



## **BY ALEXANDER FREED** WITH ART BY JOE CORRONEY AND BRIAN MILLER

evel 2142 was a bust. Anandra realized it as soon as she stepped up to the counter of "Hangra's Meat Shack," pressed her palms onto the greasy metal to quell the shaking in her arms, and asked the old man tending the grill about the "Centax 3 delivery." He looked at her with confused condescension, like she was lost and out of her depth—which, Anandra supposed, she probably was—and it made her want to drag him over the counter and swear in his face until he somehow made things right. She didn't yell. She couldn't afford to make a scene. She forced herself to stay calm, to look pathetic and confused and earn the man's sympathy. By the time she returned to her brother—still in the alley where they'd slept the night before—she had her next lead.

Anandra didn't answer. It wouldn't comfort him, and she didn't want to argue. Yes, one hundred forty-five levels was a long way on foot; yes, they were both tired; and yes, they had to do it.

They ate in silence until Santigo spat out a chip of bone and said, "I wish we had starblossom."

He'd spoken almost to himself, but Anandra pressed her thumb into Santigo's shoulder and wrenched him to face her.

Her next hope of escaping the stormtroopers.

The alley was formed by metal rain grates and Anandra settled beside Santigo against the wall, watching shadows cross his face as speeders flitted high above. She passed him

the greasy packets of meat and cheese the old man had given her and waited for the questions to start. "So are we leaving?" Santigo asked. Anandra balled her hands into fists and didn't look at him.

AS DAYS PASSED AND OFFICIAL STATEMENTS AND PIRATE NEWSFEEDS CONVERGED ON A COMMON TRUTH, ANGUISHED WAILS BECAME CRIES

"Well, we don't," she said. "We can't have fruit whenever we want and there isn't any more starblossom. There isn't ever going to be more."

Santigo was trembling. Anandra felt a rush of guilt and pulled away as she snapped, "It's gone. Just like Alderaan. Get used to it."

The riots hadn't started as riots. They'd begun as vigils, a way for the people of Level 3204 to grieve for the missing and dead in the wake of the Disaster. Hundreds of locals packed together in the streets, bringing holographic snapshots,

> handwritten letters, and children's toys to makeshift monuments in parks and community centers. As days passed, however, and official statements and pirate newsfeeds converged on a common truth, anguished wails became cries for justice

"We missed our chance."

"We shouldn't have rested," Santigo said.

At eight years old, he was barely half Anandra's age, but his bitter determination reminded her of her father.

"The transport left two days ago," she snarled. "Four hours didn't make a difference."

She took a long breath and reached for one of the wrapped packages as Santigo began to eat. She felt hollow and nauseated at the thought of food. "Besides," she said, "we don't have to leave Coruscant. The guy said he knew someone on 1997 who might give us shelter." "What level are we on now?" Santigo asked.

FOR JUSTICE AND REVOLUTION.

and revolution.

The planet Alderaan was gone, destroyed by the Empire for crimes

no one understood. The Alderaanian people-first- and second-generation immigrants who had shops and restaurants and houses on 3204, who celebrated Coronation Day and imported their favorite fruits from a planet they rarely visited—were alive and frightened and angry. The rest of Coruscant nervously stayed inside and watched the news because Alderaan wasn't, after all, their planet. Anandra couldn't blame them. She'd never thought Alderaan was her planet, either, until the underworld police and the Imperial stormtroopers came.

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When the troops marched into the street and shot her uncle's neighbor Reffe, cutting short his tirade against Imperial corruption, Anandra's mother promised it was over, that no one was going to fight and that the stormtroopers wouldn't make trouble.

"You and Santigo will be safe," she said with a faded smile over breakfast, as she absently bent a spoon in her hands.

She'd already promised that Anandra's father would be fine. That he'd be home on Coruscant as soon as his trade mission was over. Even Santigo hadn't believed that.

The day after the stormtroopers shot Reffe, security forces began arresting anyone in the streets. Anandra's mother sat on the orange couch in their apartment and cried while Anandra kept Santigo away from the windows. By that time, there was no HoloNet service either—no way to spread news apart from neighbor to neighbor.

The day after that, stormtroopers began going door to door. Rebel spies, they said, had been recruiting locals, and anyone born on Alderaan needed to be taken in for questioning. Rumor was that second-generation immigrants were being given "the benefit of the doubt" and relocated to temporary housing for their own safety.

"You, I can take," the Pau'an said. The leathery gray skin around his mouth tightened as he grimaced. "You and the boy? This is more difficult."

Level 1997 smelled like soot and human waste. Sparks from industrial compactors drifted lazily to the streets, and lurid signs in pastel pink and blue invited passers-by to sample local "entertainments." Anandra had been to 1997 once before, on a dare with a schoolmate; they'd taken a lift down, snapped their image with a holocam, then returned skyward. Her parents hadn't found out.

Now she was back, staring down a man with a face like a corpse in a cramped corner of a painfully bright cantina. Santigo stood behind her chair, a hand on her shoulder. "I'm not leaving my brother

THE PAU'AN TIPPED HIS OWN CHAIR BACK AND GRINNED AT HIS MONSTROUS PARTNER.

The young woman who lived next door—the droid mechanic with a chipped front tooth and blond hair who'd babysat Anandra years before—had repeated that particular rumor with a cynical grin.

"That's how I got my first airspeeder," the woman said. "When they relocated the Mon Calamari after the Old Market Sector riots. Dad found this B-14 some poor family left behind." "I don't remember it," Anandra said. "I was really young." She shifted her weight from one leg to the other, awkwardly wiped her palms on her hips. "You think they should've run?" she asked. "The Mon Cals, I mean."

> "Sometimes you can't know," the woman said. "You just have to wait and hope things get better." Then she hugged Anandra and slipped back inside her apartment, locking the door behind her.

behind," Anandra said.

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"I sympathize." The Pau'an

tipped his own chair back and grinned at his monstrous partner—a hulking black-skinned alien with a mouth wider than Anandra's shoulders and oily quagmires for eyes. Anandra didn't recognize the species.

"Family is family. But I need people to run goods, make deliveries. You can do that, and I can protect you."

Anandra suspected she knew what sort of "deliveries" needed to be made on Level 1997. She could adjust, though. She might have to.

The Pau'an kept talking. "Yet the boy is so little, and can give me nothing. You see my dilemma?"

"I could work for you longer," Anandra said.

The Pau'an sighed and glanced at his companion again.

"I am not sure this is enough. You are both a risk, running from the underworld police..." He paused. "What is your crime again?"

Anandra winced as she heard Santigo's soft, defiant voice. "We aren't criminals."

The rest of that afternoon, Anandra and Santigo stayed close together. Anandra's mother shut herself in the bedroom, but Anandra couldn't hear crying anymore.

Level 1996 was a maze of pipes and catwalks between the compactors above and a humming abyss below. The plating and sluices that canopied the level breathed heat onto Anandra and Santigo as they hurried away from the lift.

The stormtrooper had seen them. He wouldn't be far behind. Anandra knew she'd made a bad choice. She could've lived with herself, carrying packets of death sticks or spice to the Upau'an's clientele. Santigo was smart and resilient and he could've learned to live with it. But she'd bitten her lip when the Utpau'an had made his final offer, and instead of taking shelter with the gangs of Coruscant she'd pulled Santigo toward the cantina's back exit. Now they were paying for her squeamishness. The catwalks turned and branched, but there were no walls aside from the curtains of pipework—nothing to hide them from a stormtrooper with heat displays and sensors and who knew what else. Her brilliant plan of "run to the next level and find shelter in the deepest, darkest hole around" was turning out to have flaws.

"Then you have nothing to fear, eh?" the Pau'an said, the stains on his jagged teeth etched by the intense light. He pointed a finger toward the entrance.

Two newcomers had entered the cantina, both in full body armor. They might have been droids, Anandra thought, if it weren't for their swagger. One wore the blue-gray of the underworld police, amber lights gleaming from the sockets of his helmet. The other wore the white of an Imperial stormtrooper, stark and blinding in the cantina's illumination.

Anandra stopped on a long, narrow span between maintenance platforms. There was nothing on either side, nothing below except the weird lights and humming sounds of Level 1995.

"You need to run, okay?" Anandra said, turning Santigo to face her.

"What about you?" Santigo asked. "Don't talk back," Anandra snapped. She didn't expect her brother to obey, but he did. She looked away and breathed in relief as she heard his footsteps ring on metal into the distance.

Then she put a hand on each guardrail and waited.

When the stormtrooper came out of the lift, his white armor shone like a spotlight. He came without the underworld police officer; that was good. His blaster was still holstered; that was better.



He spotted Anandra in seconds. She stayed put as he wove among the catwalks and arrived on the nearest platform.

"Walk slowly in my direction, please. Hands on your head," the stormtrooper said. She couldn't read his tone under the electronic hiss of the helmet.

"I didn't do anything," Anandra called. "Facial ID confirms you're Anandra Milon, age sixteen, 3204 resident scheduled for relocation. Pre-convicted of juvenile noncompliance. You'll receive a fair hearing taking into account age and psychological state."

"You going to stand there, or are you going to arrest me?" Anandra asked. To her surprise, she felt calm. Almost giddy. The stormtrooper glanced behind him,

then back to Anandra. "Come on, kid. You got a raw deal, but it's not the end of the world."

"It kind of was," Anandra laughed, and lowered her knees to the catwalk. The stormtrooper put a hand on his blaster and began to cautiously approach.

"I have to put you in stuncuffs," the stormtrooper said.

As he reached for his belt, Anandra sprang for the blaster in his holster.

She didn't try to retrieve the weapon. The trooper would have caught her, broken her wrists and pried the blaster back. She only needed to pull it out of its holster, maintain momentum and release. It went sailing, skidding across the catwalk and quivering at the metal's edge. For that moment, Anandra had the advantage. Then the stormtrooper kneed her in the chest. She fell back, barely tried to break her fall. He can't shoot me, she thought. If he killed her now, at least she'd cost him his dignity. Two solid kicks to her midsection, and her whole body seemed to fold. When he hesitated, she was up again, jumping forward, wrapping her arms around his neck and jabbing her thumbs under the rim of his helmet. His fingers dug into her sides as she tried to crack the helmet's seal. She slammed her head against the

black eyeplate, saw red, hoped she'd bought herself a few moments.

Somehow, when her vision came back, she was on the ground and looking up at the stormtrooper's unhelmeted face—the face of a scarred, middle-aged man who vaguely reminded her of her uncle. Then the stormtrooper screamed as he rose into the air and plummeted over the railing.

Behind him stood the Pau'an's monstrous partner, nearly too big to fit on the catwalk, flicking stubby fingers as if the stormtrooper had left a residue.

"Level 1782," the creature said, its voice higher-pitched and breathier than Anandra had expected. "You may find shelter there." It stared for another moment before adding, "I had no part in this." of his teardrop head. Anandra knew his species—Mon Calamari—though she hadn't seen his kind for years. He carried a steel hydrospanner, long and heavy, in one webbed hand. He was probably salvaging junk, Anandra thought, but she remembered the stormtrooper's boot in her chest and she wondered how fast and hard the Mon Calamari could swing.

Anandra pointed her blaster in his direction. "Don't come closer."

The Mon Calamari stopped. Santigo squeezed her wrist and said something, but Anandra wasn't listening. The blaster seemed to twitch in her fingers.

"We won't hurt you." Anandra said. "Just give us some food and credits and we'll head to the next level."

Anandra realized she had the stormtrooper's helmet in her hands. The white surface was stained with her blood. "Why are you doing this?" she asked.

Enormous muscles rolled under skin as the creature seemed to shrug. "You are of Alderaan, yes?" it asked.

"Yes," Anandra said.

"I know what your people suffer," the creature said, and turned away.

When the stormtroopers came to the door of Anandra's apartment, Anandra and Santigo were huddled in the empty fluid bucket of a cleaning droid floating outside their bedroom window. The droid normally washed the building once a week. It had already come two days before, and Anandra guessed she had her neighbor to thank for its change in schedule. Anandra heard her mother open the door. She heard the static of a stormtrooper's voice. Then she felt the cleaning unit carry them away, and she put an arm around Santigo and tried to focus on her mother's instructions. The Mon Calamari bobbed his head but otherwise didn't move. "You said someone would be here to help us," Santigo whispered. Anandra ignored her brother. She was in control for once, and she didn't need another disappointment.

"Can you understand me?" Anandra asked, harsher. Her palms were sweating, and she tried to grip the blaster tighter without pulling the trigger.

The Mon Calamari spoke in a guttural voice in a foreign tongue. When Anandra gestured with her blaster, he tried again: "Yes," he said, spitting and fumbling with the word. "Don't hurt him," Santigo urged.

The Mon Calamari raised his free hand—the one with the hydrospanner stayed at his side—and pointed at Santigo. "Alderaanian?" he asked.

Out of the corner of her eye, Anandra saw Santigo nod. "Follow," the Mon Calamari said, and began to creep backward.

Anandra looked from the barrel of her blaster to the face of the Mon Calamari. She thought of all the ways this encounter could go wrong: he could be a slaver working with the Pau'an, or planning to sell her to the stormtroopers, or he could beat her and her brother to death for no reason at all.

They were to go to Level 3108 and find an old friend of the family. Their mother would meet them, and they'd all leave Coruscant together.

Level 3108, of course, had been the first of many disappointments. The "family friend" had offered nothing but excuses and apologies, and finally a promise that a smuggler on 2142 would get them offworld. Santigo hadn't wanted to leave without their mother; Anandra and a close call with the underworld police convinced him otherwise.

They'd been running ever since.





metal and overlooked by swaying towers of debris. It was built of crashed airspeeders, decommissioned hovertrains, and broken billboards cast down from their homes in the sky; when a vehicle fell from the upper levels, 1782 was its final destination.

Anandra and Santigo walked together, Santigo clutching Anandra's right wrist. In her left hand she held the dead stormtrooper's blaster. She hadn't put it down since she'd retrieved it from the catwalk.

They'd been exploring the junkyard for nearly an hour, alone except the oversized rats, when a humanoid figure slunk out from behind a rusting tram car. He wore a workman's vest two sizes too large, and his bulging eyes were set at opposite sides

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Santigo was watching her. Slowly, she let her breath out and lowered her blaster.

They followed a twisting path through the wrecks and descended a hill of upholstered train seats and window frames toward a great steel cavern. As they came closer, Anandra realized the cavern was the hull of a starship; it must have crashed planetside during some long-forgotten conflict and since been gutted. What remained was an open space glowing with blue and yellow light.

The hull was filled with makeshift camps, tiny stalls, tents strung with lanterns and batteries, portable stovetops sizzling with grease, buckets full of rainwater, and hundreds of life forms from a dozen species. Mon Calamari roasted mynocks on spits while tattooed near-human children tossed a ball nearby. Anandra spotted a hulking creature she thought, for an instant, was the Pau'an's partner—but its coloring was off. Santigo squeezed her arm again, and Anandra cried like her mother had cried during the riots; she cried without dignity or reason, cried until her nose streamed and strangers guided her into the warmth and safety of the hull. Santigo clung to her, and when she could speak and reason and act again, she helped her hosts prepare a meal, found a place for her brother to rest and eat.

She knew she would have questions tomorrow. She would need to learn how these people lived, what they hoped for. She would need to share news from the upper levels. She would need to decide whether to give up her blaster or use it against the Empire.

But that night, she could put those concerns aside. That night, she'd found home and family in the depths of Coruscant.

"Stop," Anandra said, sharper than she expected. She tugged at Santigo, drawing him close. "What is all this?"

"Home," the Mon Calamari said. "Stay. You are expected." Anandra shook her head in confusion.

Men and women began to emerge from the hull, observing with cautious interest. The Mon Calamari didn't look away from Anandra.

"Mon Calamari," he said, tapping his chest. "Empire takes." Then he gestured behind him.

"Herglic, Empire takes." Another of the hulking creatures was trundling into view.

As the crowd grew, the Mon Calamari pointed to the strangers one by one, naming species and planets Anandra barely knew—names she'd only heard mentioned in muted asides. Then finally, he pointed to her.

"Alderaanian," he said. "Empire takes. But here, we all share."

## -MORE TO SAY-

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And whether because of the Mon Calamari's words, or the sad, strained gazes of the people behind him, or the sheer extent of her exhaustion, Anandra dropped her gun and began to weep.





ANANDRA LOOKED FROM THE Barrel of her blaster to the Face of the mon calamari.