



Casino Galactic

General Zentru'la

On The General's Secret Service

A comfortable sofa to relax in, a cocktail of the finest spirits in one hand, the other round the waist of a pretty, purple twi'lek, with long, slender legs she had kicked up on his lap. He had forgotten her name. It was too late in the night to ask. But it didn't matter, the moment was more important. There was no place he'd rather be than *The Playground*, the unique homely feel to its mismatched chairs and tables and the mismatch of people from all walks of life, gathered to escape the toils of daily life.

A sharp buzz from Orson's communicator shattered the moment. The General always picked the worst possible time. "Can't it wait?" the girl asked. The comm buzzed once more. It couldn't wait. It could never wait when The General was involved. He could feel her gaze on the back of his head, her pout in his mind as he answered the call, walking out of earshot.

"General?"

"Vornskr Seven." The percussive blasts of the General's voice were the last thing Orson needed. "Good, you're still awake."

"The night is just beginning, General. And you took me out of it."

"We have a mission for you. Halford Varik was chief engineer on the Collective Hive Mind Marine project. The same one Masakado was onc-."

"Yes yes, I know," Orson snapped. "It left him with a brain disease and that's why he hates everything. What's the point?"

"He's also a top Sabacc player. And he's hosting an exclusive tournament at the Casino Galactic on Dandoran."

“Sorry, I missed the invite.” Orson glanced back at the girl he’d much rather be next to. As much as Orson loved a good card game, he loved the company of a pretty woman even more.

He heard the General growl under his breath. “We’ve got that covered, Orson. Our girl on the inside, Mira, has edited the invite list. You’re on the top table. With Varik. Total prize pool is six million credits. Mira will be there to support you.”

There was something that didn’t add up. Sending a secret agent on a gambling mission was out of character for the General who always favoured reliable business partners and stable income streams. And why Orson? He wasn’t bad at the Sabacc table. He usually won. But that was at bars around Kasiya’s Westwind district, not against high-profile players. “What’s the real objective, General?”

“We need his research. Your mission is to infiltrate the Gala, and win the keys to his cybernetics lab, by whatever means necessary.”

“I doubt he’ll just put the keys on the table.”

“Neither will he want to lose the game in front of his wealthy friends. Mira tells us he carries the keys with him wherever he goes. Back him into a corner and he’ll have no choice but to put them on the line to save his own reputation.” Orson tried his best to keep paying attention, but his thoughts drifted back to the woman on the sofa. “Of course, it may be a trap. The high prize pool on offer... access to a top Collective engineer... we have little doubt this is a ruse to lure the enemies of the Collective into one place.”

“You better be paying top credit for this, General.”

“Succeed and the mission pays for itself. We’ll cover your buy-in. You keep the winnings.”

“Fine. I’m all in.”

“A luxury civilian shuttle will pick you up tomorrow morning. Rendezvous with Mira as soon as you enter the casino. Be careful, Orson. If things go wrong, there will be no extraction. And no weapons. The Collective cannot know we have someone on the inside. It’d blow Mira’s cover.”

The General cut the call. Orson returned to the girl he had left on the sofa, whose expression had turned foul. "Work," he said tersely, taking the place beside her he wished he never left. But his mind wasn't really on her anymore. More important developments had happened. There were rumours that Mira was cute.

Casino Galactic

The Casino Galactic glittered in the night sky as the civilian shuttle crawled towards it. Orson checked himself in the mirror and adjusted his suit and waistcoat. He was used to dressing this formally, rubbing shoulder to shoulder with the enemy was what the Vornskr Agent was known for. He climbed out of the shuttle and took a deep breath of crisp night air. All the luxury confines in the Galaxy didn't compare to the thrill of being on the back of a fast swoop bike. But he wouldn't be outside for long, as he had been dropped right outside the door of the casino.

The giant of a man blocking the door had so many cybernetic body parts Orson couldn't even figure out what species he was. "State your name," he said with a voice that could have belonged to a battle droid.

"The name's Trent. Orson Trent."

The cyborg looked down and tapped at a datapad, then stood to one side. "Welcome, Mr. Trent." The door opened to the sound of indistinct chatter, bright lights and the aroma of fine spirits. The moment Orson passed through the threshold, the guard stood back in front of the door and it closed behind him.

Usually, Orson was the finest-dressed person in the room. But not here. He had brought his finest but still felt underdressed. The Casino Galactic was a spectacle of finery and opulence. The furniture glittered with gold trim, and huge exotic chandeliers with intricate designs hung from the high ceilings with glittering multicoloured lights. The edges of the hall were filled with alien flora and lifesize sculptures of figures from history long past.

“Orson Trent?” Said a soft, feminine voice. Orson turned to see a human woman with deep brown eyes to match her long, flowing hair. Orson’s eyes passed down a tiny black dress that did little to cover much of her tanned skin. That must be Mira. “I’ve been expecting you, Orson. Let’s grab a drink.”

Orson didn’t need asking twice and very soon found himself at the bar with Mira. He leaned on the counter. “Three measures of Sullustan’s, one of vodka, half a measure of a Corellian White. Shake it over ice, and add a thin slice of Felucian lemon peel. And for you, Mira?”

“That’s a hell of a drink.” She paused for a second. “I’ll have the same.” She took a sip of the drink, her eyes narrowed as the bitter hit of the lemon peel hit first, then a smile broadened as the sweet aftertaste took effect. “Hey, that’s actually pretty good! You’ve got taste, Orson.”

“You’ll find I’m full of surprises.”

“And there’ll be time for more later.” Mira took a sip of the cocktail. “But we don’t have long before the game starts, and I haven’t played Sabacc for years. I know there are four suits, sixty cards, and some special ones... and you make 23?”

That was not what Orson wanted to hear. Not having time to chat to get to know her better was bad enough, but they were meant to be working together in this game to take down Varik and she didn’t seem to know anything about the game. But this wasn’t the time to be condescending. They needed to be on the same page. “Yeah, that’s the basics of it. You start by drawing two cards. Each round, you can choose to draw a card or stand. You have to get either 23.”

“And if you go over?”

“Then you bomb out, and you lose the round. If the dealer triggers a Sabacc Shift, all your cards are randomised, so your perfect hand could turn to nothing, or you could suddenly bomb out.”

“So you might think you’ve got a big one, and you just end up a big laughing stock.”

Orson laughed, and in better times he’d have fired back with something witty

of his own, but he conceded this round to her and continued. “You can place one card into an interference field. That way, it’s immune from the shift.”

“And there are gambling chips? We never had those at school. How do those work? How do we beat Varik?”

“After your first two cards, you put a set amount of chips on the table. You can choose to raise the bet or fold. Each round, you get another chance to raise the bet.”

“Enjoying the evening, Mr. Trent?” A cold, high voice sounded from behind them. Orson turned to see a middle-aged man whose hair had just begun to turn grey, in a long white silk jacket with an upturned collar. His expression gave a sense of purpose and focus, that kind of ruthless, competitive drive the rich had to walk over anyone in their way. “I see you’ve met my associate, Mira.” Mira inclined her head towards Varik. “Have fun with her, but rest assured. . .” his eyes flashed dangerously. “I will want her back.” Varik turned on his heel and marched back towards the crowd.

Varik’s departure left an icy silence in the air. Varik and Mira certainly seemed close. Possibly a little too close. Mira had allegedly worked wonders to get Orson in here, but what if it wasn’t so difficult? What if there was more to her than met the eye? Her voice snapped him back into the Casino.

“So what do you want me to do?”

“Just stay in the game. And if it’s just us left in the round, I’ll bid high. Then you fold, and I’ll take the chips.”

“The first hand is about to begin!” said an amplified voice over the casino. “All players report to the Sabacc table.”

You Only Fold Twice

Not everyone was there to play Sabacc. Some were there to socialise, and some were gambling on the Sabacc. A kind of meta-gamble. But the objective was obvious, this was a show of vanity as much as it was a potential trap, the real reason everyone was invited was to bask in the glory of Varik's victory.

Orson took his place at the high table. Varik sat opposite him, and Mira was next to Varik, close to him, uncomfortably far from Orson. He didn't know the other three, and neither did he get any time to, because Varik had picked up on their tells immediately, eliminating them from the game in a brutal combination of being impossible to read, but calling all of their bluffs.

Mira had run the same strategy all game, betting minimal amounts, and folding early just to keep her position at the table. A new hand of cards was dealt. Orson checked over everyone's chip pile. Varik was in the lead, followed by him, and Mira wasn't far behind, her defensive strategy making it difficult for anyone to take chips off her.

Orson's hand was solid. 9 of Sabers and a Mistress of Coins, just one away from the perfect 23. It was a fantastic start. He didn't need to do anything to his hand, all uncertainty from drawing cards was taken away, but he placed the Mistress of Coins into the interference field. He needed to protect that card.

Varik drew a card and put 100k chips onto the table to start the betting. Mira matched the bet. Orson declared he was going to stand, happy with his cards, and raised Varik's bet to 300k, soliciting murmurs from around the casino. Varik and Mira called the bet leaving 900k on the table. Mira staying in here was part

of the plan, with just the three left in the game, she needed to pass chips towards Orson.

Varik drew another card and knocked twice on the table to indicate he was happy with the stake. Mira stood and called the bet.

This was his chance. Varik had drawn two additional cards, indicating his first cards were low. The probability he had gone bust with the new cards was high. Orson ran the numbers in his head, then shifted another 500k credits onto the table. Varik knew that he knew. The director folded immediately. It was just him and Mira left. A nice pile of Varik's chips on the table. Exactly the leverage Orson needed to force him into a corner. It was a big enough raise that if Mira folded, she would not bring suspicion onto herself. Everything was going to plan. She just had to concede the hand to Orson.

"I'll call." There were gasps around the table as Mira matched Orson's bet, shovelling chips onto the table with a wink to the crowd. What was she doing?

"The bet has been called!" announced the dealer. Orson glanced down to make sure the Mistress of Coins was in the interference field before... "Randomiser... activate!" Orson's 9 transformed into The Idiot, a card totalling zero, taking his total down to 13. He gritted his teeth. He could not show any sign of weakness. He had 200k more chips than Mira. Even if her hand was stronger, he'd still be in the game. But he saw Varik out of the corner of his eye, watching Orson like a hawk. The worst thing he could do was give up a tell that could be used against him. Mira just had to fold.

Orson knocked twice on the table.

"All in." Mira joyfully swept all of her chips onto the table.

Orson stared into her eyes. Hers were laser-focused on his. She was no stranger to the Sabacc table. She knew exactly what she was doing. And that was terrifying. Orson was led to believe she'd support him in this mission, that she was an insider there to help him. Well, she sure wasn't helping much. If he called her bet, he'd be left with 200k. Not much. Enough to stay in the game. But there was a sliver of hope, maybe, just maybe, Mira held a terrible hand, and was double

bluffing Varik, pretending to bluff while funnelling credits to Orson. It was the only thing that made sense. Orson called the bet

“Reveal your hands!”

“Thirteen.” Orson put his hand down on the table, taking one last, hopeful look at Mira, who grinned ear to ear.

“Pure Sabacc!” She rose to her feet as she swept her cards down onto the table, the Ace of Staves and an 8 of Flasks, totalling 23, before picking up a rake and dragging nearly 3 million chips on the table to her side - a small pile of Varik’s. . . and a large pile of Orson’s, putting her ahead of the others.

Varik clapped loudly. “Well played Mira, well played!”

“Thank you, sir,” Mira couldn’t seem to drop her smile.

“You seem to have lost nearly all your chips, Mr. Trent.”

“It’s time for the interval!” announced the dealer. “Ms. Sarden stands at 3.4 million chips. Dr. Varik stands at 2.4 million chips. Mr. Trent stands at 200 thousand chips. All players, return to the Sabacc table in one hour.”

“I need a drink.” Orson left the table without another word and stormed to the bar.

Quantum of Solace

“Another of the same, Mr. Trent?”

“Just a double of vodka this time.”

The bartender let out a chuckle. “Don’t blame ‘ya. Rough hand that was. Who’d have thought cute little Mira could play a round like that?”

“Certainly not me.” Orson grabbed the drink and walked outside to the courtyard. Just like the Casino, it was immaculately maintained, with rare trees from across the galaxy providing a spot of tranquillity away from the party atmosphere inside. He wasn’t the only one out here, others had come to smoke or to chat in solace with a partner.

“Figured I’d find ya here, Orson.” Mira sauntered into the courtyard and winked at Orson with that coy, disarming smile.

Orson took a deep breath. What was there to say? But he needed to keep his voice down. Any one of the people around could have been a spy working for Varik. “You nearly wiped me out, Mira.”

Mira still had that relaxed, cheerful expression that was impossible to be mad at for long. “You’re still in the game, Orson. That’s what matters.”

“I’m hanging by a thread! I’ve lost all the leverage I need to get that datachip. What were you thinking? You played me.”

“I played Varik,” said Mira softly. “He needs to believe I’m still on his side. That will be critical if you want to leave with that chip. You remember what Varik said. . . ‘I’ll want her back.’”

“Well, you’re definitely doing a good job of looking like you’re on his side.”

Deep down, Orson knew she was correct. Having Varik believe Mira could become more powerful than any Ace of Staves. But could he really trust her? If she was working with Varik all along . . . then she would be acting exactly like this. Or maybe she's working by herself and just wants to make off with six million credits.

She took a step closer towards him, her body almost touching his, and he caught a whiff of her perfume. "Don't be like that, Orson. This won't work unless we trust each other."

"After that stunt, we're some way off that."

"Then you're welcome to play this game by yourself. But you don't exactly hold a strong hand right now. So we can work together, or you can work alone."

"Are you going to stick to the plan this time?"

"I prefer to act on feelings and impulse. We can make another plan, but I'm not sticking to it if I can see a better way. Maybe, you could get that chip without my help. But if you want to leave with me too . . ." Mira ran a hand down Orson's arm. "You'll just have to trust me."

"All players, return to the Sabacc table."

The Man With the Idiot's Array

When Mira and Orson returned to the table, Varik was already there. He looked like he hadn't moved since the last hand ended. "You two took your time. I hope you're not conspiring against me."

Mira just let out a little chuckle. "How else are we supposed to overcome your mastery?" Flattery and charm was probably the best response she could have made.

The dealer dealt a new hand to each player, the table feeling quite empty with just the three of them. Slowly, Orson clawed back chips, betting the minimal amount, making small gains here and there until the chips were quite well matched.

The dealer slid two cards across the table to Orson, who grimaced at what he saw, then hoped Varik wouldn't notice. A 2 and a 3. Both terrible cards. But together... they could make the Idiot's array, a rare and unbeatable hand. He ran the numbers in his head. There was a chance to win this game in one fell swoop. Orson placed a 3 face up in the interference field. And asked for another card, being dealt a 9. Varik cocked his head curiously.

"Protecting a three, Orson? You're getting desperate. All in."

As the bets increased, Mira folded. Orson and Varik looked at each other in mutual understanding. Mira's folding early to stay at the table was part of both of their plans... but Sabacc was a zero-sum game.

"I call." Orson shoved chips onto the table to match Varik's bet.

"Sabacc shift!"

Varik let out a mirthless laugh as he placed his hand on the table, revealing a ten and a thirteen. "Pure Sabacc, Mr. Trent."

The laugh stopped when Orson revealed his own hand. A two, a three, and The Idiot. There was a cheer from the patrons who had bet on Orson. Even the dealer applauded but stopped when Varik gave him a sharp, dangerous glare. "Mr. Trent has assembled the Idiot's Array!"

Orson wrapped his hand around the large pile of chips and pulled them to his side.

"The Idiot's Array. A fitting way for you to win."

"Don't be so bitter, sir," said Mira. "I'm sure Orson will let you buy back in, for the right price, won't you Orson?"

"I wa-"

"I know what you want, Vornskr Seven. I know all about your little mission. Mira told me everything. How she leaked information about this event to your General. How I always carry this on me at all times," he flashed a datachip from his inside pocket, "And how the General needs it to keep his pet dog alive."

Varik's tone was threatening, almost boastful, like he took pride in knowing the plan. But Orson already knew that Mira had told him all this. "That changes nothing," said Orson, staring Varik directly in the eyes. "Are you going to buy back in? Or accept defeat in front of all these people?"

"Fine." Varik threw the datachip on the table. "Dealer. 500k chips and another hand."

Varik fought back like a wounded animal. Playing aggressively despite the puny pile of chips from his buy-in, he started consistently winning and building his resources, while Mira's slowly dwindled.

"You played well, Mira," said Varik. "But I'm afraid the game is up for you."

Mira looked disappointed but got up and walked the long way around the table, behind Varik. "I've found his tell, sir, just like you told me to. When he's bluffing, he shifts his cards around."

Varik quickly hushed her, and she slinked off towards the bar.

It was at that moment, that he understood Mira's plan. He looked at Varik. Then back to his new hand of cards. Then Varik again. Varik was intently watching

his cards. Orson shifted in his seat and rearranged his cards a few times.

"You're bluffing," declared Varik, shoving all his chips onto the table. "All in."

But Orson was not bluffing, and placed down the Pure Sabacc, demolishing the 20 that Varik had played anticipating a bluff. He had been defeated again, this time for good, and this time with the datachip and six billion credits on the table.

"You may have won the keys to my lab. But you'll never get out of here alive to use it!"

The Spy Who Loved Me

Chaos erupted as the Casino Galactic locked down, metal grates slammed shut on the windows and the cyborg guards drew their weapons. The guests screamed and clamoured for an escape.

"No!" Mira's shriek rang above the din. "I won't let you hurt him!"

"You would defy me?" Varik said coldly. "You have outlived your usefulness here. Mira. Guards, seize them both. DO NOT HARM THE OTHER GUESTS! DO NOT HARM THE OTHER GUESTS!"

The cyborg guard closest to Orson ran towards him, but before he could get into grappling range, Orson threw a long-range kick, knocking him backwards.

"This way Orson!"

Mira had drawn a blaster pistol from inside her dress, clearing a path towards the bar with a flurry of warning shots. She vaulted over the bar, shattering glass everywhere. The bartender wanted no part in the fight and jumped aside, letting her and Orson into a pantry area.

Orson frantically looked around for the exit. Three cyborg guards entered the pantry and opened fire. They both leapt to the side, and the blaster fire reflected off metallic pans, scattering into the walls and ceiling. Mira rolled into cover and returned fire with her pistol. Her shots landed but did little to deter the cyborgs.

Acting purely on instinct, Orson picked up a large frying pan and swung it at the guards as they fired at Mira. He connected with the first one, knocking him unconscious before another grabbed his arm. Mira was on him in a flash, and delivered a series of exotic spinning techniques, knocking both of the other

guards unconscious.

"There'll be more," said Mira between breaths. "This way. There's a secret exit."

Orson could hear the clanking metallic footsteps of cyborg guards as he sprinted down a corridor after Mira to destinations unknown. The only thing he was certain of now - she was definitely on his side.

Suddenly, Mira screeched to a stop. "Here." She tapped on a nondescript section of the wall, revealing a hidden control panel. Her fingers rapped at the panel in a staccato rhythm as she entered a combination, revealing a hidden door.

She grabbed Orson by the shoulders, forcing him to look at her. "Now listen to me, Orson." Her breath was drawn out in rags. "This leads out into the Dandoran market. From there you just need to keep running. Run until you get to the spaceport. Tell them I sent you."

"You're not coming with me?"

"This door can only be closed from one side, Orson! There's no panel on the other side! If I go with you, they'll keep coming. They'll kill us both."

"There must be another way!"

"There isn't. Goodbye, Orson."

Orson fought against her, but Mira was stronger, faster, and better. She manhandled him and forced him through the door, then it slammed shut behind him. He pounded the door with his fists, but it wouldn't budge an inch.

The next thing he heard was the screeching of blaster fire and the screams of Mira. He suppressed his urge to scream. If they heard him, her sacrifice would be for nothing. He ran down the secret passageway, following Mira's instructions.

He checked for the datachip in his pocket. Mira hadn't died for that. She probably didn't even care about it. She had died for him, to give him a chance to escape. In the chaos, he had left the credit reward behind. But that didn't matter. The General would still pay out enough for this mission to afford a night heavy enough to temporarily forget all this ever happened.