Threepio's leg, a squat barrel shape struggled for a view.

"I would rather have gone with Master Luke than stay here with you. Still, orders are orders. I don't