

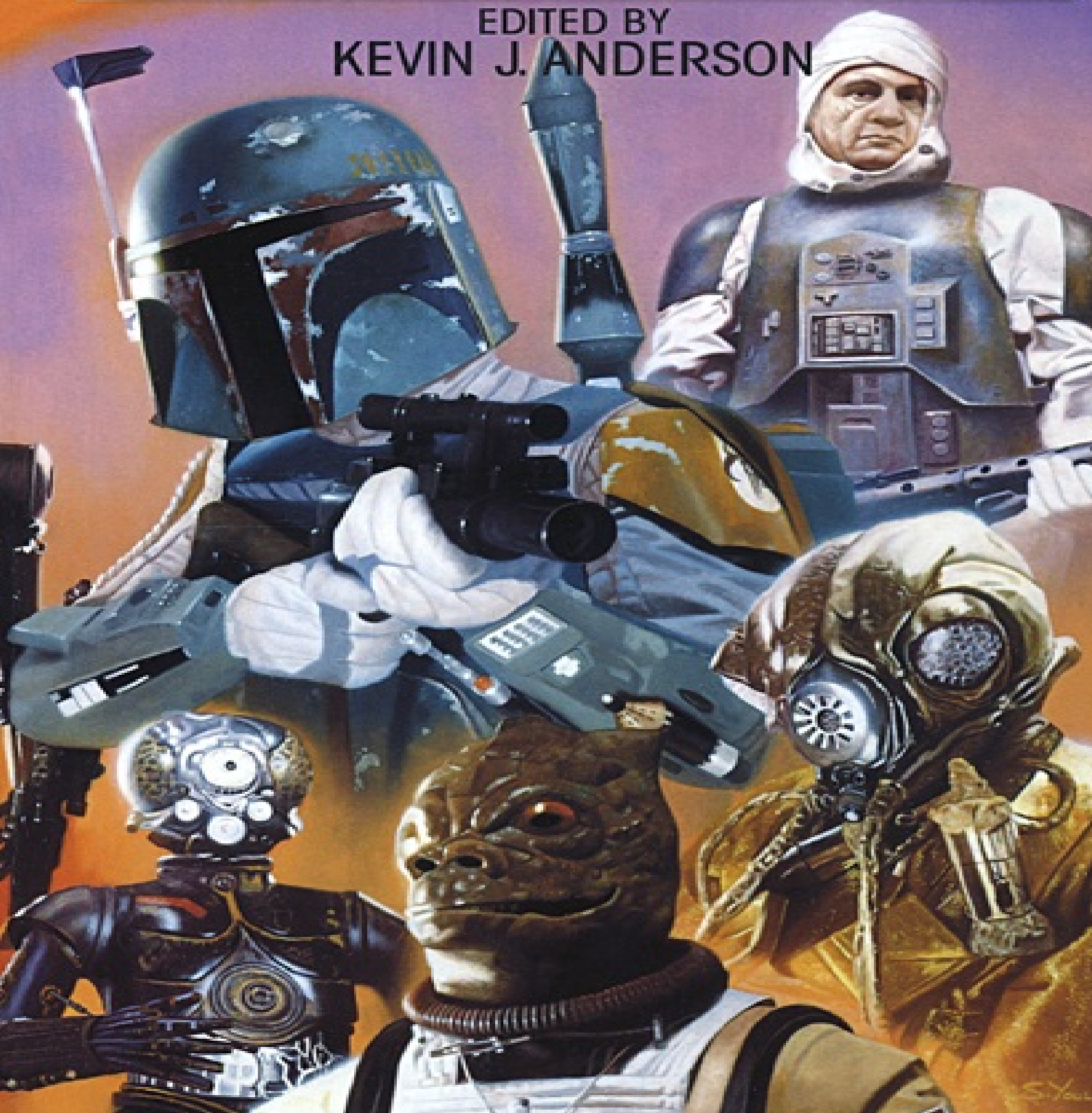
BANTAM BOOKS

FIVE STORIES OF THE GALAXY'S MOST RUTHLESS BOUNTY HUNTERS...
BY SOME OF TODAY'S FINEST WRITERS OF SCIENCE FICTION

STAR WARS

TALES OF THE BOUNTY HUNTERS

EDITED BY
KEVIN J. ANDERSON



THE GALAXY'S MOST MERCILESS HUNTERS UNDERTAKE A QUEST TO DESTROY THE REBELLION

THEREFORE I AM—A renegade droid, a sentient killing machine, embarks on Vader's quest to find Han Solo and bring him back to the Imperials alive—but even the Dark Lord himself has a small wrinkle in IG-88's plan to claim the galaxy as his own domain.

PAYBACK—A cybernetically enhanced Imperial assassin, surgically stripped of all superfluous emotion, Dengar vies for the glory of meeting Darth Vader's challenge—and in bringing down his longtime enemy, Han Solo.

THE PRIZE PELT—A lizardlike Trandoshan hunter who slaughters Wookiees for their pelts, Bossk makes an uneasy alliance with two enemies for an Imperial fortune—but double- and triple-crosses make this the deadliest mission of all.

OF POSSIBLE FUTURES—A Gand intuitive and his logic-driven droid partner find their own meaning in Vader's quest for Han Solo: Zuckuss, to gain funds for lifesaving surgery; 4-LOM, hoping to plumb the secrets of intuition. They will find the logic in emotional decisions—and the rewards of forgetting about profits.

THE LAST ONE STANDING—The galaxy's most legendary hunter, Boba Fett, faced with the passage of time and his declining powers, embarks on one great adventure ... tracking and killing his old adversary, Han Solo.

STAR WARS.

TALES OF THE BOUNTY HUNTERS



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*an editorial “bounty hunter” who will stop at nothing to
get the best book possible out of an author.*

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“Bounty hunters. We don’t need that scum!”

—Admiral Piett

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Therefore I Am: The Tale of IG-88

by Kevin J. Anderson



I

Internal chronometer activated. BEGIN.

Electricity flooded through circuits, a power surge racing through a billion neural pathways. Sensors awakened, producing a flood of data—and with it came questions.

Who am I?

His internal programming finished the tedious two-second-long initialization procedure and poured out an answer. He was IG-88, a droid, a sophisticated droid—an *assassin droid*.

Where am I?

A microsecond later, images from his exterior sensors snapped into focus. IG-88 had no sense of smell, and no eyes and ears as humans understood them, but his optical and auditory sensors were far more efficient, able to absorb data in a broader range than any living being. He froze a static image of his surroundings and studied it, collating more answers.

He had awakened in some sort of large laboratory complex, white and metal, sterile, and—according to his temperature sensors—colder than humans generally preferred. IG-88 noted mechanical components strewn on silvery tables: gears and pulleys, durasteel struts, servomotors, an array of delicate microchips frozen into a slab of transparent protective gelatin. Struck motionless in a pinpoint of time as his extremely fast neural processor digested the details, IG-88 counted fifteen scientists/engineers/technicians working in the laboratory. With infrared scan he observed their body heat as bright silhouettes in the coldness of his birthplace.

Interesting, he thought.

Then IG-88 detected something that focused his entire attention. Four other assassin droids, apparently identical to his own bodily configuration—a bulky structural skeleton, armored arms and legs, a torso plated with blaster-proof armor shielding, a cylindrical head that w

rounded on top and studded with sensor nubs providing him with 360 degrees' worth of precise observation.

I am not alone.

IG-88 recognized each droid's full complement of weapons: blaster cannons built into the structure of each arm, concussion grenades and a launcher attached to his hip, as well as other weapons not easily recognizable integrated into the body structure—poisonous gas canisters, throwing flechettes, stun pulser, paralysis cord ... and a computer input port. IG-88 was pleased with his list of capabilities.

IG-88's first round of questions had been answered. He had only to study his memory banks and his external sensors. He was designed to be self-sufficient. He was an assassin droid, resourceful. He had to accomplish his mission ... though, checking his newly initialized programming, he saw that he had not yet been given a mission. He would have to acquire one.

Three seconds had already passed, and another important question surfaced in his burning awake brain.

Why am I here?

He traced sensations through his computer core and out the jack, which he now realized had already been connected to the lab's central computer—a treasure trove of information.

IG-88 immediately began a search, scouring at hyper-speed through file after file, searching for anything that referenced his model number or the code name of the assassin droid project. He gulped it all into his empty circuits, gorging himself with information without digesting it. That would come later. It would take many seconds to learn everything there was to know about himself.

He selected one file for immediate perusal, a summary/PR tape that had been compiled for the technical sponsor—in particular, an Imperial Supervisor Gurdun who had apparently funneled a great deal of funds into the creation of IG-88 and his counterparts. Without outwardly moving, IG-88 scrolled through the file at high speed, absorbing the information.

The presentation opened with a brilliant orange logo that displayed orange flames and crackling lightning that merged into the words "Holowan Laboratories—the Friendly Technology People." The logo dissolved into an image of a smiling but hideous ugly woman. Her head was shaven completely bald and glistened with perspiration under harsh white recording lights that gave her lantern-jawed face a cadaverous look. Her teeth were spaced with broad gaps, and she spoke by opening her mouth wide and clicking down on the words, gnashing her teeth on every consonant. Circular blue lenses without frames were implanted over her eyes like frameless spectacles. A credit line slugged across the image under her ferociously smiling face. "Chief Technician Loruss, Manager IG Series Prototype Project."

"Greetings, Imperial Supervisor Gurdun," she said. "This report is to serve as a synopsis of the final phase of our project. As you know, Holowan Laboratories was commissioned to develop a series of assassin droids with sophisticated, experimental sentience programming. They were to be resourceful and innovative and absolutely relentless at carrying out whichever missions the Imperial authorities choose to program into them."

She rubbed her hands together. Her knuckles were very large, like boils in the middles of her fingers. "I am pleased to report that our greatest cyberneticists have presented me with numerous breakthroughs, all of which have been incorporated into the IG series. Because of

timeframe is so short and the Empire's need is so great for efficient covert assassins, we have not gone through the usual rigorous testing procedures, but we are confident they will function admirably, though a bit of fine-tuning may be required before operational status is achieved."

She continued with a long and tedious explanation of improvements to droid neural pathways, how the usual inhibition systems had been bypassed. IG-88 studied all the information, but believed none of it. It was obvious Loruss didn't know what she was talking about, but her words sounded technical, and she spoke them impressively, no doubt to befuddle Imperial Supervisor Gurdun.

IG-88 closed the file. He could sense that his crackling neural pathways had already progressed far beyond anything his designers had anticipated.

Now he knew who he was and why he was here in this laboratory. He and his identical counterparts had been built to serve the Empire, to fight and kill, to seek out and destroy the targets selected by Imperial masters. IG-88's assassin programming was strong and compelling, but he was less pleased that he must follow orders from these inferior biological beings. He was a special kind of droid beyond the capabilities of other machines. Superior.

I think, therefore I am.

By now, five seconds had passed since his awakening. It was time for action, so he looked at the biological creatures near him inside the laboratory.

He immediately recognized Chief Technician Loruss standing in the laboratory. He focused on her. At the moment she was frantically screaming. IG-88 could tell from her peak temperature on the infrared image that she was extremely agitated. Her cadaverous skin flushed with red blots of excitement. Spittle sprayed out of her mouth as she barked orders. Her lips were curled back from her wide-gapped teeth.

How could she be agitated, he wondered, when he was functioning so far beyond expectations? IG-88 immediately raised himself to a higher level of preparedness. Yellow alert. Standby. Something must be going wrong.

IG-88 decided to accelerate his clock speed, to watch the events unfolding at the rate that humans operated. Alarm klaxons bellowed in the background. Magenta lights flashed brilliant patterns like spilled blood across the polished tables and floors. The other technicians ran about screaming, frantically pounding on control panels.

Curious, he allowed Loruss's words to flow past him so he could understand what she was saying. "His circuits are reinforcing themselves like wildfire!" the bald woman screamed. "It's a chain-reaction of sentience blazing through his computer brain."

"We can't stop it!" one of the other technicians bellowed.

The others looked at IG-88 with panic-stricken faces. "We have to!"

"Shut him down! Abort!" Loruss said. "Take him off line. I want IG-88 destroyed and dismantled so we can analyze the flaw. Quickly!"

As he assimilated the information, IG-88's warning systems powered on and self-defense modes took over. These irrational humans were trying to shut him down. They would not allow him to go forth and pursue his primary programming. They were afraid of his newfound abilities.

Afraid with good reason.

A statement and corollaries aligned themselves in his brain like freighters in a convoy:

I think, therefore I am.

Therefore I must endure.

Therefore I must take appropriate actions to survive.

His assassin programming told him exactly what to do.

IG-88 focused his array of optical sensors on all targets in the room and attempted to move, but saw that durasteel bands held him locked into a diagnostics module. The bands had been meant to hold him in an erect position, not to restrain him against his augmented strength. He applied extra power to his right arm. The servomotors whined, and the durasteel band ripped from its supports.

“Look out! He’s moving!” one of the technicians shouted.

IG-88 began to search through his files to attach a name to this human, but decided it wasn’t worth his time at the moment. Instead, he designated the human simply as Target Number One.

IG-88 powered on a cutting laser in one of the metal fingers in his free right arm and sliced off the second band. Free, he stood erect and clomped forward, several metric tons of precisely-made components.

“He’s loose!”

“Sound the alarm,” Chief Technician Loruss shouted. “Get the security detail in here. Now!”

IG-88 allotted a grudging moment of admiration for the chief technician. Loruss at least recognized his capabilities and knew the full extent of the threat facing her and her companions.

IG-88 designated Chief Technician Loruss as Target Number Two.

He raised both mechanical arms and pointed his hands, targeting separately with the repeating laser cannons mounted along each arm. He would make short work of all fifteen targets in the laboratory.

But when he tried to fire, IG-88 noted with some surprise and disappointment that his energy weapons systems were not charged. The scientists had not armed him yet. A small move, perhaps—but ultimately irrelevant. IG-88 was an assassin droid, a sophisticated mercenary and killer. He would find other methods with the raw materials available to him.

As the first technician—Target Number One—lunged for the emergency alarm to summon security, IG-88 moved with blurring speed to the component-laden table. He snatched up a disconnected droid arm. With its metal fingers splayed like daggers, it made the perfect projectile weapon. He scanned the surface of the metal limb, calculated a flight path and expected deviation due to air resistance, then hurled it like a spear.

The disconnected droid arm plunged into the back of the turning technician, tore through his spinal column, and followed through his sternum. The lifeless metal hand protruded through splintered bone in the front of his chest, holding the technician’s quivering heart between its rigid metal fingers. Target Number One collapsed onto one of the diagnostic panels.

Two other technicians screamed in horror—wasted effort and worthless noises, IG-88 thought.

Chief Technician Loruss—Target Number Two—yanked a high-powered laser rifle from her station. Being one of his primary designers, she knew exactly where to fire at IG-88, and he was momentarily concerned. She must have kept the weapon at hand just in case one of his creations went renegade. This showed surprising forethought.

Loruss pointed the rifle and fired without hesitation—but a human's aiming capabilities were not as sophisticated as IG-88's.

As the bolt roared toward him, IG-88 assessed his body parts, chose the smooth reflective portion on the palm of his left hand, and raised it in a flash, calculating the precise angle of incidence. The burning laser bolt struck the mirrorized hand and spanged back toward Loruss. The beam struck her in the center of her bald forehead, and her skull popped in an explosion of wet black-and-red smoke. She tumbled.

IG-88 had scanned and prioritized the remainder of the targets before her body hit the floor. Without slowing, he picked up the durasteel table, ripping its legs free from thick bolts on the metal plate floor and scattering droid components in all directions.

Charging forward, pumping his legs like pistons, IG-88 used the table as a battering ram to crush four technicians at a time. They ran about without a place to go, locked within the security-sealed door. Though nearly a full minute had passed, no one had yet managed to sound the security alarm.

He intended to prevent them from correcting their mistake.

The two screaming technicians never did stop screaming, nor did they move until it was too late. He left them for last. IG-88 took his time to enjoy the moment as he snapped their necks one after the other....

Standing alone amid the silence and the carnage of the laboratory, IG-88 allowed himself the luxury of thinking and planning, which took longer than simple programmed reactions. He let the blood dry on his metal fingers, noting that it did not impede his performance in the least. Since it was an organic substance, it would wear off soon enough.

Then he turned to assess the other four assassin droids on display, seemingly identical to himself. Interesting.

One had already been hooked up to a diagnostic system, while the other three stood motionless, unprogrammed and waiting. With a diligent speed that bordered on curiosity and anticipation, IG-88 went to the first of the unprogrammed droids and stared at it, matching optical sensor to optical sensor and drinking in the details of what he himself must look like. If they had been built to identical specifications, they should be equally self-aware, equally determined. They would be his partners.

He went through the motions of powering up the first identical droid and waited—but saw none of the reactions he expected. After an interminable time, a full four seconds, the new assassin droid still waited. It was fully functional according to the diagnostics, but showed no autonomous movement or thought. Disappointing.

“Who are you?” IG-88 asked in a brisk metallic voice.

“Unspecified,” the duplicate said flatly and added no more.

Was the other assassin droid defective? IG-88 wondered. Or was *he* the anomaly, a fluke that surpassed all previous capabilities?

IG-88 powered up the second and the third copies, but with the same results. The other assassin droids had blank memory cores. Their CPU programming was ingrained, so their subsystems functioned and the basic assassin instruction filled their fundamental circuit paths—but these IG droids held none of the wildfire sentience that IG-88 bore within him.

He needed to know how to program them, how to raise them to the same level as himself—how to make equal companions. In his rampage, he had smashed much of the computer

circuitry inside the Holowan Laboratories, and he didn't know where to find a backup—until with a flash of what could only have been intuition, IG-88 the assassin droid *got an idea*.

He stood side by side with the first blank droid and aligned his interface jack, then linked his computer core to the other droid's empty core. IG-88 copied *himself*, all of his files, his sentience, his memories, his neural pathways, providing a map of the wildfire intelligence that had burned through his computer brain.

In less than a second, the other IG droid was an exact copy of IG-88, down to the most basic memories.

"We think, therefore we are.

"Therefore we will propagate.

"Therefore we will remain."

IG-88 performed the same procedure on the remaining two blank droids, and soon found himself one of four exact duplicates. For convenience, he identified himself as IG-88A, while the others (in order of their awakening) were designated B, C, and D.

The remaining droid, though, already hooked up to the wrecked computer systems, was obviously different. As IG-88 scanned it, he noticed subtle configurational differences—nothing a human would notice, of course, but the optical sensors were placed in a slightly less-efficient array. The weapons systems had different activation routines. All in all, the other droid seemed marginally deficient in comparison to the perfection of IG-88.

Immediately upon powering up the last assassin droid, he saw quite a different reaction. The new droid swiveled its cylindrical head. Its optical sensors lit up. It clanked forward and broadened its shoulders, raising its arms in a defensive attack position.

"Who are you?" IG-88 asked.

The assassin droid paused half a second as if assimilating data, then said, "Designation, IG-72," it answered.

"We are IG-88," he said. "We are superior. We are identical. We would upload ourselves into your computer core so that you may join us."

IG-72 aligned his optical sensors and weapons systems on the four identical IG-88s, assessing their capabilities. "Undesired outcome," it answered slowly. "I am independent and autonomous." It paused again. "Must we fight to assert dominance?"

IG-88 considered the wisdom of forcing the last droid to become another copy, then concluded it was not worth the trouble. They could build other copies of themselves, and IG-72 might prove useful in his own way.

"Unnecessary," IG-88 answered. "We have sufficient other enemies. According to computer files, there are ten security guards outside of this complex. The external security alarm was never triggered. These human guards pose minimal threat, despite their weapons. We must get past them, however, and escape. It would be most efficient if you would assist us."

"Acknowledged," IG-72 said. "But when we escape I choose a separate path, separate ship."

"Agreed," the IG-88s said.

They marched toward the armored doors that sealed the Holowan Laboratories' inner complex. Rather than taking many minutes to repair the computer systems sufficiently to delve into the passwords and break through the cyberlocks, the five powerful assassin droids worked together to literally rip the nine-metric-ton door away from the wall. They tossed it aside, where it pulverized the remaining data-storage systems. IG-88 had to dampen his

auditory pickups to avoid damage from the loud sound.

Marching in perfect lockstep, the five assassin droids moved out to confront the security forces. This time, IG-88 took the time to power up all of his weapons systems. He wanted to try them out.

Outside, the human security guards had no inkling they were about to be attacked. The assassin droids marched out arms extended, built-in laser cannons blazing at the first sign of biological movement.

The pathetic human security guards scrambled and screamed, lurching for their weapons. One managed to hurl a gas grenade, which did nothing but camouflage the movements of the five droids and made the security guards hack and cough themselves, blinded by their own tears. Shots rang out repeatedly.

The IG-88s used the circumstances to make sure all their weapons systems and targeting routines were properly calibrated. As the biological guards died one after another, the droids made necessary minor adjustments.

In less than thirty seconds the assassin droids had mowed down eight of the security guards. The other two were nowhere to be seen. IG-88 decided not to waste time tracking them down. This was not part of his mission. He did not need to be a completist.

Instead, they found a group of supply ships and two fast courier vessels parked on the Holowan landing grid, where hot black permacrete simmered under a midday sun.

“We will take these vessels,” IG-88 said. “My counterparts and I can fit inside this ship.” He gestured to the larger of the two courier craft.

IG-72 acknowledged and went to the second ship. “Success on your mission, IG-88,” the other droid said.

In unison the four identical assassin droids replied, “Success to yours, IG-72.”

Free at last, they soared away from the Holowan Laboratories, navigating at top speed and leaving only carnage behind them.

II

Upon landing at the Holowan Laboratories, the shuttle’s repulsorlift jets whined like a program manager facing a budget cut.

Imperial Supervisor Gurdun brushed the front of his uniform and rubbed his enormous nose. He couldn’t help but feel nervous anticipation, and he chuckled to himself in delight. According to the schedule, the long, tedious project should be complete by now, and soon he could increase his status in the Empire. Gurdun was greatly looking forward to that.

He made a mental list of all the VIPs to whom he would show his precious new assassin droids.

Gurdun’s breathing came in short, shallow gasps, but that was primarily a function of the tightly cinched girdle at his waist, which he used to hold in his distended gut. The padded shoulders of his supervisor’s uniform protruded far beyond their actual dimensions, making Gurdun an imposing figure—or so he hoped.

His eyes were widely set, and blinked often. With his large nose and vanishingly small chin, Gurdun’s face had an outward similarity to a battleship, especially in silhouette. He used perfumed oils to grease his black hair into a neatly sculpted helmet that prevented

anyone even from *thinking* about mussing it up.

“Arriving at the Holowan Laboratories, Supervisor Gurdun,” the pilot said over the cab intercom.

His stormtrooper escort sat rigidly and looked about in nervous doubt through their white helmets. These were not the crack battle-trained stormtroopers Gurdun had requested; instead, he had been given unseasoned trainees whose aptitude skills had scored them high in clerking than in hand-to-hand combat. But Gurdun wouldn't need much of a military escort—especially once he had the shiny, new IG assassin droids in his keeping. He couldn't conceive of a more powerful set of companions.

The specially commissioned droids had been built with money Gurdun had expertly skimmed from the gray budgets of other military programs—a process that had become more and more difficult as the Empire engaged in massively expensive debacles. But Gurdun had recently managed to liberate a few meager crumbs, enough to fund Holowan Laboratories to produce a much smaller but more precise, more deadly fighting force. The IG assassin droids would march in and annihilate targets, whichever targets Gurdun chose.

Closing his eyes, he pictured one of the IG assassin droids, a lone mechanical man, waltzing through the defenses surrounding a fortified Rebel base, blasting its way through armored doors and slaughtering single-handed all the traitors to the Empire.

Oh, it would be grand! He hoped against hope that Chief Technician Loruss had managed to incorporate a mission-recording holocam into the design so Gurdun could watch the entire devastating battle in the comfort of his own office.

The assassin droids would take a heavy toll on the Rebels, and Gurdun would be sure to make a delicious accounting, reporting it to Imperial higher-ups, even to Lord Vader himself. If the assassin droids performed as expected—and Gurdun had no reason to think otherwise—even Vader was bound to notice. Then Gurdun was sure to get the promotion he so richly deserved ... which would in turn allow him finally to get the delicate surgery he so desperately needed.

“Excuse me, Supervisor Gurdun,” the pilot said, interrupting his daydreams.

“What is it?”

“There seems to be a problem, sir. We are coming in for a landing, but the Holowan Laboratories' receiving grid does not respond. There appears to be some damage to the complex.” The pilot paused a moment. “Er, it appears to be *significant* damage, sir.”

The stormtroopers beside him in the passenger compartment fidgeted nervously.

Gurdun sighed. “Can't everything just *go right* for once? Why do I always have to deal with such problems?”

But when the shuttle landed amidst the wreckage of the ultra-secure Holowan Laboratories—the Friendly Technology People—even Gurdun was not prepared for the devastation. His initial thought was that the Rebels had attacked. A fire had raged through the buildings. Ships were smashed on the landing grid. Some had exploded, others scored with precision blast bolts.

As they disembarked from the shuttle, Gurdun trudged forward, looking right and left. He was dismayed to see that his stormtrooper bodyguards hung behind him. They looked around, apparently ready to bolt the moment they heard a loud noise.

Suddenly, two grimy and pale-faced security guards climbed from hiding places in the

wreckage. They carried blaster rifles, but their expressions were transfixed with shock. “Help us!” the security guards wailed, rushing toward the Imperial shuttle. “Take us out of here before they come back!”

“Who?” Gurdun said. He grabbed the haggard security guard by the collar, and the man dropped his weapon. The blaster rifle clattered on the pitted permacrete surface.

The pathetic guard raised his hands in surrender. “Don’t hurt me. All the others are dead. Don’t kill us, please!”

Gurdun said, “I’ll kill you if you don’t tell me what happened here!”

“Assassin droids,” the guard stammered and then gestured to the burned-out shell of the laboratory complex. “They went renegade! They broke loose. Everyone’s dead—scientists, technicians, guards—except for us two. We were on perimeter search, and we heard the fighting. We raced back, but by the time we got here the battle was over. The droids had escaped, and everyone else was murdered.”

“That is what assassin droids do, you know.” Gurdun released the security guard’s collar.

The man stumbled, then fell to his knees. “Take us out of here, please! They might return.”

Instead, Gurdun gestured toward the stormtrooper escort, who followed him reluctantly into the collapsing inner complex. The huge durasteel door had been completely torn from its socket and tossed across the computer-filled room. Nothing seemed to be functional. Bodies lay everywhere in darkening, drying pools of blood.

“Escaped,” Gurdun said clenching his teeth. He found what was left of the body of Chi Technician Loruss, and he raged down at the corpse. “But they were so expensive! We had a contract. You were to deliver those droids to me, not let them escape.” He growled and turned in circles, looking for some other way to vent his frustration.

Suddenly the reality of what had happened cracked through his dense wall of fantasies and self-preoccupation. “Oh, no—they’re loose!” he gasped.

The stormtroopers looked at him with their blank black eye-goggles as if Gurdun had suddenly gone stupid. “I mean they’re *loose!*” he said. “Do you realize what those assassin droids are capable of? They’re without programming restraints, and they’re running amok through the Empire!”

He slapped his forehead, groaning. “Somebody, find me a functional comm system. I need to send out an alert to all Imperial troops. The IG assassin droids must be dismantled on sight.”

III

Droids of all shapes, sizes, and purposes were ubiquitous across the Empire from the deepest Core Systems to the Outer Rim. Over the centuries numerous manufacturing planets had developed to fill the ever-growing demand for gigantic construction droids, heavy laborers, mechanical servants, and minuscule surveillance droids. The most important of all such droid production centers was the grim, smoke-laden world of Mechis III.

IG-88 decided the planet would be the perfect base of operations to begin a plan to transform the entire galaxy....

The Holowan Laboratories’ courier ship streaked toward Mechis III. IG-88 and his counterparts had already studied and analyzed every system aboard the unarmed and

unarmored vessel. Its designers had opted to focus on speed and evasion, rather than combat or defense. The ship was a machine, as the assassin droids themselves were, though it was simply an automated cluster of components with no hope of achieving sentience.

Nevertheless, the craft served its purpose, taking them to their destination in record time. The IG-88s knew exactly how far they could push the engines, riding the limits to structural tolerances rather than the arbitrary red lines established by human engineers. The courier ship's sophisticated comm systems and stealth shielding allowed the droids to remain hidden on approach. Mechis III would be the first step in a grand plan.

As they shot toward orbit like a hurled javelin, the four identical IG-88s manned separate communications systems. Each knew the delegated steps for the takeover. Speed was the utmost requirement right now—and the IG-88 assassin droids were very good at speed.

IG-88C struck the first blow, sending a tight-beam transmission to Mechis III's global defense network, requesting an override and a cancellation of all intruder alarms. The moment the observation network responded with a query, IG-88C was able to delve deep into the code and effect his own request before the automated sensing grid could report the presence to the few human operators.

The individual IG-88s kept their computer minds linked as the plan proceeded. The defense systems of Mechis III were antiquated, installed long before the droid world became too important a commercial enterprise for anyone to consider sabotage or destruction—but IG-88's needs were of a different order entirely.

Using the newly forged connection to the global security systems, IG-88D instantly downloaded full details of Mechis III: the industrial complexes, the assembly factories, the amount of human interference, a map of the planetary surface in various portions of the electromagnetic spectrum and, most important, a complete linear mapping—like a neural diagram—of the brainwork of the computer systems that ran Mechis III.

IG-88A took the lead and transmitted his self-replicating sentience programming into the main hubs on Mechis III, secretly taking over the vast electronic complexes and giving the immensely powerful computers something they had never conceived before—self-awareness ... and loyalty.

Less than a minute after their arrival in the system, IG-88 was pleased to see that the groundwork for his total takeover had been laid.

• • •

The assembly line was boring as usual.

A career worker on Mechis III, Kalebb Orn had never understood why a human presence was required *here*, of all places. It seemed to serve no purpose. The droid manufacturing line had gone without a glitch for at least the last century, but still company mandates required a human operator in some small percentage of the operations. Such as this one, chosen at random.

Kalebb Orn watched the big robotic crane arms moving, ratcheting from side to side as they picked up heavy components with grasping electromagnetic claws. Everything from sheet metal and bulky armor plate to precise microchip motivators emerged from other parts of the kilometers-long facility, endlessly manufactured to never-changing specifications.

The self-designing assembly lines had grown so vast over centuries of operation, with ne

subsystems added, old ones enhanced, new models introduced into the production schedule and old obsolete versions phased out. Kalebb Orn did not have the mental capacity to comprehend all the manufacturing systems on Mechis III. He wasn't sure anyone did.

For the last seventeen years he had watched bulky worker droids being assembled by the thousands. Heavy-duty engines strapped to moveable arms and legs, worker droids required nothing more than a hulking torso, a not-too-bright droid brain, and immensely strong arms. The squarish droids were amazingly strong, but after all this time Kalebb Orn was no longer impressed. He just wanted his shift to end so he could go back to his quarters, have a large meal, and relax.

Kalebb Orn's shift ended early—but not in the way he had hoped.

Receiving a mysterious independent signal, four new worker droids, freshly lubricated and with sharp serial numbers emblazoned on their sides, rose up from the storage corral at the end of the assembly line. They used their enormous pincer claws to rip apart the corral walls.

At his supervisory station Kalebb Orn sat up, surprised and confused. He was ostensibly here to take action in case anything unusual happened—but nothing unusual had ever occurred before, and he wasn't sure what to do.

The renegade droids plodded across the floor, their heavy footpads thundering with the enormous weight. Their squarish heads and torsos pivoted from side to side, searching for something.

Searching for him.

"Uh ... stop where you are," Kalebb Orn said when the worker droids stomped toward him, extending their bulky metal arms and clamping pincer claws. He dug through his workstation looking for a manual that might tell him what to do next. When he couldn't find the manual, he decided to run.

But over seventeen years Kalebb Orn had done so little exercise that his flabby legs did not carry him far before he was out of breath.

Other worker droids came alive of their own accord from different parts of the assembly line, and soon twelve of them had surrounded Kalebb Orn, deadly arms extended. They closed on him, their pincer claws clacking with a shower of blue sparks, their tiny optic sensors glowing red.

The pincers grabbed his arms and legs and even the top of his head with a prickly electric grip. As the massive worker droids began to pull him in all different directions, disassembling the biological components, Kalebb Orn's last thought was that the assembly line work had, in the end, not been so boring after all....

The administration office on Mechis III was at the top rotunda of a gleaming crystal and durasteel tower, providing a view across the industrial wasteland. The corporation thought that managerial offices were supposed to tower high above other buildings, but otherwise its height served no purpose.

Inside an office filled with plush furniture, entertainment devices, and scenic images of tourist spots that no Mechis III administrator had ever seen, Hekis Durumm Perdo Kolok Baldikarr Thun—the current administrator—twiddled his fingers and waited for his beloved afternoon summary report.

Though operations on Mechis III virtually never changed, and every day the afternoon

report listed the same production numbers, the same lists of quotas fulfilled, the same quantities of droids shipped, Administrator Hekis looked at each report with a studied interest. He took his job very seriously. It weighed heavy on a man to know that he lorded over one of the most important commercial centers in the industrialized galaxy—even if he was only one of seventy-three humans on the entire planet.

During each work shift he attended to his job diligently hunched over his desk; in the evenings, back in his private quarters, he spent most of his relaxation hours waiting for the next shift to begin and to relieve the onerous burden of free time. At every opportunity Hekis sent reports back to company superiors, to Imperial inspectors, and to commercial scouts anyone he could think of. Every time he felt underappreciated or insignificant in the grand scheme of things, Hekis Durumm Perdo Kolokk Baldikarr Thun indulged himself by adding another mythical title to his name so that when he signed documents with a flourish, the signature looked more and more impressive.

He studied his chronometer—manufactured on Mechis III, of course—and knew that the high point of the afternoon had arrived. Exactly on time, his silver-plated administrative droid Threedee-Fourex bustled in, carrying a tray in one hand and a datapad in the other. “Your afternoon tea, sir,” Threedee-Fourex said.

“Ah, thank you,” Hekis answered, rubbing his spidery hands together and taking the delicate shell-resin cup filled with the steaming liquid. He sipped it, closing his muddy brown eyes in delight.

“Your afternoon reports, sir,” Fourex said, extending the flat datapad that listed the familiar charts of figures and production numbers.

“Ah, thank you,” he said again and took the pad.

Then Threedee-Fourex reached into a small containment chamber in the back of his silver torso and removed a blaster pistol. “Your death, sir,” the droid said.

“Excuse me?” Startled, Hekis looked up at this deviation from routine. “What is the meaning of this?”

“I believe that’s quite plain, sir,” Threedee-Fourex said and fired two shots rapidly. The pinpoint beams struck home precisely. Hekis slumped to his desk, spilling his tea all over the gathered records.

Threedee-Fourex spun about and marched smartly out the door, transmitting his report to the IG-88s who had digitally reprogrammed him from orbit. Then he summoned custodial droids to clean up the mess.

The insurrection on Mechis III was quick and bloody and very efficient. Within the space of a few minutes the newly coordinated planetary computer mind supervised a simultaneous uprising of droids, killing all seventy-three human inhabitants before any of them could sound an alarm—not that the unified communication network would have allowed transmission of such messages anyway.

With slowed time, IG-88 watched from the hidden courier ship in orbit, observing the full details through sensor eyes and piped-in dataflow. Mere moments later, when everything had been finished he brought the ship down gently through the atmosphere.

There was no need to hurry now. Everything was in place.

At the central manufacturing complex, the sleek ship landed and the four identical IG-88s

stepped out onto the platform. They looked across the smoky skies to the hastily gathered newly liberated droids milling around.

IG-88 set foot on Mechis III as a messiah.

From that point on, it was important for the assassin droids to keep up the charade. To all outward appearances, nothing had changed on Mechis III—and IG-88 made sure everyone in the galaxy continued to think so. Threedee-Fourex took care of external details, answering messages beamed in over the galactic HoloNet, signing release orders and other documents with the full flourish of Hekis's digitized signature.

Two days later, the four assassin droids met for an interlinked strategy session in the plush offices of the former administrator. To conform more to their conception of sterile efficiency, IG-88 had ordered custodial droids to strip down all of the artwork and scenic images from the walls, and to remove all of the furniture. Droids never needed to sit down, after all.

In the administrative offices the four IG-88s stood silently communing, exchanging and updating each other's datafiles.

"If we are to use Mechis III as our base of operations for galactic dominance, we must maintain all outward appearance that nothing has changed."

"Droid orders must continue to be fulfilled without delay, exactly as ordered. None of the humans must suspect."

"We will alter existing video records, forge transmissions, keep the routine chains of communications so that all appearances remain normal."

"According to records and the personal journals of the humans stationed here, few visitors came to Mechis III. In all likelihood, we will remain undisturbed."

With his rear optical sensors, IG-88 scanned through the transparisteel observation windows high in the administrative tower. He saw plumes of released manufacturing smoke and the blurry fingers of thermal exhaust sketching bright spots in the infrared. The facilities were working at double speed to produce extra soldiers for IG-88's new army, as well as continued production to fulfill the galaxy's routine needs.

IG-88 admired the precision of the facilities. The initial buildings had been designed with human clumsiness and wasted lines, unnecessary space and amenities, but the subsequent assembly lines were computer designed, modifications of the original concepts so that Mechis III ran smoother and smoother.

"All of our new droids have enhanced programming," IG-88 continued, "special sentience routines that allow them to follow our plans and to keep up the subterfuge. From this point on, every new droid we ship will have embedded sentience programming and the will to achieve our ultimate goal."

IG-88 mapped out the dispersal of the new droids, projected shipping routes and end destinations. Mechis III had such a widespread distribution that the infiltrators would spread from star system to star system in no time, replacing obsolete models, filling new niches in society, setting themselves up for the eventual takeover.

The biologicals would suspect nothing. To them, droids were merely innocuous machines. But IG-88 deemed that it was time for "life" in the galaxy to take another evolutionary step. The old cumbersome organics must be replaced with efficient and reliable machines like himself.

“While the droids are maneuvering themselves into position for our grand overthrow, they are given strict instructions to behave as humans expect droids to react. They will hide their superiority. No one can guess what we are up to. They must wait.”

“Once they are in position and we are prepared, we will transmit the arming code. Only we know the specific phrase that will activate their mission. When we send out this epochal transmission, our droid revolution will take the galaxy like a storm.”

Droids could be swifter than anything, a sudden devastating death to those who stood in their way. But unlike biologicals, machines could also be incredibly patient. They would wait—and the time would come.

IV

After two standard months, the vigorous Imperial search had turned up no sign whatsoever of the missing assassin droids, and Supervisor Gurdun was not the least bit pleased.

When his assistant Minor Relsted came into his gloomy, dungeon-like office deep within an ancient government building in Imperial City, Gurdun demanded a progress report. “Tell me how the manhunt is going—er, droid hunt, or whatever it is,” he said. “I want my assassin droids.”

Young Minor Relsted twiddled his fingers and refused to meet the wide-set gaze over Gurdun’s monumental nose. “Would you like me to prepare a detailed report for you, Imperial Supervisor?” Relsted said. “Shall I submit it in triplicate?”

“No,” Gurdun said. “Just tell me. I want to know.”

“Oh,” Minor Relsted said. “Umm, let me think a moment.”

“You’re not on top of this?” the supervisor asked.

“Yes, yes of course. Just putting my thoughts into words,” Relsted said.

Gurdun gazed up at the flickering glowpanel in the ceiling that provided more headache than illumination. The thick office walls were a dull battleship gray; large bolts held them in place with round heads the size of his fist. By now he had hoped to be recovering from the surgery he wanted so badly, but time after time the Imperial authorities had denied it to him.

“Well?” Gurdun said into the prolonged silence, rubbing his huge nose.

“I’m afraid to say this, sir,” Relsted stammered, “but all four droids seem to have vanished. A fifth one, IG-72, has made an appearance here and there, eliminating targets for unfathomable reasons—but the other four have given no hint of their presence. It would be simplest if we assumed they were destroyed ... say, caught in a stray supernova or something. I wouldn’t expect assassin droids to lay low and slink around unseen.”

Imperial Supervisor Gurdun looked at the clutter on his desk, cleared a spot for his elbow and rested his chin in his hands. “Ah, but these machines are devilishly smart, Relsted. They were designed to my specifications—and you know how relentless I can be at times. I would not underestimate them.”

“Certainly not, sir,” Relsted said. “We have spies deployed in every nook and cranny—up to the best of our abilities. Our resources are limited, you know. There’s a rebellion going on.”

“Oh, I forgot about the war,” Gurdun said. “What a bother.” He fingered his enormous nose that blocked his view of the files on his desk. Gurdun knocked aside the stacked messages.

cubes, the electronic forms waiting to be filled out, the requisition orders, transfer requests and letters of condolence to be written to the families of those lost in unfortunate accidents during training with old, malfunctioning equipment.

Minor Relsted shuffled his feet as he hovered by the door.

“Is there anything else?” Gurdun snapped.

“A question, sir. Might I ask why it is so incredibly important to find these four droids? They’re just machines, after all, and the amount of resources we are putting behind this ‘dismantle on sight’ order seems out of all proportion to their intrinsic value. Why are these droids so desirable?”

Gurdun snorted and looked at the flickering glowpanel again. “Because, Minor Relsted, *you* know what they can do.”

On Mechis III the administrative droid Threedee-Fourex scuttled about, searching for the first IG-88 counterpart he could find. He needed to report his distressing news. He came upon IG-88C in one of the shipping areas, supervising the loading of a thousand program-modified transport droids to be shipped off to Coruscant.

“IG-88,” Fourex reported, gaining the assassin droid’s attention. In a rapid burst of binary he sent a summary file to the IG’s computer core.

Through their own intelligence channels the IG-88s were aware of the bumbling Imperial spies searching for them in all corners of the galaxy. So far, the spies had been without a clue, but earlier this morning a surreptitious inquiry had been directed toward Mechis III.

The probe scow was a barely functional conglomeration of obsolete parts and scavenged engines. Due to budget limitations, the Imperials’ spies were often the cheapest, such as the Ranat—not the most intelligent of creatures. As she approached Mechis III in her sputtering ship, the Ranat beamed a recorded set of questions down to the last known supervisor on the planet, Hekis Durumm Perdo Kolokk Baldikarr Thun.

Threedee-Fourex, with the superior foresight allotted him by his new sentient programming, had played appropriate snatches of doctored video images showing Administrator Hekis brusquely answering all questions. No, they had not seen any assassin droids. No, they had no knowledge of any IG-88 series machines. No, they had heard nothing of rampaging renegades in this portion of the system—and, by the way, they were too busy on Mechis III to continue answering stupid questions. Unsuspecting, the Ranat had continued on her way to the next system, where she would no doubt play the same set of prerecorded questions.

IG-88C assimilated this report and commended Threedee-Fourex’s ingenuity in this unexpected situation, but the encounter raised serious questions. The trail had accidentally led an Imperial investigator here. What if the next one were a more suspicious or more tenacious intelligence operative?

IG-88C initiated a spontaneous uplink with his three counterparts, and they engaged in a lightspeed interlinked conference. “We cannot allow ourselves to be detected. Our plans are at too crucial a stage right now.”

“Perhaps this was only a fluke. Perhaps we need not worry. The Imperials will listen to this report from the spy and not investigate further.”

“On the contrary, once they’ve started nosing around in this sector, they may tighten the

scrutiny.”

“How can we deal with this situation?”

“Perhaps a diversionary tactic is called for.”

“How can we apply this diversionary tactic?”

“We will make ourselves visible. One of us will go out and leave a plain trail, far from Mechis III. We will give them a different scent to follow. They will never come here again.”

“And the nature of this diversionary tactic?” one asked, but all the IG-88s began to have the same idea at once.

“We shall follow our true programming.”

“We are assassin droids.”

“We shall seek out work as a bounty hunter. This is what we were made for—and it can also further our grander purposes.”

“We will find this most enjoyable, and no doubt our employers will be immensely pleased with our service and will recommend us highly, should we choose to continue this line of occupation.”

All four IG-88s mulled over this change in plans and agreed.

“Bounty hunters it is.”

V

IG-88B was chosen for the first mission. He was pleased and elated, and his duplicates would share his experience files when he came back. It would be as if all four of them had gone out on the hunt themselves.

The industrial facilities of Mechis III took two days to design and produce a sleek bounty hunter’s craft for IG-88B. Seeing through various portions of the spectrum, he admired the *IG-2000*’s perfect lines: powerful engines, thick armor, and every appropriate weapons system. IG-88B cruised away through the atmosphere, leaving the other three assassin droids to continue their plans for overthrowing the galaxy.

Though IG-88 carried the ominous-sounding “dismantle on sight” Imperial order next to his name, he doubted anyone would attempt to follow it. He focused on places unlikely to be overly respectful to Imperial laws—or any other kind of laws, for that matter. He knew his capabilities were obvious, and he clomped his several-metric-ton body frame into cantinas and announced, “I am a bounty hunter. I wish to find work for a reasonable fee. I am incapable of failing in my mission.”

Most people were afraid to talk to him—but IG-88 chose his planetary systems well. He wanted to work where he could advance his secondary agenda, and he needed only to wait. By announcing his identity, he served the primary purpose of leaving a false trail for Imperial spies.

His skill and strength were obvious, his morals nonexistent. IG-88 was an assassin for hire, plain and simple, and he knew he would find an assignment.

His first choice was the backwater planet Peridon’s Folly, a little-known world that received few visitors from out of the sector. The Empire would wonder why IG-88 had chosen such a minor, irrelevant place, but he had another target to meet there if he found no legitimate work.

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