

Tabletop Squadron Transcript, Karma Interstitial 1, Part 2:
Boardroom Maneuvers

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Intro

NICK: Hi everyone, and welcome to Tabletop Squadron, a Star Wars: Edge of the Empire actual play podcast. I'm Nick, your game master. Every other Thursday, our story follows a thief, a bounty hunter, and a slicer as they explore the galaxy helping a mysterious benefactor and each other.

This week we continue to follow the high stakes politics of Karma and her new friend Stiro. This one ran a little long, so we'll have one more episode releasing next week as well. This one goes in some wild directions and I know you're going to love it.

I wanna take a minute to address the health crisis that we're all facing right now. Stay safe out there, squad, and make the best choices you can. We know that this is a difficult time, and we here at Tabletop Squadron are going to continue to release content as quickly as we can. We hope that it provides a bit of distraction from everything going on. If you need a place to talk or a distraction, we've got a great group of humans on our Discord who are loving and supportive and have adorable pets. We're all in this together.

Music this week is Horrible by Mela and Chitarradistorta by Nickk Dropkick.

So now, let's get into the episode.

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NICK: When we last left off, Karma and Stiro had just finished getting information out of an admin for Serres Super Structure. They met up at a diner the next morning to discuss their plans and were about to head off to meet their mark.

ROB: I sort of rub my hands together, limber my shoulders up like I'm getting ready to do some sort of exercise or something, and check my com for the 365th time for the time of the meeting, and make sure that we're all good for transportation even if something bad happens. We'll still be there.

NICK: Yeah. So, the meeting, you were very specific, the meeting is immediately after lunch, so this guy's gonna be full, happy, kind of sleepy.

ROB: Best mood of the day. Yep.

NICK: Yeah. You made sure that happened. You actually had Diana move his lunch up a little bit, because that also makes your meeting look more important.

ROB: Ho-ho.

NICK: I'm just gonna play with these seven successes for a while, because that was very good.

CAMERON: [laughs]

ROB: Yeah, I mean, feel free.

NICK: So you have some time to kill. You hang out at the diner for a while, and then a very nondescript speeder pulls up. It kinda looks like a Honda Civic but in Star Wars.

ROB: Sure.

NICK: Plain, not very interesting, doesn't look particularly broke down but doesn't look nice, and Seeley Mox, the skinny blonde guy from the club, is in the driver's seat and he rolls down the window and waves to the two of you through the window of the diner and is gesturing for you all to come on.

CAMERON: Karma throws back the rest of her caf.

ROB (as Stiro): I do believe we are being summoned.

CAMERON (as Karma): Yup.

CAMERON: Gets up out of the booth, adjusts her carbine and sword since sitting with them in a booth is difficult.

NICK: The next question is, how do you two react to being convinced that you're about to die in a horrible speeder accident? Because that's how Seeley drives at all times.

ROB: Oh man. I think that Stiro just sits back very steadily and concentrates on breathing, because he's been in a lot of life or death situations before, from the time that he was little, and I think that he can tell the difference between a life or death situation where decisive action can save your life and a life or death situation where you just have to see how it comes out on the other side, and unfortunately this guy's driving is the latter.

[laughter]

CAMERON: Karma is sitting in the front passenger seat and is full-on parent energy while they're teaching their teenager to drive.

ROB: Oh no. [laughs]

NICK: [laughs]

CAMERON: So, is sitting there gripping the center console and the door handle, and any time we take a turn too fast or we start to see a light coming up that we're gonna need to stop for or another speeder turns out in front of us is like throwing her foot forward where a break would be if she was the one piloting, and is just holding herself into the seat, is not moving at all with the shifts and the fast turns and stuff, is locked in, and just deep breathing but very concerned and very much has the parents', like, 'oh my gosh.'

ROB: In one instance do you actually mom arm the driver?

CAMERON: Yes. That most definitely happens.

[laughter]

ROB: Oh god.

NICK: And Karma's strong enough that probably bruises his chest pretty hard. That happens right at the end as Seeley pulls to a stop. The whole flight, because it's a speeder so it tends to go up to 50 feet down to street level, is barrel rolls, drifted turns, cutting in and out of traffic, going up on one side of the car to skip between two pedestrians, and Seeley, this scrawny guy with blonde hair, is just whistling a jaunty tune, seems super relaxed.

ROB: Yeah, he's like an eastern European cabbie.

NICK: Yeah, that's what I was gonna say, trying to do the taxi thing of like "so, how's it going, how's the morning been, saw you got the bright orange eggs, those are fun, those are good," and everyone is just (rattled fearful inhale).

CAMERON: [laughs]

NICK: He slams to a stop and drops 15 feet to the street, and Karma mom arms him, knocking the breath out of him.

NICK (as Seeley): [strained] We're here. Ow... Why?

CAMERON (as Karma): Hey, your head didn't hit the steering wheel.

NICK (as Seeley): It never does. I'm good at this.

ROB: Stiro checks his time piece and says:

ROB (as Stiro): Well, you certainly did get us here fast.

NICK (as Seeley): And I'll be here in case you need to leave quickly. I'll be just looping the block, but I can't loop the same block for too long because eventually CorSec gets called because of... I mean, it's not my fault, but I'll be around. A simple com call, I'll get you out of here.

ROB (as Stiro): You got it, buddy.

NICK: He hits a button and the doors pop open and the seats angle slightly like the car is encouraging you to leave.

CAMERON: Karma unbuckles her seatbelt...

NICK: [laughs]

CAMERON: ...because she was definitely wearing her seatbelt, and calmly gets out of the car. Or the speeder, I guess.

NICK: You find yourselves standing in front of one of Coronet's many spires. Coronet is the capital city of Corellia. It is basically epitomized by dark industrial slums and factories and these huge, miles-high skyscraper buildings that have really, really, really wide bases, like five to ten city blocks, and go up to almost a point at the top.

ROB: Oh, how perfect, so the offices and such get more and more exclusive as they get higher. As well as just being higher there's also fewer of them.

NICK: Absolutely! It also lets them build higher.

ROB: Perfect.

NICK: The bases of these, depending on where the spire is, are sometimes surrounded by rundown neighborhoods, places that are used for garbage disposal, and sometimes are very nice streets. This one interestingly has two entrances, because it's so big. One entrance basically leads to a dump, just like a scrapyard that's been sunk down under a rundown apartment building, and the other entrance is on a well-lit, brightly white paved avenue with people walking pets up and down it and little decorative trees on the sidewalk. Which side would you like to be dropped off at?

ROB: The money side.

NICK: The money side, great, so then you aren't faced with a large, mechanical blast door, you're faced with simple glass shutters that seem to become transparent in front of you, and you walk into this clean lobby. All you have to do is mention your appointment. You're shuttled into a lift, rocketed up into the sky. You do not go all the way to the top. You are about five floors from the top. You do know the floor below that is where Diana works, and you go up past that, and you are led through a receiving area and immediately into a very nice office with glass windows all the way around, a burnished steel desk, bookcases that have glowing blue panels instead of books – because that's in Star Wars, that's a thing they do – and it just looks austere, corporate, organized, and there is no guy in here yet. They just dropped you in his office and he's not here.

ROB: That's alright. This is an important guy. He'll feel more important if he's a little late.

NICK: Yeah. You have a minute in this office to yourselves.

ROB: Well, due deference would be waiting by the door or whatever, but I fully intend to look at my ease when he comes in and I fully expect that the inside of this office is being surveilled by him or someone who works for him right now, so I am not going to search for anything or do anything untoward.

NICK: Hmm.

CAMERON: Karma walks to the windows, because I'm assuming it has full wall windows.

NICK: Oh yeah.

CAMERON: Since we're up this high, you want the view. Just goes and stands at the window, facing it, with her hands behind her back in the at-east position and is just looking.

ROB: Yeah. I think security taking a look around is pretty acceptable, but the other businessman should not be dirtying his hands at this time.

NICK: Right. Did you take a seat in front of his desk?

ROB: That's right I did, yep.

NICK: [grinning] Okay.

ROB: I'll stand up again when he makes it in here.

NICK: Cool. You find yourself waiting in awkward silence for four, six, ten minutes or so, and a panel slides back on the wall, and you see Cord Trustbuilder walk into the room.

[elevator music begins]

He looks early 30s, he has dark hair that is long, below the nape of the neck, swept back and hair gelled in place, almost like a helmet. He's wearing a perfectly coiffed suit, but it's a Corellian suit so he also has like a stole over it that has the logo for Serres Super Structure on it which is like interlocking stars. It's like the lapel of the suit is actually like a scarf or a stole thing hanging down. He strides up to you and says:

NICK (as Cord): Ah, if it isn't my sudden reschedule. My name is Cord, Cord Trustbuilder. Nice to meet you.

ROB: Of course I have like liquidly gotten up out of the chair to stand square right across from him. I return the handshake hardily.

ROB (as Stiro): The name's Stiro, Stiro Waybridger. It's really good to see you in the flesh.

CAMERON: [laughs]

NICK (as Cord): Waybridger? I know a Waybridger. Were you involved in that shipping skidoo over by Coruscant a couple of years ago?

ROB (as Stiro): Well, I've got a big extended family. You know what they say about those big Corellian families, but I've got wide-ranging business interests which is why I am suddenly on your schedule as you so astutely mentioned.

NICK (as Cord): Yeah, you know, it's the kind of thing where, when I see something rearranged like that, if I didn't know Diana had my best interest at heart I'd be a little suspicious, but no reason to be, obviously, just two business men having a time.

NICK: He is steadfastly not acknowledging that Karma is in the room.

ROB: Right.

NICK: Like, it hasn't even occurred to him.

ROB: She's the help.

NICK: Yeah. She's just there. What could it be? He slides behind his desk. His desk chair is one of those swivel chairs with the large leather back and the blinders that stick out of either side of the chair. It's completely silent when he sits in it, which is weird because it's leather, it's super nice. He laces his fingers in front of him.

NICK (as Cord): So, what brings you on my schedule?

CAMERON: As soon as he sits Karma turns to where she is now facing him but he is now facing away from her, but so that she can see Stiro if any communication needs to happen between the two of them.

NICK: Nice.

ROB (as Stiro): Well you see, I had a serendipitous meeting with your assistant, Diana, at a mid-town establishment last night, and we got to talking about some shared experiences in the world of business and the theme of our intercourse was a reticence on the part of upper management types to seize opportunities when they present themselves, kind of an entrenched risk-averse attitude that's not particularly conducive to growth.

NICK (as Cord): Uh-huh! Uh-huh!

ROB (as Stiro): Even though growth is the life blood of businesses of this size as you well know. Look how young you are. You got here by taking risks when they make sense to take. I do admit to have done a little bit of homework on your career. It's a fascinating read.

NICK (as Cord): Well, I mean, it's all in Business Monthly. I'm an open book.

NICK: He pounds his hand on the desk and two fat cigars stick straight out of the material and he grabs them.

NICK (as Cord): Do you smoke?

ROB (as Stiro): I surely do.

ROB: When these cigars appear Stiro allows a child-like grin of glee.

CAMERON: [laughs]

ROB: Like a completely guileless “ooh, that’s fun” look on his face before reassuming the business thing, because it’s important to Stiro that Cord feels like he is impressing me, like I am impressed by his office, I’m impressed that he made me wait ten minutes, this little trick with the desk, this is all so cool to Stiro.

NICK: He puts the tips of the cigars down on the desk, the desk glows in a circle of bright orange for a second and lights them, and he flips one around to hand it to you and sticks the other one in his mouth and starts puffing on it very noisily.

ROB: Yeah.

NICK (as Cord): So we’re talking about risk, right? So, that’s a lot of words. What are we talking about here?

ROB: Out of character, what’s the name of this gigantic pod race that’s coming up?

NICK: Ooh...

ROB: Because there should be a sexy name for it, right?

[elevator music fades]

NICK: I agree. So, everyone has just been calling it the Inaugural Circuit, because pod racing has actually been out of favor for quite a while. This is the first pod race that will have happened in Corellia ever, and the marketing in the underworld – because pod racing’s not technically legal – the marketing has been huge to where everyone knows about it because they’re trying to bring pod racing back, so it’s just been called the Inaugural Circuit.

ROB: So it’s not technically legal. Does that mean that literally this high profile race is being carried out illegally essentially as a marketing campaign to convince big business that the sports betting market is worth legitimizing with their money?

NICK: Yup.

ROB: That’s so great.

CAMERON: [laughs]

NICK: Yep, and you would know, because you've been involved in some of this, there have been massive bribes paid to CorSec, which is the Coruscant Security Core, it's their police, to close off certain areas at the right time and not arrest anybody.

ROB: Yeah, they're gonna avoid the track like the plague that night.

NICK: Yeah. Well, the track is the city, so that's gonna be really fun.

ROB: Right, well...

CAMERON: [chuckles]

NICK: Yeah, but it's the kind of thing, they're trying to demonstrate the profitability and get it made legal enough and to get public interest big enough that they can get more of these races started, so it's this fine balance.

ROB: Well, and it makes sense that you want the Corellian Sports Authority to walk back this pod racing ban, because as the shadow of the Empire grows deeper and deeper on Corellia you need bread and circuses, right? You need more distracting, fun entertainment for people to keep them from thinking about how maybe life used to be a little better.

NICK: Yup. So, it's an opportunity that has been very much seized on by certain people to try and do this and get a pretty big slice for themselves. Kettle has not been directly involved but has helped facilitate some of the things that made it even possible.

ROB: Sure. Sure.

NICK: So you're tangentially involved in the situation already. But yeah, it's called the Inaugural Circuit.

ROB: Inaugural Circuit, awesome. Okay.

ROB (as Stiro): Now, Mr. Trustbuilder, between you, me, and the ears of God, what's your opinion of the fine sport of pod racing?

NICK: His eyes light up and he takes a very long pull on the cigar.

NICK (as Cord): Pod racing... Now, that's a name I haven't heard in a long, long time.

CAMERON & ROB: [laughs]

NICK (as Cord): I like pod racing. I think pod racing is very cool. I used to hear stories about it from my dad back in the day.

ROB (as Stiro): So I think it's safe for me to assume that you have at least heard something about a little event coming up that prefers to be known as the Inaugural Circuit.

NICK: He actually sets his cigar down on something you didn't notice before but it's like a built-in ramp ashtray type thing on the desk.

NICK (as Cord): Now, me being an upstanding and law-abiding citizen of Corellia wouldn't know anything about an illegal race like that.

ROB (as Stiro): That is a damn fine answer.

[laughter]

NICK (as Cord): Especially not an illegal race that would be a course unparalleled in the sport going through the sewers, the main street, and circumnavigating the entire city of Coronet. [grinning] I wouldn't know anything about that.

ROB (as Stiro): No. [chuckles] And let me tell you, Mr. Trustbuilder, it is an exciting thing to not know anything about, particularly at this time.

CAMERON: [laughs]

NICK (as Cord): Now, why would you say that?

ROB (as Stiro): Well, a few different little birds have been speaking to me lately about the betting pools that are already starting to make waves surrounding the Inaugural Circuit. You see, it's not just my people who are interested, pretty much every investor worth his salt who's not too afraid, you understand, is very interested in seeing what they can make happen in the betting halls, which are not only centralized but in satellite locations around Corellia, you understand. Astronomical numbers of credits moving fast and moving quietly. Now, you can ask sports analysts – not from here of course, because we don't do pod racing on Corellia – but you can ask sports analysts who is the smart money to bet on, who is maybe a dark horse to win, but what if all that uncertainty were to be removed?

NICK: He places his hands flat on the desk to either side.

NICK (as Cord): That sounds like cheating.

ROB (as Stiro): I ask you this. Is it possible to cheat in a sport that's not officially sanctioned by the Corellian Sports Authority?

NICK (as Cord): Yes.

ROB: Fuck.

[laughter]

ROB (as Stiro): We're in a unique position to make a first impression of how the sport will be conducted on this world. Who is to say we don't set a few things up to funnel the chaos in directions that we favor? That's what Black Sun is doing on Corellia right now.

ROB: I give him a very significant look.

NICK (as Cord): Black Sun? You know, I just had dinner with the Commissioner of CorSec last week and I was assured that Black Sun doesn't exist in Corellia anywhere.

ROB (as Stiro): I could think of no better advertisement for my effectiveness in my job than that.

NICK (as Cord): You make a fair point. Waybridger... Waybridger, Black Sun, pod racing... I'm beginning to see exactly what you're telling me, but I don't understand exactly what my opportunity would be in this situation.

ROB (as Stiro): Well, I forget my manners. Let me introduce you to my cousin. Her name's Kizmet.

CAMERON: [laughs]

ROB (as Stiro): Before you bring up the lack of family resemblance, you understand, she's my cousin, a close cousin of mine in the family that matters.

NICK (as Cord): Oh, I think I understand perfectly.

CAMERON: While this conversation is happening Karma has come up behind him, and so when Stiro says "let me introduce you to my cousin" and directs towards Karma she is suddenly so much closer than she was when he sat down in his chair.

ROB: [laughs]

NICK: You're pulling a Batman.

ROB: Mm-hmm.

CAMERON: Yes. I have arrived, still standing at ease, no real facial expression. When he turns to look at her, nods, but doesn't say anything.

NICK: Cord was so entranced by Stiro's pitch that he had completely lost track of where Karma was, so he doesn't see her, sees Stiro's gesture, goes to turn his chair, bounces off of her, leans back in the chair, looks up, goes very pale for a second, like one bead of sweat, and then regains his composure.

NICK (as Cord): Oh, well, I do apologize, I didn't introduce myself before. I just thought you might be a bodyguard. My apologies. My name's Cord, Cord Trustbuilder.

ROB (as Stiro): We do things a little bit differently in Black Sun.

NICK (as Cord): What do you mean by that?

ROB (as Stiro): it's all family. My cousin here can be very persuasive in her way, and she is but one part of the operation that I am running to change this sporting event from what it appears to be on the surface into the greatest return on investment possible in the Corellian economy. I have here for you the odds as the bookkeepers are currently publishing them.

ROB: I will bring up on a com dossiers of all the drivers and their professional records, any amateur accolades, things like that.

NICK: Cool. We get a spread of dossiers. You set your com on the desk and the whole desk becomes a screen and all of these dossiers flow out. We see pages of things, and a quick smattering of the people that you might see sitting on this desk. You see a female Xexto, which are super skinny, have four arms and big old black eyes, named Longtanno with a very safe looking pod racer with lots of safety things on it. You see Kelbit Fizz, a male Toong, the grandson of Ben Quadrenaros from the Bunta Eve Classic. He looks like a cartoon diamond-shaped face with arms and legs sticking out of him.

CAMERON: [snickers]

NICK: You see what just looks like a pod racer with a head sticking out of it that's a droid and it's all black with red under-lighting that just has the designation F4-ST. There are some other ones, but you also see an aging Dug, which are the walk on their hands aliens—

ROB: Hell yes!

CAMERON: Oh-ho-ho...

NICK: --with a long goatee with an X-shaped pod race behind it, and it is Sebulba—

CAMERON: Yesss.

NICK: --back from retirement, competing in this race.

CAMERON: [giggling] Oh, I'm so excited.

ROB: Old Sebulba. Silver fox Sebulba up in here.

[laughter]

NICK: So, you see Sebulba's picture with his graying skin and goatee, and his odds are pretty good but not as amazing as they used to be because he's been out of the game for a long time. They brought him back special for this race to boost visibility. You see another racer who is Toonba, a male Ortolan, which is the stuffed animal elephant looking guy from Jabba's palace.

ROB: [breathy laugh]

CAMERON: [chuckles]

NICK: He is a famous actor in a holo-drama series across the galaxy who races as a hobby and to boost his notoriety. He drives a very specific pod that is maximized for surface area, not for speed, because it's covered in advertisements for various things. On the cockpit of his ship is a giant picture of his face.

CAMERON: He good.

ROB: The Endorsement-mobile.

CAMERON: [laughs]

NICK: Yup. He tends to drive pretty slow and carefully. Toonba has won a couple of pod races in the last few years by accident, because everyone else blew up. So, those are a few of the racers that are in this race. There's about eight total, I've told you about five-ish.

ROB: Sure. I will wait a respectful amount of time for him to digest the information that I've displayed, and I'll say:

ROB (as Stiro): Now Mr. Trustbuilder, if it was you and you wanted to turn this gamble into a certainty, how would you go about it?

NICK (as Cord): Well, I'd probably make sure that droid racer has an accident. It seems like it's too good for its own good, and I think honestly it ruins the sport.

ROB (as Stiro): And see, with all due respect, that's what the people organizing the race are looking for. You can't directly sabotage a driver, or bribe a driver to throw the race, or anything like that. They're worried about that 25 hours a day, 329 days a year. But here's the thing about worrying, you can only worry about so many things, it drives you crazy. All eyes are square on these racers. Look to the side a bit. What do you see? The pit crew. Nobody cares about the pit crew, it's not exciting. Only a rarified subset of the viewership even appreciate the artistry of what goes on in the pit with maintenance.

So here's what we did. The personnel concern that staffs these pit crews, we bought it. The shipping company that supplies the tools, fuel, other sundries for maintenance, we bought that too. Nobody batted an eye, all part of corporate acquisition, shell company buying a shell company of a shell company, you understand. And so, let's think about the Inaugural Circuit for a second.

It's a long race, a lot of pit stops. Even the most efficient racer in the whole caboodle is gonna be making five, six stops over the course of the event. Now, if a mechanic or two happens to develop a nervous case of butterfingers at a really unfortunate time...

CAMERON: [chuckles]

ROB (as Stiro): ...or the wrong grade of transmission fluid accidentally gets shipped to one of the pits and poured into the unfortunate engine of a racer that we don't want to win, or there's a delay in one of the mechanical shuttles that moves the pod racer into position for a certain maintenance thing, or a wiring problem suddenly develops... these things scattered thinly enough across the entire event can guarantee an outcome without the appearance of anything but garden variety rotten luck. We're not gonna have the lowest C racer win the whole thing, we're gonna have someone who probably wasn't gonna win but has been seen to win in the past walk away with it, and what a story it will be in the mainstream media when Toonba is given the victor's crown.

NICK (as Cord): Toonba?!

CAMERON: [chuckles]

ROB (as Stiro): That's right.

NICK (as Cord): You know, I was at the Mon Cal underwater event where he won by accident.

ROB (as Stiro): See? It can happen.

CAMERON: Karma leans forward over the desk and presses on Toonba's dossier, and it opens up more fully and shows his win-loss record. He's actually pretty good.

NICK: Yeah, but it's mostly really small circuit things that he's won.

CAMERON: Yes, but the numbers are there.

ROB: And that's what's gonna be on the news.

[laughter]

NICK: So you look at the win-loss ratio, and you point at it.

CAMERON: And get up in his space as I lean over the desk as well.

NICK: He awkwardly does that thing where he scooches his chair sideways a little bit.

NICK (as Cord): No see, you're saying that this is believable, but if you expand it...

NICK: He touches it and pulls it out.

NICK (as Cord): Look, Toonba only wins enough minor league races to get to the big ones and then he doesn't do anything there. You think this is believable? Pod racing aficionados will know the fix. I don't know how you're gonna pull this one off.

ROB (as Stiro): Well, as I said, the very involved processes of over the course of the event maintenance are just going to... break, in a certain racer's favor, well and anybody who's coming in place behind him, it's all fine for us you understand. We're only really going to need to affect three or four racers to guarantee the outcome that we need.

NICK (as Cord): It's a good field. It is a good field.

ROB (as Stiro): Think about Toonba. You've seen him on the holo-dramas, right?

NICK (as Cord): I love him on Sands of Tatooine. I'm going to admit Sands of Tatooine is a guilty pleasure of mine.

CAMERON: [chuckles]

ROB (as Stiro): If he wins this thing on accident he is going to believe in all his heart that he won it because of his own determination to win and his guts and his spirit and his drive. He's gonna do half the work for us, and people are going to believe him because he is famous and beloved.

NICK (as Cord): It'll be a real shame when Sebulba rips his blue elephant head from his body.

ROB (as Stiro): He might get a slap on the wrist ,a little fine or something like that, but each one of his media appearances, his talk show appearances coming off this thing is gonna pay him twenty times what he has to pay CorSec, you understand, and this well-loved public figure being the name closely associated with the race legitimizes it further. It guarantees the success of the grassroots movement to legalize the sport on Corellia, and nobody needs to know that the first one was all a show, except for those who got rich from it of course. What's the best return on investment you've ever made on a legitimate business deal, Mr. Trustbuilder?

NICK (as Cord): Legitimate? Uh, let me redo the math in my head there.

CAMERON: [laughs]

ROB: I'll smile. [laughs]

NICK (as Cord): Fifteen percent got me to this office.

ROB (as Stiro): I'm offering you 115. It's actually 125, but we're taking a 10% cut. You understand, this isn't a charity.

NICK (as Cord): You're talking a good talk, I'll admit, 115, I could do a lot with that. I could buy my own spire at that point, but I don't know about working with Black Sun.

NICK: He tries to push back from the table and bumps into karma and kinda freezes for a second.

NICK (as Cord): That seems a bit overt for my taste. I think I might need to ask you to leave.

CAMERON: Karma does not move, and actually scoots forward slightly so his chair is pushed back in.

NICK: [laughs]

ROB (as Stiro): Don't get us wrong, Black Sun is who it takes to make this happen. Kizmet here is gonna be on the ground during the race making sure that nobody in those pits or in those betting locations gets any second ideas or squirrely thoughts in their heads, and when it comes to changing hearts and minds, or violently ejecting them from the bodies in which they previously resided, you couldn't ask for better.

ROB: I just give him this big shit-eating grin.

NICK: [laughs]

CAMERON: Karma smiles at him. [laughs]

NICK: He's now forced to deal with the fact that the person he's talking to is in front of him and the person threatening him is directly behind him and trying to look back and forth, and looks like he throws a muscle in his neck doing it.

NICK (as Cord): So far you've talked a pretty good game, but all you've done is talk. I'm not betting at the beginning of this race. I want evidence that this is going to work out the way you say it is.

ROB (as Stiro): I wouldn't dream of asking you to do that. Please. I don't even want the appearance of coming in here trying to scam you out of your money. That's not what I'm about.

NICK (as Cord): It's good to hear you say so overtly. I actually feel much better.

CAMERON: [laughs]

ROB (as Stiro): The betting window is open until the halfway point of the race, or I should say when the first racer reaches the halfway point. Our calculations put that around about the third lap is when the odds start to flatten and really stop being so turbulent. Profitability goes down, predictability goes up, you understand. If you are willing to bet before the third lap concludes we can get you your return on investment. That figure that I quoted to you before was not about making a bet, sight unseen, right now with no reason to trust me beyond my winning demeanor. You didn't get this far making THAT level of risk. And if I'm not too bold to say it, at your age, being by my count five floors from the top of this magnificent structure, you don't get that far that fast if you're aiming for five floors from the top. We know where you're aiming, and we wanna help get you there, because it's gonna get us where we need to go too.

ROB: I think at this point I'm gonna do my Biggest Fan action.

NICK: Oh-ho-ho!

CAMERON: Heh-heh-heh.

ROB: My capstone ability, once per session, make a three difficulty Charm check to turn one NPC into the character's biggest fan. So, I am going to remove a rank of difficulty.

NICK: Oh man.

ROB: Killing with kindness, so it's actually a two difficulty check.

CAMERON: [chuckles]

ROB: And what does Force and destiny points do again?

NICK: You can upgrade an ability check for flipping one over, so you could turn a green to a yellow or if you have all yellow you could add a green if you wanna.

ROB: I'm gonna do that.

NICK: Okay.

ROB: This is for all the marbles.

[laughter]

NICK: Oh, uh, it's actually two reds instead of two purples. I forgot to mention that. This guy is very good at not being persuaded.

ROB: Oh, he's like a more significant 'dude?'

NICK: Yeah. Yeah.

ROB: Okay. So, yellow-yellow-yellow, green, red-red.

NICK: Yep.

CAMERON: Yup.

NICK: I will give you a blue die for how much has gone into setting this guy up, and also for Karma, just, he is very uncomfortable with this situation at this point. [laughs]

CAMERON: [chuckles]

ROB: That is three successes and two advantages.

NICK: Damn! I wanted a despair so bad.

CAMERON: [laughs]

NICK: I wanted you to succeed and have a despair. That's okay. Yeah, so, this guy gets a big smile on his face and he picks the cigar back up and sticks it in his teeth.

NICK (as Cord): Alright, no kriff, I think this is something that we can do. What I need is you to tell me two things that are gonna happen before the second lap. Those two things happen, I bet an unconscionable amount of money.

ROB (as Stiro): That is what I like to hear. Kizmet, that's great to hear, isn't it?

CAMERON (as Karma): [flatly] It's fantastic.

NICK: [laughs]

ROB (as Stiro): [laughs]

CAMERON: Still standing right behind him, doesn't move.

NICK: A question for y'all. Who do you want to win?

ROB: Oh, that's a good question. Who DO we want to win? Because it's obviously not actually Toonba, we just want his money.

NICK & CAMERON: Yeah.

ROB: And then we're doing actually a similar middle of the pack, it's a person on one side or the other of him in the odds. Who's a respectable racer who is not this guy? [laughs]

NICK: The other two I have designed are Longtanno, who is probably the best odds to win, she drives very safely and usually finishes in the top three but rarely wins.

ROB: Ohh.

NICK: And then Mousecratel is a female Alina, which is kind of like a little mini dinosaur with a triangle head, and has the largest pod racer that goes the fastest but has terrible stats at everything else.

ROB: Right, bad cornering and stuff, which is not good for...

CAMERON: A city race. [laughs]

ROB: Like, basically she's gonna try to make up a huge amount of, uh, there's one huge straight away, right, in the race?

NICK: Mm-hmm.

ROB: She's probably not even aiming for first. She's probably like I'm gonna place by just burning past people on every lap, right here, and then just eating shit the rest of the way.

NICK: Her real plan is to try to set the land speed record. [laughs] That's what her goal is.

ROB: Right. It's an advertisement for herself on other races.

NICK: Yeah, for sure.

ROB: Which makes sense. So yeah, I think—What was the one who drives safe and gets like top three?

NICK: Longtanno.

ROB: Longtanno's gonna win.

NICK: Okay. So jumping back into it, he demanded: What are the two things that are gonna happen that will prove to me that the fix is actually on?

ROB (as Stiro): Now here are the two things that you can take to the bank, Mr. Trustbuilder. Sebulba is not gonna be finishing first in this race.

CAMERON (as Karma): Sebulba's not going to be finishing this race.

CAMERON: Says a creepy voice from behind him. [laughs]

NICK (as Cord): Oh?

ROB (as Stiro): Thank you. Yes. That's a much better way of putting it. He's gonna have a very unfortunate technical accident, before the betting window closes, that removes him from the running.

Now, he has a great record, don't get me wrong, he's a celebrity they brought out of retirement to legitimize this thing, but he does have a history of bullying his pit crew pretty horribly and favoring pushing things to their limits, favoring power, speed over safety. It works out for him, he's a good driver and he has a powerful machine, but once in a while something goes wrong, and the Inaugural Circuit will be one of those times that something goes wrong and it's going to go very, very wrong for him.

I expect he'll be okay, maybe his brain will get a little bit rattled or something like that, but nothing catastrophic. He's not gonna be a concern. That's before the betting window closes. There's a huge tumult in the betting market at that point. Fortunately you already know what's gonna happen, so that uncertainty doesn't need to worry a single hair on your head.

The second thing that's gonna happen is the pit crew of Kelbit Fizz is going to experience an unforeseen delay. Security staff at the event are going to investigate a possible cheating scandal, some kind of sabotage of another racer. We can't have that, we're trying to legitimize the sport after all, and that pit stop that he takes that just keeps going on and on and on like you're waiting at the space port and your ship is delayed for the third time in a row, and... he's also out of the running. These things I promise you before the end of the third lap, and by our calculations we only really have one more big move to make towards the end of the race to give Toonba his crown.

NICK (as Cord): Well I gotta say, the more you talk the more of a fan of yours I become.

CAMERON: [giggles]

NICK (as Cord): I'm really appreciating this strategy. I can really see myself buying a planet from this plan.

ROB: [laughs]

ROB (as Stiro): It'd look good on you. You got where you were by taking smart bets, and I got where I am by making mutually beneficial relationships.

NICK (as Cord): If those two things happen you'll get your 10%. Now if you don't mind, I really have enjoyed our conversation...

NICK: He throws the cigar towards a panel in the wall, it hits it and just vaporizes off the panel.

NICK (as Cord): ...but I do have the head of the Chamber of Commerce coming here in a minute, so, if you could—

ROB (as Stiro): Oh, surely, surely. I understand. Do you mind?

ROB: I make as if to throw my cigar like a dart.

NICK (as Cord): By all means. That's why the panel's there.

ROB: I throw it, and when it vaporizes I do another, like, [giggles], like oh that's so cool.

NICK: [laughs]

ROB: Just another completely guileless joy reaction. One little cherry on top of the disarmament sundae before I say:

ROB (as Stiro): Kizmet, I think it is time we took our leave.

CAMERON: Kizmet—[chuckles] Kizmet, I'm gonna call her Kizmet now. Karma nods and steps away from Trustbuilder's chair, and still has her hands behind her back, and walks towards the door. I think it's the first time that Trustbuilder realizes how heavily armed she is, because she has both her vibro-sword and her carbine on her back, and at least one light blaster on her hip and a vibro-knife sticking out of a boot.

NICK: [laughs]

CAMERON: And that's the weaponry you can see.

ROB: When I reach the door I'll look back at Trustbuilder, give him the finger guns.

ROB (as Stiro): Knock 'em dead, Mr. Trustbuilder. We'll be in touch.

NICK (as Cord): I should be wishing you the same thing. Now, go on and get out of here. I'll see you at the celebration party.

NICK: As you walk out you see someone dressed in what looks like flowing ivory robes with a very weird, it's like a fedora hat on, and they have a monocle, and they go walking into the room.

ROB: Oh, Stiro's body language instantly switches to like stick up the ass, 1000% business. He's not a casual criminal guy anymore, he's a legitimate business man who had an important meeting a second ago. Maybe it didn't even go that well for him. We're gonna give the impression that this guy drives a hard bargain.

CAMERON: [chuckles]

NICK: The head of the Chamber of Commerce looks sympathetic and tips their hat.

ROB: I'll give them a little solemn nod.

NICK: And brushes past you into the room, and you hear them go:

NICK (as CoC Head): Cord~!

NICK: And you hear Cord go:

NICK (as Cord): Ahh, the Commissioner~!

NICK: And the door shuts behind you to hobnobbing. And with that scene set, I think we're going to move ahead to the day of the race. If there's anything preparatory-wise that comes up that y'all would have had done we'll just do it in a quick flashback and keep moving.

ROB: Sure.

NICK: So, the things that you need to achieve is before the third lap you need to sabotage Sebulba's racer, probably at the beginning of the race if not the first pit stop, and you need to spread a terrible rumor about Kelbit in enough time for them to all show up, and then you potentially may wanna do something to make sure that Longtanno is going to win, because if not it could come down to a Force roll and you may end up that the money is gone but not necessarily to you, which could be an issue.

ROB: Yeah, that is true. God, this is so perfect too, because we're gonna make a shitload of money on our improbable bet but like lots of other people who are not good at betting will also make a ton of money.

[laughter]

NICK: So, I think we're gonna cut to the race. Do you think you're going to sabotage Sebulba before or during the race?

ROB: Hmm.

CAMERON: I think that Sebulba has... since he is well-known for wandering about the other pods before the race starts to do all the shit that he's gonna do to them, the start of the race.

ROB: Oh yeah. He's gonna mark territory, try to scare people, just be an asshole.

CAMERON: Yeah. The start of the race might be the best time to do it because that's when he's gonna be paying the least attention to his pod racer, and there's the most people walking around.

ROB: And his pit crew are probably taking that moment to be like, oh thank god, he's not here right now, he's not gonna slap me.

CAMERON: Yeah.

NICK: [laughs]

CAMERON: And there's enough people moving around that with all of the pit crews for the eight different racers that having us being out there isn't gonna make a big impression.

NICK: Cool. Let me set this racing scene here. The Inaugural Circuit pod race is starting about five kilometers outside of town. There is a swampy flat land with broken trees sticking up out of it. This is starting at dawn, so the sun is below the horizon still. There's a smoggy gray light coming up over the horizon. There are stands that have been setup. There are people everywhere. They're excited but still a little sleepy, and you see a Devaronian announcer on a high tower by the starting line.

The pits here, these are like the starting pits and then the main pits are further into the city near a sewer entrance, so the pit crews are going to have to make sure everything's ready and then very quickly move to where they're needed for the rest of the race, but it's for a great dramatic start so they couldn't talk

them out of it. The announcer is a Devaronian male with long horns that have been pierced in several places and have golden barbells hanging in them.

CAMERON: Oh cool.

ROB: That's metal as fuck.

NICK: Yeah, with like actual bells hanging off of the barbells, so it makes a jingly noise when he moves, and he has big gauges in his ears with bells hanging off of those too.

CAMERON: Oh, I love him. What's his name?

NICK: [smiling] I don't know. I just came up with him right now. I need to think of a name for this guy.

CAMERON: His last name is Dawnbringer.

NICK: How about Delbo Dawnbringer?

CAMERON: [laughing] Okay.

NICK: That's good, the announcer.

ROB: There we go. But you can call him daddy.

CAMERON: [laughs]

NICK: Yeah. Delbo Dawnbringer. Our character Falx has definitely slept with Delbo Dawnbringer at least once. That is a character that will be coming back.

CAMERON: [snickers]

NICK: So, Delbo is saying—What is Delbo saying?

NICK (as Delbo): [through megaphone] And welcome to the Inaugural Circuit! Just glad to have everyone here.

NICK: Jing-a-ling-a-ling from his horns.

CAMERON: [giggles]

NICK: And you get a sleepy yay from the crowd, because it's still about an hour to the race. He starts doing the announcer—

NICK (as Delbo): This race will determine the future of pod racing as we know it. We have Sebulba back from retirement. We've got Longtanno the crowd favorite, the careful racer. We even have an experimental droid racer, designation model F4-ST. And who can forget, Toonba~!

NICK: And the whole crowd's—

CAMERON & ROB: Yay~!

NICK: [chanting] Toonba! Toonba!

CAMERON & ROB: [laughs]

NICK: And you see a little blue elephant waving its stubby arms from the sidelines.

CAMERON: Aw.

ROB: I see the crowd doing the Goldberg chant for Toonba. [deep, slow chanting] Toonba...! Toonba...!

NICK: Yeah, that's very good.

CAMERON: [laughs]

NICK: [laughing] Oh man, I like that a lot.

ROB: Into it.

NICK: Yeah. And we zoom in to the camera. The announcer keeps talking about the preparations. You overhear him saying:

NICK (as Delbo): As well, part of the course is on the streets of our good city of Coronet to take part in the fact that our friends over at CorSec have volunteered to be in other parts of the city and keep civilians off of the course.

NICK: You hear a mixture of cheers and boos.

ROB: [laughing, sarcastically] In the interest of public safety.

[laughter]

NICK: Yeah. We zoom in from there and we see Karma and Stiro, we see them both standing amongst the moving crowds of the pit crew. Each of the racers is probably 50 meters from each other, but there's people everywhere. There's a lot of people, so there's crowds to hide in, but each area has probably a 10 meter, 15 meter square cordon around it that's like chains on sticks. The thing that seems to keep people inside and outside of those cordons is that they're wearing jumpsuits in various colors and the flags and everything. The pod racers are being test started, so there's engines roaring and then cutting back off, kind of like drag racers do before the race, and it's very hectic, it's very excited. Delbo is still continuing to pontificate about how great this race is and how amazing it is for the city of Coronet.

As we get a shot of Stiro and Karma surveying the beginning of the pod race, we flash back to Karma and Stiro standing in a dark room leaning over a table littered with dossiers and plans, spot lit from above.

ROB (as Stiro): Well, alright now, I've put you in a bit of a spot and I do apologize for that. we gotta sabotage Sebulba's pod.

CAMERON (as Karma): I'm actually quite excited about doing that.

ROB (as Stiro): That sounded like an awful lot of confidence in your voice. That is heartening to hear.

CAMERON: [laughs]

ROB (as Stiro): Are you as good at being unseen as you are about being seen to be god damn scary?

CAMERON (as Karma): Being a bounty hunter I do have experience being, you know, with the quieter aspects of the trade. It is very much going to depend on how many people are near the pod, though, how easy it is for me to sneak to it.

ROB (as Stiro): Well, here's the thing, there are going to be a lot of people in that vicinity because of what I'm going to be doing at that time. I see no reason not to kill two mynocks with one stone on this. So, I am going to pose as a concerned employee of the fine folks who are running the race and I'm going to make a big stink, the biggest stink possible, about having seen the pit crew of Kelbit Fizz up to no good concerning the wellbeing of the pod being driven by Mousecratel. It's gonna bring a lot of people in to listen to me, to figure out what's wrong with me, what I'm so upset about, and my story is gonna be pretty scary for them to listen to.

In that kerfuffle, you ought to be able to get done what you need to get done just unseen enough that you're not all the way unseen, you're seen leaving the area in hopefully the colors of the pit crew of one of the other racers.

CAMERON (as Karma): So actually, if we can get me a uniform for Sebulba's pit crew I can get into the ropes...

NICK: Mm-hmm.

CAMERON (as Karma): ...and then casually walk by another pod as I leave, looking suspicious, but they're not gonna suspect me when I'm near Sebulba's pod.

ROB (as Stiro): Exactly. That's a very good idea. I think that is a fine update to the plan. They can suspect you of something that is far off the trail of what's actually going on. I like it.

[huffs] And see, this rumor that I start right at the beginning of the race about Kelbit Fizz is gonna be enough to concern people but maybe not get the whole thing done. Maybe one, one and a half laps in some very highly placed people are going to be receiving a call on their coms about the unsportsmanlike behavior of the Fizz pit crew.

CAMERON (as Karma): That would be very convincing if it were to come from a concerned member of that pit crew that may be having second thoughts about the sabotage that they were supposed to admit.

ROB (as Stiro): The type of business they're getting wrapped up in. Yes, it's such a concern.

CAMERON (as Karma): Mm-hmm.

ROB (as Stiro): And when you've got multiple sources of corroboration things start to look very concerning, never mind the fact that both of those sources of corroboration are yours truly.

CAMERON (as Karma): I like it.

ROB (as Stiro): And with that, we ought to be able to have things go our way.

CAMERON (as Karma): So, Stiro, I have a question.

ROB (as Stiro): Sure.

CAMERON (as Karma): From my observations over the past few days, watching your interactions, getting this con done, you are amazingly good with both people in general as well as molding yourself to be whatever would most interest the person that you're interacting with.

ROB: Give a deferring nod.

CAMERON (as Karma): I'm just interested. I see very well how this being a gangster and working on Kettle's crew would be an incredibly lucrative position for someone with your people skillset, but I can also see you making far more money and a name for yourself if you'd gone into the more legitimate lines of business. So I'm interested really in what made you choose this lifestyle for yourself?

ROB (as Stiro): Yeah, I suppose that is a little bit of a curiosity.

ROB: Stiro's body language changes a lot. He had a sense of animation to him, like he's really jazzed up because he's making a plan and he's getting excited about the details. You can tell that while he performs various things something that's not a performance is that he's kind of a nerd for the con. He loves the details of putting together an operation and figuring out how people are going to interact with different points of the plan and what the outcome's going to be. He clearly gets a charge out of that.

That sort of scales back, and he becomes a little more introspective, and even a little bit vulnerable. He actually sits down and picks up the drink that he had been mostly gesticulating with rather than drinking for most of the conversation. Takes a long sip.

[sad jazz music begins]

ROB (as Stiro): [exhales] You don't have to pretend. I've seen that you've noticed my face.

CAMERON (as Karma): What does that have to do with your people skills?

ROB (as Stiro): Well, when I was seven years old I didn't have a single credit in my pocket, didn't have parents, didn't have siblings. I had whatever I could steal before somebody else beat me up and stole it from me. There's a lot of kids like that on Corellia. What happened to my face is... I stole a sugar pastry from a café left unattended by a patron while they went to pick up a news holo to add to their order. I hadn't eaten in a while and I was excited about getting something sweet, you know, just a kid with a sweet tooth.

I got too happy about it, so I didn't wanna give it up when some bigger kids decided that it was gonna be their sugar pastry and not mine. I wouldn't give it up, so they cut off half my face with a broken bottle.

CAMERON (as Karma): Oh my gosh.

ROB (as Stiro): And you know who found me?

CAMERON (as Karma): I'm going to guess Kettle.

ROB (as Stiro): Delirious with fever, blood loss, probably not gonna live through the night even though I tried to stick my face back on my skull best I could. Not Kettle herself, but a nice old man, a doctor who's been patching people up for Kettle for a long time. It started as a protection thing, you know, you don't want Kettle's people messing up you or the people around you so you help them out occasionally, but it's the doctor's oath anyway, right? You gotta help people. He put my face back on, he helped me through the fever and the infection, and he didn't want me back on the street after that so he put me in contact with Kettle's people and I started to learn.

Here's the thing about her, people who work for her. They care. We're not the good guys, we're not the Empire either. We're a necessary part of a community. Maybe someday they'll make perfect laws somewhere so there don't need to be any criminals, but I haven't seen that yet. We make a profit, we protect our own, we care about the neighborhood. None of that was bullshit. Then the Empire came in.

You've seen what it does. You've seen people scared to leave their homes. You've seen people stop talking. Communities become a collection of isolated people. I can't stand it. It makes me sick. I want to live in a world where I'm the worst bad guy there is.

CAMERON: Karma looks slightly concerned.

NICK: [chuckles]

CAMERON (as Karma): Okay, so I'm going to guess that the people skills come from the genuine caring about the community.

ROB (as Stiro): Well, and sometimes needing to disguise my intentions so that a repeat of the broken bottle incident doesn't happen. I wasn't immediately a powerful or impressive individual, I just had a little bit of wit and I was given a good opportunity.

CAMERON (as Karma): And you learned some knife skills, I'm assuming.

ROB (as Stiro): You see, the thing is about losing a knife fight...

ROB: And I flip out the karambit and dance it around my fingers again.

ROB (as Stiro): ...you really don't want to lose the second one. You're willing to put in some work.

CAMERON (as Karma): Being used to using a vibro-sword, yep, I fully understand that.

NICK: We get a camera shot that zooms in on Karma whose armor isn't all put together, it's been released because you're just hanging out and talking, and she has a huge roping scar across her midsection that looks like it was from a barrage of blaster bolts at some point within the last six months or so. It's mostly healed, but it's pretty bad, so understandable from someone else's perspective for sure.

ROB (as Stiro): You were exactly right. You had me pegged completely in terms of being able to make way more money white collar than black market, but you've seen how those people are interacting with the Empire. They're rolling out the red carpet for them, and what good is all the money in the world if there's no neighborhood to live in at the end of it?

CAMERON (as Karma): I will say I identify slightly with that as there is a reason that I decided to become a bounty hunter instead of working for a fancy corporate security office.

ROB (as Stiro): There you go.

CAMERON (as Karma): Both of those apply to my skillset, but I have a lot less issues with one of them. I have a lot more freedom with which jobs I choose to take and the types of individuals that I choose to bring in for bounties.

ROB (as Stiro): That's it in a nutshell.

[sad jazz music ends]

NICK: We get a shot of the two of you smiling over the plans. There's like a rough sketched outline on this table of the course with little models of the different pods at different places.

ROB: Oh yeah, there's like balled up pieces of flimsy and whatever the data pad equivalent of a dry-erase board and tons of stubbed out death sticks in an ashtray and stuff.

CAMERON: There's a board with a lot of red string on it. We don't really know why.

ROB: Yeah.

NICK: [laughs] It's mostly the picture of Sebulba with a lot of red string coming off of Sebulba.

ROB: Yeah.

CAMERON: Yup.

NICK: [putting on a voice] 'He's the key!'

CAMERON: [laughs]

NICK: We swipe away to the two of y'all sitting in the stands at the race eating corn, because popcorn is canon in Star Wars now thanks to Disney.

CAMERON: Mm-hmm.

ROB: Hell yeah. Is that a Galaxy's Edge thing too?

NICK: Yeah. Yeah. So, eating popcorn, and you look at each other and nod, and get started.

NICK: End of episode.

Outro

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Stiro Kuwe is played by Rob Stith. You can find him at @LordOfTheStith on Twitter and on his podcast, The ORPHEUS Protocol.

Karma Nailo is played by me, Cameron Robertson. You can find me on Twitter at @midnightmusic13.

Our game master is Nick Robertson, and you can find him on Twitter at @alias58.

Our intro song is Space Jam by Pablo Ribot.

Additional music by James Gunter.

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