



CHAPTER 1

Lando Calrissian looked at his cards one last time and sat back in his chair. He stroked his mustache, smoothing it so each and every hair lay perfectly flat. Lando liked to look good when he won. He was, after all, building a legend.

Anyway, there was no point trying to hide his pleasure; the hand was almost over and the bets had been laid. Earlier in the evening Lando had wondered about his luck as he lost hand after hand, but it seemed like it had changed for the better. The Quarren female across the way kept looking at her dwindling pile of creds and then back at the cards in her hand in a way that could only be described as worried. The Lynna sitting to the left of Lando had started to groom herself, running her paws nervously over the wide tufted ears on top of her head. Her gray-and-black-striped fur was already immaculate, and the last time she'd begun to groom herself, she'd had the worst hand of the evening.

Lando was about to win, and he hadn't even had to cheat.

Well, not much, at least.

Someone entered, and a chill passed through the cantina, the frigid air making Lando wrap his cape a little closer to his body. Hynestia wasn't much of a planet, cold and wintry, a frozen tundra of a place with only a small zone of habitable land toward the equator. But Hynestia was known throughout the galaxy for its gherlian fur, a thick pelt that came not from an animal but a curious sort of lichen that Hynestians cultivated in domes built across the frozen landscape. It was a commodity tightly regulated by the Empire since it had claimed the planet for its own, which made the fur even more desirable. The more something was kept from people, the more they wanted it. And the more that people wanted a thing, the more they were willing to pay for it.

Lando was always willing to help. For a fee, of course.

It was the gherlian fur that had brought Lando to Hynestia. He had a lead on a particularly valuable relic that a collector was willing to part with for the right price. That price happened to be a crate full of gherlian pelts. And since there was only one place in the galaxy to get gherlian, Lando and his best droid, L3-37, had gone to Hynestia.

But no trip was complete without a few hands of Sabacc, especially when the *Millennium Falcon* was low

on fuel and Lando was light on creds. And although Hynestia's lone cantina, the Frozen Kova, wasn't much—just a handful of tables and a single bar tended by a surly Mon Calamari—there were several games of chance going, and what more could a young entrepreneur want?

The Quarren stared at the pile of creds in the middle of the table and then at her cards again, her facial tentacles waving about in irritation. She let out a deep breath and threw her cards facedown on the table.

"Fold," she said, standing to leave. She towered over the Sabacc table, her blue-green skin glistening in the low light of the cantina. "And I think you've taken enough of my creds for one night, Calrissian."

"Well, I am sorry to see you go," Lando said with a respectful nod. She was an excellent player, and Lando always enjoyed playing against someone with skill. "But if you ever find yourself in this part of the galaxy again, Bweena, please stop by and say hello."

The Quarren made a blooping noise that was either agreement or a rude sort of retort. Either way, Lando just kept grinning. He was about to be a very rich man.

"And you, my dear," he said, turning toward the Lynna running a paw over her ears.

"Zel. Zel Gris. That's my name. Not 'my dear.'" The Lynna had a soft, husky voice that was at odds with her large size. "And I'm not out of it just yet."

Zel tossed a few more creds into the pile on the



table and exchanged a couple of her cards. It was her last exchange, and any worry that might have plagued Lando evaporated when her whiskers twitched once and then again.

She still held a terrible hand.

“Well, I suppose that’s that,” Lando said. He spread his cards across the table. “Pure Sabacc.”

The Lynna heaved a sigh and stood to leave, her trio of tails swishing in irritation. Her gray stripes had shaded to a deep burgundy. Her wide shoulders slumped, and she towered over the table. “Bad luck, bad luck,” she muttered as Lando cleared the creds off the table.

“Bad luck? No such thing,” Lando said, laughing, even though he completely and utterly believed in luck—good, bad, and otherwise. But the Lynna was agitated, and Lando did not like it when people left his Sabacc table irate. Anger had a way of turning blasty, and Lando would rather smooth ruffled feathers—or fur, in this case—than deal with any unpleasantness later.

Zel gave Lando a look from the side of her eye that was somehow both insulting and dismissive, and turned to go. But something at the entrance of the cantina made her freeze.

“Oh, no. Bad luck. Worst luck,” she muttered, the burgundy of her fur shading to a mustard yellow. She turned toward the back of the cantina, where a few folks

snored, their cups of purple glandis flower juice mostly empty.

Lando watched her go and then turned back to the front of the cantina to see what had caused her sudden flight. It didn't take much to guess what had provoked her distress. A shadowy figure stood in the entry, the low light barely catching the gray and blue of the blaster he held. And even though Lando was quite smart, it didn't take a genius to spot a bounty hunter.

The man scanned the room. He wore a helmet, and the reflective visor hid his face, making him seem even more sinister. Lando didn't bother waiting to see if the bounty hunter was looking for him. He hurriedly pocketed the few remaining creds still on the table.

"Bad luck, indeed," Lando murmured. He stood and walked nonchalantly to the bar, his eyes on the bounty hunter the entire time. Sure, the hunter could be there for anyone, but only Lando had just smuggled in thirty barrels of purple glandis flower juice, a delicious drink that was quite illegal on Hynestia.

Lando was not a man to overstay his welcome, and between the skittish Lynna and the bounty hunter stalking through the cantina, it was a brilliant time to plan a departure. Besides, he had more than enough creds to fuel up the *Falcon* and several crates of gherlian furs secreted in his ship. The last thing he needed was trouble.

Lando grabbed his overcoat from a nearby hook and settled it into place nonchalantly before casually making his way to the door. He waved jauntily at the bartender as though they were old friends, and predictably the Mon Calamari burbled dismissively.

Lando schooled his expression to one of good cheer and walked toward the door. He was almost out of the cantina when his luck went completely south.

“Halt, ZelGris!” the bounty hunter yelled. “I am here to apprehend you, and resistance is not recommended.”

Lando turned to see the Lynna sprint across the room toward what must have once been a rear entrance but was now a blocked door.

The bounty hunter leapt across the cantina, vaulting tables and pushing patrons to the side. People shouted in dismay. A few patrons hurriedly grabbed their things and left, letting in swirls of snow in their hasty departure. Lando tried to join the fleeing fray, but someone grabbed a handful of his overcoat and yanked him backward.

“Not you, friend. Why don't you have a seat.” A tall human woman with bright red hair and skin as pale as the Hynestia landscape pointed a blaster at him. She was dressed all in green in the traditional garb of the Hynestians: a thick gherlian overtunic belted around the waist and shiny leggings made of kova leather, which came from the skin of an underground reptile the Hynestians hunted for food.

Lando held up his hands and sank into the chair she indicated. "What would this happen to be about?" he asked with a cheerful grin.

"This would be about the purple glandis flower juice you smuggled onto Hynestia. The royal family doesn't like it when offworlders flaunt their laws."

"Oh, I'm afraid you have me confused with someone else . . ." Lando began, but drifted off when the woman shoved the blaster in his face.

"Sit there and be quiet," she said, and Lando pressed his lips shut.

Across the cantina, the bounty hunter had caught the Lynna and now held her captive. Zel's arms were locked to her body in restraining hoops, and her fur shaded to a sickly pale green. Lando felt ill just looking at her. The bounty hunter pulled out a chair and sat her next to Lando. The poor Lynna let out a single yowl of despair, and Lando sighed. He knew how she felt.

Everything had been going so well.

