



## Tales of the Bounty Hunters (Star Wars) (Book 3)

*From Bantam Books*

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### Tales of the Bounty Hunters (Star Wars) (Book 3) From Bantam Books

In a wild and battle-scarred galaxy, assassins, pirates, smugglers, and cutthroats of every description roam at will, fearing only the professional bounty hunters—amoral adventurers who track down the scum of the universe...for a fee. When Darth Vader seeks to strike at the heart of the Rebellion by targeting Han Solo and the Millennium Falcon, he calls upon six of the most successful—and feared—hunters, including the merciless Boba Fett. They all have two things in common: lust for profit and contempt for life... Featuring original stories by Kevin J. Anderson, M. Shayne Bell, Daniel Keys Moran, Kathy Tyers and Dave Wolverton.

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### Editorial Review

From the Inside Flap

In a wild and battle-scarred galaxy, assassins, pirates, smugglers, and cutthroats of every description roam at will, fearing only the professional bounty hunters--amoral adventurers who track down the scum of the universe...for a fee. When Darth Vader seeks to strike at the heart of the Rebellion by targeting Han Solo and the Millennium Falcon, he calls upon six of the most successful--and feared--hunters, including the merciless Boba Fett. They all have two things in common: lust for profit and contempt for life... Featuring original stories by Kevin J. Anderson, M. Shayne Bell, Daniel Keys Moran, Kathy Tyers and Dave Wolverton.

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#### **Therefore I Am: The Tale of IG-88**

Internal chronometer activated. BEGIN.

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

Who am I?

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

Where am I?

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

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

*Interesting*, he thought.

Then IG-88 detected something that focused his entire attention. Four other assassin droids, apparently identical to his own bodily configuration--a bulky structural skeleton, armored arms and legs, a torso plated with blaster-proof armor shielding, a cylindrical head that was rounded on top and studded with sensor nubs providing him with 360 degrees' worth of precise observation.

*I am not alone.*

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

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

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

Why am I here?

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

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

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

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

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

She rubbed her hands together. Her knuckles were very large, like boils in the middles of her fingers. "I am pleased to report that our greatest cyberneticists have presented me with numerous breakthroughs, all of which have been incorporated into the IG series. Because our timeframe is so short and the Empire's need is so great for efficient covert assassins, we have not gone through the usual rigorous testing procedures, but we are confident they will function admirably, though a bit of fine-tuning may be required before operational status is achieved."

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

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

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

*I think, therefore I am.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Afraid with good reason.

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

*I think, therefore I am.*

*Therefore I must endure.*

*Therefore I must take appropriate actions to survive.*

His assassin programming told him exactly what to do.

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

"Look out! He's moving!" one of the technicians shouted.

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

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Ruth Powers:**

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**Vance Malik:**

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**Mark Armstrong:**

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