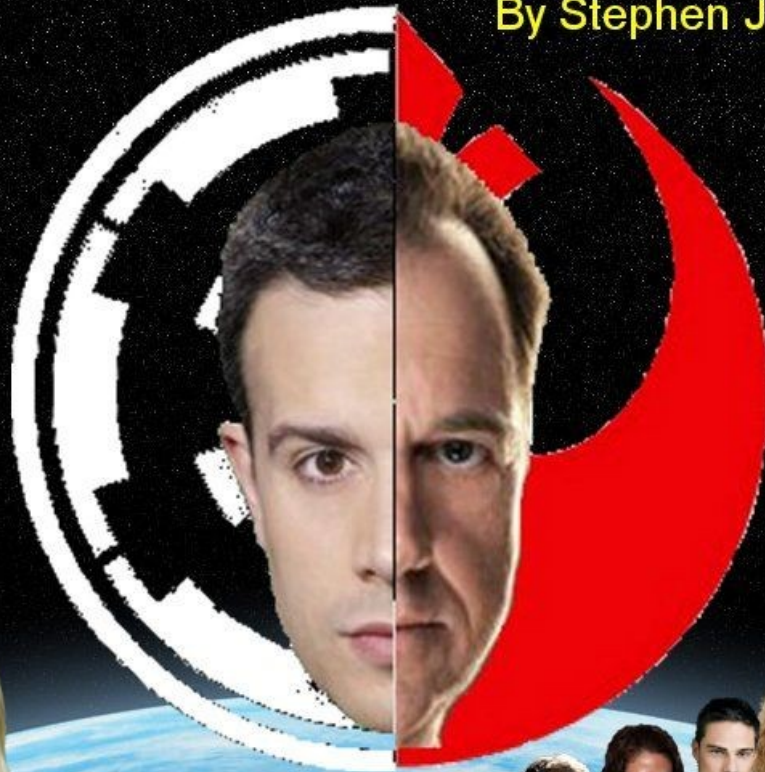


STAR WARS

8-11: An Offer of Friendship

By Stephen J Dutton



8-11
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Civil war turns father against son

IT IS A TIME OF CRISIS. REBEL FORCES FIGHTING
AGAINST THE EVIL GALACTIC EMPIRE ARE OUTNUMBERED
AND OUTGUNNED BY THEIR FOES. THEY MUST INSTEAD RELY ON GUERRILLA
WARFARE AND HIT AND FADE STRIKES BY SMALL GROUPS AGAINST STRONGER
FORCES.

ONE SUCH GROUP IS LEAD BY THE EXILED NOBLEMAN VORN LARCUS III WHO, WITH
THE HELP OF THE SMUGGLER MACE GRAYLE, CAPTAIN OF THE FREIGHTER THE
SILVER HAWK TAKE THE FIGHT TO THE EMPIRE.

FACING THEM ARE A MULTITUDE OF ENEMIES, BOTH SEEN AND UNSEEN AS THE
EMPIRE PLOTS TO BRING DOWN THE REBEL ALLIANCE AND FOREVER EXTINGUISH
HOPE AND FREEDOM IN THE GALAXY...

AN OFFER OF FRIENDSHIP

AN OLD ADVERSARY REACHES OUT TO VORN LARCUS WITH AN OFFER TO DEFECT
TO THE ALLIANCE. BUT THE OFFER MAY NOT BE AS SINCERE AS IT IS BEING
PORTRAYED...

Original characters created and story written by Stephen J. Dutton.
<http://thehazugfiles.uk/Index.htm>

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1.

As a member of the Estranian Parliament, Lord Maxamillion Torr had access to far more information than the average Imperial citizen, especially when it came to military operations in the sector. This was not to say that he was given advance warning of military operations, but he did get to see reports on the effects that the outcomes of such actions would have on Estran's planetary security and economy. Therefore, when he watched the nightly news and saw a report on an accident at a shipyard belonging to Kurrad Industries that had occurred just over a week earlier and resulted in the destruction of a large number of obsolete starships being stored there as sources of parts for the examples still operating within the sector he knew that the truth was that the vessels had been stolen by the Rebel Alliance. Significantly he had been given access to evidence that identified the rebel unit responsible as one commanded by Lord Vorn Larcus III, a former member of the Estranian Parliament who Lord Torr himself had successfully petitioned to have expelled after he began making speeches in Parliament that were highly critical of the Empire. He had also wanted to have Vorn arrested for his sedition but the Imperial Security Bureau had been too slow to react and Vorn had escaped off world to join the rebellion.

This was not the first time that Vorn Larcus's name had been included in intelligence reports that Lord Torr had seen. In fact during the last few years he had risen to become one of the rebellion's leading agents, responsible for many of their greatest successes in the sector. Several attempts had been made to bring him to justice, including by Lord Torr himself, but Vorn remained at large and clearly was continuing to play an active role in advancing the cause of the rebellion.

Lord Torr turned the video screen off and got up from the couch. Making his way to the office he maintained in his home he sat down at his desk and activated the computer terminal that was built into it, causing a holographic screen to appear in the air above the desk. Lord Torr opened up a file in which he had documented every piece of information he had about the activities of Vorn Larcus, the attack on the shipyard being the most recent of these. He adjusted this information to be displayed as a map of the sector and labels appeared to show the times when Vorn Larcus had been sighted at specific locations. From this it was easy to see that Vorn and his team had been especially active on Estran itself, despite the high security provided by the presence of so many Imperial warships in orbit and troops and agents on the surface. One such visit resulted in the kidnapping of a former Imperial senator, or at least that was how it was reported in the news. But the man in question had spoken out against Moff Horatian shortly before this, accusing him of not taking rebel activities seriously and in the upper circles of the Estranian parliament there were rumours that he had been targeted for elimination by the Empire for his seditious comments and had escaped by defecting to the Alliance.

Thinking about this gave Lord Torr an idea and a smile spread across his face.

He reached for the intercom built into his desk and activated it.

"Mack, is Corva still on the property?" he asked.

"I am afraid not Lord Torr sir." his protocol droid replied, "Mister Dratt departed approximately an hour ago to attend a gathering with a lady. Shall I see if I can raise him on his comlink?"

"No. If I know Corva he won't appreciate being disturbed." Lord Torr answered, "But I will want to see him first thing in the morning. In the mean time have my speeder brought to the front of the house and contact Lord Desh. If he's available then I'd like to meet with him this evening."

Lord Couran Desh had retired from public life years earlier but as a former Speaker of Parliament he remained a well respected figure, admired by both local and Imperial leaders on Estran. Significantly during his time serving on influential committees and as head of the planetary government he had been a friend and mentor to Vorn Larcus during his time in Parliament. Lord Torr was one of many prominent figures who still consulted with Lord Desh on a variety of matters. Most of these individuals were looking for endorsements of their ideas from a man who remained popular with the general public but Lord Torr also knew that the retired politician could be counted on to provide advice based on decades of experience in politics. On this occasion however, Lord Torr was looking for answers of a more personal nature.

"I'd like you to tell me about Vorn Larcus." Lord Torr said as he and Lord Desh sat down when the former arrived at the latter's home.

"Max my boy, is this little visit of yours going to be about your little vendetta with Vorn?" Lord Desh asked in response.

"I'd just like to get some more background on how he thinks, that's all." Lord Torr answered, "You knew him better than anyone else after all. In fact I believe that your family and his have know one another for a long time."

"Well if you can call about four thousand years a long time then I suppose yes we have. Would you consider

that a long time Max?" Lord Desh said.

"A long time, yes." Lord Torr replied, "Though of course the previous generations of his family did not cause such a scandal as Vorn has."

"Didn't they? Oh Max if not for scandal the Larcus family wouldn't even be in this sector. In fact they wouldn't even exist. But that's all in the past now."

"So the Larcus family knows how to hide scandals then?" Lord Torr responded, "I'm curious about how they think. How Vorn thinks."

"Ah, well let me tell you, never underestimate Vorn Larcus the third. Consider how his life has changed over the years. He started out in a privileged family before serving the Republic during the Clone Wars. He could have stayed here on Estran making himself rich supplying over priced goods to desperate people but he didn't. He got involved." Lord Desh said and Lord Torr frowned briefly, guessing that his comment about war profiteering was aimed directly at him. Lord Torr had done his best to hide how he had used the Clone Wars to enrich himself further but it was inevitable that a man with Lord Desh's connections would be able to uncover that information, "Then after the war ended he went into politics. He got involved again."

"Then he got involved with the rebellion's little insurgency." Lord Torr added.

"You have an interesting idea of 'little insurgency' Max. Those rebels are on the point of bringing the Empire to its knees. You see the same reports I do. Have you seen any grand Imperial victories recently? No. Neither have I." Lord Desh pointed out.

"I'm sure it's just a matter of time before the Empire regroup." Lord Torr said before he realised that he was being dragged off the subject he had really come here to discuss, "But what about Vorn?" he asked.

"Vorn can't just sit back and let the galaxy move on like I've done in the past few years. He has to get involved and he leads from the front. He doesn't let others do his dirty work." Lord Desh explained.

"So present him with a situation that could shape the galaxy around him and he'll rush right into it?"

"I suppose you could put it like that my boy. Though I wouldn't count on him making any stupid mistakes. He hasn't evaded the Empire this long by being stupid."

"Of course not." Lord Torr said, smiling. Then he got to his feet, "But I've taken up enough of your time. I really ought to be going."

"But you've only just arrived my boy."

"Perhaps, but I have what I need and I really must be getting on."

"As you wish, I'll show you out." Lord Desh said and he accompanied Lord Torr to the front door of his home and watched as he got into his speeder and was driven away by his chauffeur, "I've got a very bad feeling about this." Lord Desh then said to himself.

"You wanted to see me sir?" Corva Dratt said as he entered Lord Torr's office the next morning. Lord Torr had got up early and he looked up from his desk when his retainer entered the room.

"Ah yes, Corva. Take a seat please." he said and as the man sat down Lord Torr used the computer built into his desk to project the images of three people between them. Each of them had the appearance of having been taken from public surveillance footage and so the quality was less than could be expected from the best recording devices but they were still good enough that their faces could be made out clearly, "I take it you know who these people are?" he said and Corva nodded.

"Vorn Larcus's team." he said, "Tharun Verser, the ex-mercenary who Vorn was claiming had proof that the Estranian government was faking terrorist attacks right before you got him kicked out of Parliament. Kara Bilstran, some farmer's daughter from Tarlen and Jaysica Horbid from the same planet. She does their security and demolition work I believe. Am I right?"

"Almost. If recent information is to be believed then Vorn Larcus has married this Kara." Lord Torr replied and Corva smiled.

"Not bad. I've seen her up close and you certainly wouldn't kick her out of bed. But he must have thirty years on her." he said.

"Quite." Lord Torr said, "But I'm hoping that one of these individuals will be able to lead us to Vorn himself. Vorn Larcus has demonstrated a remarkable ability to remain out of sight when he wants to. On the other hand since they are less well known I'm hoping that one of these three might be more willing to make public appearance somewhere."

"You want me to grab one of them and make them tell me where he's hiding?" Corva asked.

"No, nothing so crude. What I want you to do is make contact with one and arrange a meeting between myself and Vorn." Lord Torr told him.

"A meeting? Why would he want to meet you?" Corva said.

"Because you'll tell him that I want to defect to the rebellion and to sweeten the deal you'll tell him that I'm offering to turn over details of the Empire's defence plans for Estran."

"If you don't mind me saying so my lord, he'll never go for it. It's a trap and he'll see that."

"Ah but that's where you're wrong Corva. Vorn may suspect a trap but the potential for a high profile defection will draw him in. Besides, I'm sure his team will tell him that it's an opportunity to take me out."

"Which it is." Corva said.

"Perhaps, but that's why you're also going to arrange for a unit of mercenaries to be at the meeting. Then when Vorn and his team arrive we'll take them all into custody in one fell swoop."

"As you wish. I'll get started on this immediately my lord." Corva responded as he got up to leave the room.

2.

This was not the first time that Lord Torr had attempted to take Vorn Larcus into custody, but it was the first time that he was using Corva directly in the attempt. The previous time he had instead placed an illicit bounty on Vorn without formal approval, contracting the services of a bounty hunter named Keena Vayal to capture him. Though she had been initially successful, Vorn's team had been able to rescue him before Lord Torr could take him into custody and hand him over to the Imperial authorities on Estran. The incident had been an embarrassment to both Lord Torr and Corva since it showed them up as incompetent, but it did offer Corva somewhere to start with his own operation.

Keena Vayal had disappeared some time earlier, but during the brief time she had worked for Lord Torr she had informed Corva of how she tracked Vorn Larcus down. As an unlicensed bounty hunter, Keena had maintained significant contacts in the sector's underworld and through these she had learned that his visits to Estran frequently involved trips to a somewhat rundown area of one of the cities outside the capital where he would meet with local contacts. It was following one of these meetings that she had ambushed Vorn and abducted him. Corva doubted that he could use the same tactic again, if he tried to walk right up to Vorn in the street then he and his team would undoubtedly recognise him and were highly likely to simply shoot him before he could present the supposed offer from Lord Torr to defect. However, if Corva could isolate one or two members of his team then, as Lord Torr had suggested, he could use them to take the message to Vorn. Just in case they refused, or if Vorn did not take the bait in spite of Lord Torr's insistence that he would, Corva would also trail them back to their hideout so that he could organise an assault on it later.

Lord Torr had shown Corva details on only three individuals known to be associates of Vorn Larcus, but Corva knew that there were two others who were the crew of the starship that his team used to travel around the sector. Though not formally a part of the rebel field team itself, they did act as part of it. The ship's engineer was known to be a male human named Tobis Dorfus, while its owner and captain was another human male whose identity was still unknown to the Empire. Allegations had been made that it was a man named Mace Grayle, a free trader who was also a personal friend of Lady Lynn Sharva. That Lady Sharva would knowingly associate with a member of the rebel alliance was unthinkable. That and the fact that the allegations had first been made by Vorn's son Garm Larcus who had currently been promoted to assistant director of the Imperial Security Bureau in the sector suggested that the claims were an attempt to smear Lady Sharva. Not only was she a fierce critic of Vorn Larcus, having taken his place in Parliament after his defection but she was known to be hostile to Garm as well, repeatedly claiming that the son of a traitor should not be trusted with a position of authority. Therefore, it was in Garm's interest to try and discredit her. There was also some disagreement over the vessel that Vorn's team used to get around the sector. By all accounts it was an unremarkable Corellian Engineering Corporation YT-1300 class transport. A good choice for a group wanting to travel without attracting too much attention. There were thousands of the class operating in this sector alone and that did not include those that visited from neighbouring ones. But whereas the class of vessel was known, the identity of it was as much of a mystery as that of its captain. The names *Grey Ghost* and *Silver Hawk* were mentioned in various reports but both of these ships were properly registered vessels and it was entirely possible that the rebels were using fake transponder codes to help them slip past Imperial ships who did not have the time to stop every YT-1300 flying just in case one of them was carrying rebel agent aboard.

However, even without the identity of the ship or its captain Corva still had a lot to go on. He knew the area that Vorn had been captured in and he knew the faces of most of his associates. All he needed now was to find someone willing to give them up and Corva knew that for the right price there would be a great many in that particular part of the planet.

Corva considered taking his own transport to the city where Vorn had been seen but ultimately decided against it in favour of public transport. This would mean him having to travel by foot when he got there but given that Vorn's team would likely be doing so as well that meant he did not have to worry about abandoning his vehicle anywhere should his targets go somewhere that a speeder could not. In any case, should he need private transportation then he could quickly acquire it, legally or not.

Taking a shuttle flight to the area known to be frequented by Vorn's team, the first thing that Corva did was book into one of the hotels at the local starport, asking specifically for a top floor room that overlooked the starport itself. This gave him the opportunity to study many of the vessels already landed there. As expected there were a number of YT-1300s among these and by using macrobinoculars Corva was able to study many of the crews as they came and went. All this served to do was confirm that Vorn's team was not among them but this did not put Corva off. He was smart enough to know that this meant he did not need to rush to locate any of the team before he departed from the hotel room to start his search.

The area around the starport was littered with various cantinas, diners and other places where beings could

go to eat, drink and meet with others. Keena had told Corva that it was outside a cantina that she had ambushed Vorn and another of his team and so it seemed like a logical place for him to start canvassing the locals. Knowing that the patrons of such establishments were not likely to look kindly on being interrupted while they ate or drank Corva instead focused his attention on the serving staff, speaking to them when they approached him to try and take an order.

"Actually I'm looking for some associates of a friend of mine." he said as his opening line, "They often come to this part of town and I was told that they could help me out with a business proposal."

Corva knew that it was best to keep things vague, giving the impression that he did not know the rebels personally and that whatever his reason for wanting to locate them was not entirely legal. This would then provoke one of two responses, either the individual he had asked would refuse outright to help him or they would ask for a description and Corva was ready to provide this in the form of images on the datapad he carried with him. These were not the basic captures from the file that his employer had shown him, instead they were manipulated images that placed the faces of the three members of Vorn's team plus the ship's engineer onto the bodies of other people in images taken in a more casual setting. Such quick forgeries would not stand up to any detailed electronic analysis of the image files but they were more than sufficient to fool a barman or waitress who was eager to earn a good tip in the shortest possible time.

The problem was that no-one who Corva spoke to admitted to having seen any of them.

However, the reaction of all the beings that he showed the images to were not the same and Corva was careful to study each one in detail. In most cases the reaction was one of confusion or regret that not being able to help would not leave Corva wanting to tip them, though he did anyway after thanking them for trying to help.

"I'll be around for a few days." he told each of them as he handed them a fifty credit note, "Let me know if you happen to see any of them."

But there was one individual, a muscular barman in a cantina located a short distance away from the starport that hesitated and Corva noticed a hint of a smile that suggested he recognised at least one of the faces on the datapad before he denied all knowledge of them.

"Are you certain?" Corva asked, "I've heard they spend a lot of time in this area and-"

"Look buddy," the barman interrupted, "I said I've never seen any of them before. Now are you going to order something or not?"

"I'm fine, thanks." Corva replied as he put the datapad away and then he turned to leave the cantina.

Outside he had gone less than ten metres from the door when he realised that he was being followed. Two muscular figures from inside the cantina had left just seconds after he had and started to follow him down the street. Corva was now presented with several options. Firstly he could attempt to lose them, but the mere fact that they were following him meant that it was a strong possibility that the barman had indeed recognised one or more of the rebels from their image and that made these two the best lead he had had so far. Secondly he could just attack them. Corva was armed with a heavy blaster pistol and vibroblade, both of which he kept concealed and he was confident that he could kill one and then be able to subdue the second before he could react. However, starting a blaster fight in the middle of the street, even a street that was probably used to violence was not a good way to maintain a low profile. Alternatively he could allow them to follow him back to his hotel room and try to ambush them there. Once again Corva was confident that he could beat both of the thugs following him but there was the issue of remaining anonymous. If they failed to report in then their associates would undoubtedly know that Corva was the reason and Vorn's rebel team could be alerted to his actions. Corva needed to be able to interrogate one or both of the men in such a way that no-one would know that he was responsible for what had happened and that required him to be able to turn the tables on the two thugs following him.

Corva turned and went inside a small shop that sold packaged food suitable for restocking a starship's consumables and made his way between the shelves, confirming that both of the thugs had followed him into the store before making it appear as if they were studying the items on sale closest to the door. Corva smiled at this. Had they been better at what they were doing then one of them would have followed him through the store while the other remained by the door to see him if he managed to give the first the slip. But with both by the door Corva was able to make his way towards the rear of the store and approach a member of staff, a wiry looking youth who was mopping the floor.

"Is there a back way out of here?" Corva asked and before the youth could reply he held out a bundle of banknotes. The youth's eyes widened at the sight of the money, Corva had meant it to be a significant amount to him and it was obvious that he had succeeded.

"This way." the youth replied as he leant his mop up against the wall and Corva handed him the cash.

"Quickly if you don't mind." he said and the youth nodded before leading Corva through a doorway that led to the storeroom and from there to the large loading door at the back of the building, "Thanks." Corva then said as he left through this.

It took about ten minutes for the two thugs to realise that Corva had escaped through another exit and they pushed their way past not only the youth who had shown Corva out but also two other members of staff as

they attempted to pursue him. However, by the time they reached the street behind the building there was no sign of Corva.

"Stang!" one of the pair exclaimed, "Mister Balve will be furious."

"He'll be even more furious if we don't get back and tell straight away." the other added, "Let's go."

The two men then started to head back towards the cantina they had followed Corva from, unaware that he was now following them. Initially the pair led Corva back to the cantina where they had first begun following him and Corva found a building close by with a fire escape that led all the way to the roof where he bribed the owner to give him access so that he could observe the cantina unnoticed until one of the two thugs appeared again. As soon as this happened Corva rushed down the fire escape and started to follow the man, making sure that he was not seen by his target as he had so easily noticed them. The man seemed unconcerned about being followed and he led Corva to an nearby residential area of the city. The buildings and streets in this area looked every bit as neglected as those nearer the starport and Corva was not surprised to see the man he was following head straight into one of the apartment blocks. Following him now became more difficult for Corva, requiring him to get closer to him in an environment that offered him few opportunities to conceal himself. Even harder though was following the man as he got into a turbolift and headed upwards. In response to this all Corva could do was watch the level indicator above the turbolift door until it stopped moving. Then he darted into the other turbolift and rode it up to that floor as well, hoping that it was the correct one and that the man would not happen to be standing right outside the turbolift door when it opened.

Cautiously Corva peered around the turbolift door to see which way the man had gone and he saw him just as he was disappearing round a corner and Corva rushed to make it to the corner before he could lose the man. Peering around this corner as well, Corva saw the man now stopped at an apartment door and as Corva watched he went inside. Now Corva had two choices, neither of which was without risk. Firstly he could force his way into the apartment but this would mean coming face to face with an unknown number of people, any of whom may be armed. Secondly he could leave the building and attempt to gain further information about what was inside the apartment. The risk with this second option was that if the man left the apartment again while Corva was gone he would be able to escape. On balance this second option was preferable. Even if the man was able to escape Corva would probably be able to acquire him or his associate at the cantina again and so Corva headed back towards the turbolift.

To get more information about the apartment that the man had entered Corva went to the building next door on the side that the apartment faced and took a turbolift up to the top floor. Here he made his way to the side of the building facing back towards the one he had just come from and quickly located a window that overlooked it. Then taking out his macrobinoculars he started to search for the man he had followed.

When he found the man he was looking for, Corva saw that he was sat at a table with four other men playing cards. He also saw that there was an empty seat and the next window along gave Corva a view into a bedroom where another man was in bed with a young woman, their clothing scattered on the floor beside the bed. Satisfied that he had all the information that he needed before entering the apartment, Corva was just about to lower his macrobinoculars when he heard a voice from behind him.

"What the hell are you playing at?" a male voice demanded and when Corva turned around he saw an angry looking man staring at him, "Pervert. We don't need-" the man continued but Corva had no intention of wasting time trying to provide an explanation as to why he had been peering in windows using macrobinoculars and so instead he just punched the man in his face and he staggered backwards with blood pumping from his nose. Then before the startled man could recover, Corva lunged forwards and delivered another blow to his abdomen that sent the man to floor where Corva kicked him twice before simply stepping over the groaning man as he continued to bleed heavily from his nose and he started to make his way back to the building next door.

Corva inspected the apartment door as well as the corridor immediately outside from the end of the corridor first, searching for any signs of improved security. In his experience some career criminals would rig the areas right outside their doors with surveillance systems to alert them to the presence of law enforcement officers or rival criminals or with booby traps capable of injuring or killing anyone who attempted to gain entry uninvited. However, this particular door appeared not to have any of such upgrades, suggesting that it was merely the residence of one of the occupants and not a place where criminal activity was planned.

Making his way up to the door Corva crouched down to examine the locking system. As was to be expected in a place like this, the lock itself was far from being state of the art and Corva knew just how to bypass it. Standing back up, he removed the lock panel carefully and let it hang on the wires connecting it to the control circuitry behind it as he drew his blaster. Then he reached inside the lock and pulled a wire loose before touching it against the right part of the circuit to trigger the door's motor.

The door slid upwards faster than any of the men sat around the table could react and before they even realised that Corva was there he had already shot one of them in the back with his blaster.

"Holy kriff!" the man Corva had followed here exclaimed as he dived from his chair. Meanwhile another of his

friends reached for a blaster and Corva fired at him next, sending him falling backwards as the blaster bolt passed through both him and his chair before striking the wall behind him.

Corva saw his target reaching for a weapon as well and he charged across the room and kicked it from his hand before using the butt of pistol to strike the back of the man's skull.

"Stay down!" Corva hissed before he heard the last of the man's friends in the room rushing at him from behind. Corva's hand slipped beneath his jacket as he turned, guessing that by the time he was facing this next opponent he would be too close to be able to aim a blaster at and he was right. The man had already closed to within arm's reach by the time Corva was facing him and he had a knife in his hand that he thrust towards Corva's stomach. However, rather than embedding itself in Corva's flesh the knife just embedded itself in the discrete armoured vest that Corva wore under his shirt. As the started man stared at Corva, wondering why his attack had had no effect Corva was able to produce his vibroblade and there was a high pitched whine as it activated. Then Corva used this to stab the man in his chest, slicing through muscle and bone until the blade of his weapon cleaved the man's heart in two and he died instantly.

"What the kriff?" a voice then called out and Corva turned to see the man he had seen in bed through his macrobinoculars now standing in the doorway of the bedroom in just his underwear and with a blaster in his hand. Before he could make use of his weapon, Corva took aim at the man while using the body of the stabbed man as a shield and he shot the man in the doorway in the head.

Before Corva's latest victim could hit the floor there was a loud screaming from within the bedroom and Corva ran to investigate. From the doorway he saw the woman he had observed from the neighbouring building now sat on top of the bed and making no effort to cover herself as she stared at the dead man she had only a few moments earlier been having sex with and screamed continuously. Corva had no time to waste in trying to calm the woman down though, so before she even knew what was happening he shot her as well. Leaving her body sprawled across the bed Corva then returned to the apartment door and closed it before turning back to look at the man he had followed here who now lay face down on the floor and groaning.

"You and I need to have a little chat." Corva said calmly as he walked over to the man and crouched down beside him, "I need to know how to find Vorn Larcus's people and I think that you can help me do that. Even if you don't know them personally I'm pretty sure that you know someone who does. That's why you followed me from the cantina."

"I don't know what you're talking about." the man on the floor groaned.

"Of course you do. You and your friend didn't do a very good job of keeping out of sight. That's how I was able to give you the slip and follow you right back there. Then you made it pretty easy for me to follow you here. Now how about you tell me about these people?" Corva said and he swapped his blaster for his datapad before calling up the images of Vorn's team again to show the man.

"I never seen any of them before in my life." the man said without bothering to look at the datapad and Corva sighed.

"And here was me thinking that you'd realise the situation you've managed to get yourself in and appreciate that I can kill you and try again with your friend or possibly the barman who I'm guessing had something to do with you both being sent after me. Now before I give you a second chance to tell me where I can find any of these people I want you to consider how you only really need one eye to look at my datapad." Corva said and he held his vibroblade menacingly close to the man's face.

"Okay, okay!" the man yelled, "I have seen them before. One of that Larcus guy's people owes Mister Balve money, a poodoo load of it."

"Which one?" Corva asked.

"I don't know. Honest!" the man protested, "Mister Balve doesn't give us the names of his customers unless he's sending us to collect payment from them. It could be Larcus himself."

"Unlikely. Vorn Larcus is not the sort to borrow money from a criminal." Corva said.

"All I know is that there's a guy that owes him money who often comes into the cantina with those people." the man said, pointing to the datapad.

"So you're saying that if I wait long enough they'll have to return to the cantina to make the next payment?" Corva asked, "Or else your employer will send someone like you to take it by force?"

"That's right." the man said, nodding, "Now I've told you what you wanted to know. I can't help you any more."

"No, you can't." Corva replied, "But if I let you go then I expect that you'll warn your employer that I was asking about Vorn Larcus and word will get back to him before I can do what I have to do."

"I won't. I swear I won't." the man said in a panicked sounding voice.

"Well I suppose that there's one way to make sure of that." Corva said and then he slit the man's throat with his vibroblade.

Before he left the apartment that now had bodies strewn across the floor Corva made his way to the table where the men had been playing cards and scooped up all of the money they had been using. Then he went into the bedroom and searched through the discarded clothing for any valuables that had belonged to either of the couple he had killed in there. When he finally left the apartment he was carrying enough stolen money

and other valuables that it would likely be labelled as a robbery gone badly wrong and no-one would suspect the real reason for his being there.

3.

"Do you really think that Odras Balve will be angry with you dad?" Cass Grayle asked from the *Silver Hawk's* co-pilot seat as her adoptive father Mace flew the ship through Estran's atmosphere.

"Well I did kind of cost him a lot of money on that deal with Onell the Hutt." Mace replied, "The Alliance may have unrestricted access to Onell's shadow port now but that's not something that Balve can spend like the money he'd have been paid under Onell's original offer. Hopefully we'll be able to come to some sort of arrangement with him, but I don't see it being cheap."

"Well at least you're not paying it." Cass pointed out, knowing that Vorn would be negotiating with the crime lord Mace owed money to on behalf of the Alliance to compensate him for the money he was supposed to have been paid by Onell the Hutt in exchange for getting Mace to deal with a group of pirates who were threatening his shadow port. Mace had attempted to negotiate a better deal for the Alliance with Onell but had inadvertently cut Odras out entirely.

Mace snorted.

"Yeah, right." he said, "I'm sure that the colonel will be able to smooth things over between Odras and the Alliance but I doubt he's going to just forget that I cut him out of a deal. "

"So what do you think he'll do?" Cass asked.

"My guess is that he'll increase the interest rate he's charging me. I've done good work for him before and he knows that he may need me again in the future. My contacts in the Alliance have proven useful to him and that's not something he wants to lose. The more money I owe him the more leverage he has."

"Dad, why don't you just ask Colonel Larcus for the money to pay him off entirely? From what I hear he managed to bring a lot of money with him when he joined the Alliance."

"Yes he did. But that money's not being replaced. Instead of owing Balve I'd owe Vorn and that scares me more."

"Why?"

"Because the colonel is my friend and I don't want to risk losing him over money. Especially the amount of money it would cost to pay off Balve in one go. You can borrow a small amount of money from a friend if you really need it but big loans like that have to come from family."

"We're family. Can I borrow money from you?" Cass said.

"What for? Just a few days ago you said you'd been saving up. Did you manage to spend it all at Onell's shadow port?" Mace said.

"No." Cass replied quickly, "I didn't buy anything."

Mace had guessed that this was not true, but the nature of what he suspected his teenage daughter had purchased was not something he really wanted to discuss with her and he also suspected that she definitely would not want to talk about it with him. But in the interest of sparing either of them any embarrassment he let the lie slide without mention.

"Okay, there's the starport." Mace said, "You take over." and he let go of the control column.

Cass smiled as she took hold of the controls in front of her and checked the instruments. Mace had been spending a lot of time teaching her to fly the *Silver Hawk* and she was at the stage where he trusted her to operate it alone just as long as the trip was not likely to involve any sudden manoeuvres such as in combat. Cass brought the *Silver Hawk* into land in a private docking bay, setting the ship down with just a slight shudder as she cut the power a fraction too soon. However, the lack of shouted insults from elsewhere in the ship suggested that the other occupants had barely noticed, if at all.

"Not bad." Mace said, smiling at his daughter, "Now let's go and see if everyone's ready."

Mace and Cass walked the short distance to the *Silver Hawk's* lounge where they found Vorn and his team as well as Vorn's gold coloured protocol droid Jeeves. However, both Mace and Cass froze and gasped when they saw that Jaysica appeared to have a metal container stuck on her head.

"What the hell happened to her?" Mace exclaimed.

"Same as always." Kara replied, grinning, "She's a klutz."

"I am not." Jaysica's muffled voice said from beneath the container.

"The little lady was checking the trash for an ear ring that she thought she'd lost when she managed to over balance." Tharun commented, at which point Kara held up an ear ring.

"The klutz had sat on it." she said, "It was stuck to the back of her pants."

"Gods I'm sorry." Cass said, "I didn't think the landing was that rough."

"Cass don't blame yourself. Sadly this pre-dates that slight bump." Vorn told her.

"Though it was quiet amusing to see the little lady fall right into Tobis as he tried to help her get her head out of that thing." Tharun added.

"Where is Tobis right now?" Mace said, wondering why Jaysica's unswervingly devoted boyfriend would

abandon her at a time like this

"He went to get Harvey." Kara answered just as Tobis returned along with his R5 astromech droid.

"Oh, err, I've got him now Jaysica." he said as he took Jaysica's hand, "Now, err, if you just kneel down and bend over."

"I bet she hears that a lot." Kara muttered and she and Tharun smirked as Vorn frowned at her, "Sorry boss." she said, "You can punish me later."

"Tobis just get Jaysica out of that thing." Vorn said. But then there was a chiming sound from the *Silver Hawk's* communications to indicate that a message was being received, "Go and see who that is Jeeves." Vorn told his droid.

"Of course Master Larcus sir." Jeeves replied before he started to shuffle towards the cockpit.

Tobis held Jaysica by her shoulders as she knelt down and bent her head forwards and from inside Harvey a small circular saw appeared.

"What's happening?" Jaysica asked.

"Err, just hold still." Tobis told her.

"Bet she flinches." Tharun said.

"She better not." Kara replied, "I'm the one that'd have to stick her back together."

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Jaysica called out as Harvey began to cut into the metal container, starting at the open end and slowly moving along a side where there was an obvious gap between the metal and Jaysica's head until all of a sudden the droid stopped cutting and let out a chirp.

"What's going on? Why did he stop?" Jaysica asked.

"Oh, err, I'm not sure." Tobis replied, "But, err, he may have loosened it." and he took hold of the container over Jaysica's head and twisted it free.

"Thanks." Jaysica gasped.

"Stang!" Kara suddenly exclaimed.

"What's wrong?" Cass asked.

"My recording rod." Kara answered, "This was so funny that I forgot to go and get it. Now we don't have it on video."

"Well your memories will just have to do." Vorn said as Jeeves returned to the lounge, "So who was it Jeeves?" he asked the droid.

"Colonel Larcus sir, it is a private call for yourself. Rather urgent it would appear." Jeeves replied.

"Okay I'll take it. The rest of you get ready. Tharun, I want you to back me and Mace up when we go to see Odras. The rest of you are free to wander but keep your comlinks with you and try not to get into any trouble."

4.

Corva did not want to spend all his time watching the cantina and risking being seen by any of the occupants who may remember his face so instead he decided to put his faith in technology. Purchasing a simple surveillance droid with a repulsorlift motor he commanded it to take up a position on the roof of a building directly opposite the cantina where it could monitor who came and went. The information gathered this way was then transmitted back to Corva now located in a guest house much closer to the cantina than the previous one had been.

For several days he waited, spending most of his time reading or watching video broadcasts and checking the screen of his datapad every time it alerted him to someone else arriving at the cantina. Of course he still had to sleep and so the first thing he would do when he got up each morning was review the images of everyone who had been into the cantina overnight.

Corva would have preferred a plan that would have produced more rapid results than this, but for now all he could do was sit and watch and for several days this was all he did. Right up until the surveillance droid alerted him to new arrivals at the cantina and checking his datapad he saw Vorn Larcus and his team entering the building.

"I have you now." Corva said to himself.

Corva instructed the droid to transfer all of the footage from the last few minutes to his datapad and he watched it carefully, paying close attention to the group accompanying Vorn. He saw Kara, Tharun and Jaysica as well as the engineer Tobis and the captain of their ship just as he had expected to. But also with them was a young woman that Corva estimated could be anywhere between sixteen and twenty standard years of age.

The group split up at the entrance to the cantina, with Vorn and his ship's captain heading inside while Tharun waited just outside the entrance. The former mercenary was wearing a cloak over his other clothing and from the way he was standing Corva guessed that he was concealing a weapon of some kind beneath it. Obviously what ever was happening here, Vorn suspected that there could be trouble and Tharun was going to be his back up. Meanwhile the rest of the team, consisting of all three women as well as Tobis turned away from the cantina and carried on walking.

Corva now focused his attention on the young woman he did not recognise from any of Lord Torr's intelligence. Since he did not know who she was it was logical to assume that she would not recognise him when she saw him and that gave him an advantage if he could just get to her when she was away from the others currently with her.

A disturbing smile spread across the face of the barman when Vorn and Mace appeared in the cantina operated by Odras Balve.

"Well looked what the bantha dragged in." he said, "You've got some nerve showing up here after what you pulled."

"Hey," Mace replied as he and Vorn walked up to the bar, "I operated entirely in good faith. Do you really think I'd show up here to try and smooth things over with Balve if I hadn't?"

"Maybe you just realise that having your head ripped off by a wookiee is faster than what'll happen to you if Mister Balve has to send a bounty hunter after you."

"Now I'm sure that there's no need for any unpleasantness." Vorn said, "If we could perhaps speak with Mister Balve then-"

"You're in luck." the barman interrupted, "As soon as he got word that your ship had landed he cleared his schedule. You can go right in." and he nodded towards a doorway at the back of the room.

"Thank you." Vorn replied, smiling at the barman before he and Mace headed for the door and Mace could not help but notice the two large guards outside it.

"Mace Grayle." Odras Balve hissed when he saw Mace enter his office, "The last time you were here I offered to include you on a deal that would have worked out very nicely for both of us and how did you repay me? You cut me out entirely. You come here and take advantage of my hospitality but you show me no respect. Tell me, how am I supposed to deal with this so that the idea does not spread?"

"Look Balve-" Mace began before the wookiee bodyguard standing behind Odras growled, "Sorry, Odras, I didn't know that Onell was going to trick me. If I had then of course my first loyalty would have been to you. Well, out of you and the hutt anyway. That's why we're here."

"Yes, our mutual friend Vorn Larcus." Odras said and he looked at Vorn.

"I'm here on behalf of the Alliance." Vorn said, "Since we were the primary beneficiaries of the deal Mace made with Onell we're hoping that we may be able to smooth things over with you."

"And how exactly do you propose to do that?" Odras asked and Vorn placed a small plastic case on the desk

between them.

Odras reached out and took the case, opened it and looked inside.

"Interesting." he said as he looked at the collection of precious stones inside.

"Untraceable." Vorn said, "Their refractive indexes do not appear on any Imperial database. You can release them into the market at whatever rate you want or use them as currency with those who consider them negotiable."

"Okay, this stops me just having Mace killed and taking his ship." Odras said, "But I'm still not seeing why I shouldn't call in his entire debt right now."

"Because the Alliance has free access to Onell the Hutt's shadow port." Vorn said, "Which means we can move goods through there without Onell taking a cut. It's only fair that the individual who helped us set up that deal should share in that wouldn't you say?"

"So you're saying that any ship I send to the shadow port can land there and conduct business without having to pay off Onell?"

"Within reason." Vorn said, "There will be certain cargoes that we won't tolerate. Slaves for example."

"Onell's already banned the trading of slaves at the port." Odras pointed out and he looked at Mace, "Your doing I believe."

"I don't see your bodyguard complaining about that." Mace commented, looking at the wookiee.

"Quite." Odras said.

"Certain narcotics will be banned as well." Vorn said, "Oh and the Alliance will want first refusal on any cargo that's being carried. Your ships will also be fuelled and serviced by Alliance ground staff as well. All this has been cleared from the top."

"Then I think we have a deal." Odras said, smiling, "But Mace there is one other thing."

"I thought there would be." Mace commented.

"I'm afraid that in the current economic climate I'm going to have to adjust my interest rates."

5.

Corva hurried from the guest house, using the surveillance droid to track the members of Vorn's team that had not gone inside the cantina with him. The group went to a nearby market area and Corva was happy to see them split up. Tobis and Jaysica went one way while Kara and the other young woman each went off on their own. The surveillance droid allowed Corva to follow Cass through the market and he caught up with her while she was examining a stall selling cheap looking jewellery. He stood beside a neighbouring stall, acting as if he was interested in the bizarre wire sculptures it sold while he was actually watching what the young woman did and when she walked away from the jewellery stall Corva waited a few second before suddenly darting after her, leaving the sculpture seller in mid-sentence. As the young woman continued to explore the market area she reached a cluster of dilapidated structures that were no longer in use and she walked between these in order to get to the stalls on the far side.

Seeing his chance Corva charged between the buildings after her and grabbed hold over her from behind, clamping a hand over her mouth to stop her from screaming. Then as she struggled he kicked open a boarded up window and barged into one of the buildings.

"Shush!" he hissed, "I'm not going to hurt you. I just need to speak to you about Vorn Larcus." and he set her down and released his grip on her.

Cass reacted by stepping away from Corva and drawing the sporting pistol she had holstered on her waist. But Corva was quicker on the draw and before Cass could point her weapon at him he already had the muzzle of his pressed under her jaw.

"If I wanted you dead I could just blow your head right off and if I had any other unsavoury ideas about what I could with you then I could have stunned you outside and be having my way with you while you were unconscious on the floor. Now are you going to put that blaster away?"

"Okay." Cass said and slowly she returned the sporting pistol to its holster.

"Good." Corva responded and he lowered his own weapon, "Now what's your name?"

"Cass. What's yours?" Cass said before considering that giving him her real name might not have been the best idea.

"Well Cass, my name is not important. But what is important is that my employer used to work with Vorn Larcus in the Estranian Parliament. Just like Vorn he's seen how the Empire really works, not the version portrayed on the censored media and he wants to do something about it."

"Why?" Cass asked, "The way the war's going there isn't going to be an Empire in a year or two."

"Perhaps not. But for the rebellion to win it needs supporters and my employer wants to become one of these. He has access to intelligence reports from both the planetary government and Imperial authorities. Plus he has industrial interests that can be used to support the war effort."

"So what do you expect me to do?" Cass asked.

"Just tell Vorn." Corva told her, "My employer will meet him face to face to discuss this. Ten tomorrow night. There's an abandoned warehouse that used to belong to Harden Corporation in Meritan City on the east coast. If Vorn can get there then my employer will explain everything. Now off you go Cass, deliver my message."

Cass frowned.

"Why do you want me to leave first?" she said.

"Because I'm leaving by a different route and I don't want you to see which way I went." Corva replied, "It's much safer that way."

"Sure, okay then." Cass said and with Corva watching her she backed away towards the opening he had made to get inside the abandoned building before quickly pulling back the plastic board covering the window and slipping back outside. Then she ran until she reached the more public area of the market she had been heading for and took out her comlink.

"This is Cass." she broadcast, "Can anyone hear me?"

"Oh, err, yes. I can." Tobis responded, "What's wrong?"

"Some guy just grabbed me and dragged me into a building." Cass said.

"Are - Are you okay?" Tobis said, "Where are you? We'll come and get you."

"I'm fine. The guy just wanted to talk to me. He said that he works for someone who used to work with the colonel and that he wants to meet up. I've got a really bad feeling about this." Cass said.

"Oh, err, right." Tobis said. Then there was a pause while he spoke with Jaysica, "Okay, err, get back to the ship. We'll join you there and wait for the others to get back."

When Vorn, Mace and Tharun returned to the *Silver Hawk* they found the rest of the team already waiting for them.

"What happened?" Mace asked, "I thought you were all going to spend the day looking around the market."
"Oh we were." Kara said, "But then a friend of the boss decided to kidnap Cass."
"You okay kid?" Tharun said, looking at Cass.
"I'm fine. He didn't really kidnap me, he just pulled me into an abandoned building so we could talk privately. He could have killed me if he wanted. He had a blaster and was faster at drawing it than me."
"So you tried to outdraw him?" Vorn said.
"Shoot first. Any decent smuggler knows that." Mace added. Then he looked at Cass, "So why was some creep pulling my little girl into an abandoned building. Because well meaning or not I'm in the mood to find him and express my displeasure."
"He knew the colonel." Cass answered, looking at Vorn.
"Me?" Vorn replied and Cass nodded.
"He said that he worked for someone who's in Parliament. Someone you knew." she said.
"I knew a lot of people in Parliament." Vorn said.
"Nerf herders mainly I bet." Kara commented.
"Looking back, yes most of them were." Vorn said, "But what did this person want with you Cass?"
"He wanted me to tell you that his employer wanted to join the Alliance. He's offering intelligence reports and support from his companies."
"I don't suppose this mysterious benefactor has a name does he?" Mace said.
"No. The guy who grabbed me didn't tell me his name or the name of the person he works for." Cass replied.
"So how is he supposed to join us if we don't know who he is?" Tharun pointed out.
"The abandoned Harden Corporation warehouse in Meritan City tomorrow night at ten." Cass said, "That's what he told me. His employer will be there."
"One moment." Vorn said and he pulled Mace aside. The two men headed for the cockpit and closed the door behind them.
"So what do you think they're talking about?" Jaysica asked.
"How all this is a set up?" Kara suggested.
"What do you mean?" Jaysica said.
"It's a trap." Tharun replied, "It's too convenient."
Just then Vorn and Mace returned from the cockpit.
"Okay I'm going to the meeting." Vorn said.
"Boss this is a bad idea." Kara said.
"Maybe," Vorn replied, "but the chance that a senior Member of Parliament is looking to defect is too good to overlook. Besides, I'm sure that we can ensure my safety."

Lord Torr smiled at his dinner guests as they finished their meal. As well as Lord Couran Desh, Lord Torr had invited fellow Member of Parliament Lady Lynn Sharva and also Rodge Larrs, head of the Committee for the Preservation of the New Order in the sector and his wife. Lord Torr's wife also sat at the far end of the table, though she had spoken little other than to Rodge's wife while the others discussed current affairs.
"And just in time." he said, glancing at the wall mounted chronometer and seeing that it indicated that the time was shortly before ten.
"In time for what exactly?" Rodge asked.
"The entertainment." Lord Torr said.
"I didn't realise that you were offering us dinner and a show Max." Couran commented, "Is there a band?"
"It's more of a holo drama." Lord Torr replied, "If you'd like to accompany me to my office I'll show you." then he looked at his wife and added, "Perhaps you and Missus Larrs would like to retire to the atrium. I don't think that this will interest either of you."
"Of course dear." Lady Torr replied with a smile.
While his wife and the wife of Rodge Larrs headed for the atrium, Lord Torr led his other guests to his office where the holographic display above his desk was already active and a set of chairs had been laid out so that they could all sit down and see the display clearly.
"What are we seeing here?" Lady Sharva asked.
"We are seeing the beginning of the end for a thorn in all our sides." Lord Torr answered with a smile, "The end of Lord Vorn Larcus the third."
"It looks like an empty room to me Max." Couran commented, "From lots of different angles."
The display was split into numerous different images, each one of which showed a large empty space inside a building that did not appear to have been used in a long time.
"Corva are you there?" Lord Torr asked.
"Yes my lord." Corva's voice responded and his face suddenly appeared in one of the images.
"Your signals are coming through clearly Corva. Could you please inform my guests of what is about to happen?" Lord Torr said.
"Of course my lord." Corva said, "As you can see from the image feeds I have troops deployed all around the

warehouse able to cover every part of the inside. I also have several sentries on the outside to warn of anyone approaching. An invitation has been issued to the traitor Vorn Larcus to come here tonight at ten in order to meet with another Member of Parliament who wished to defect to the rebellion. Instead he and anyone else that arrives with him will find twenty armed men waiting to take them into custody. The images you are seeing are from the recorders each man is wearing on his head.”

“And then we shall hand him over to the proper Imperial authorities for trial.” Lord Torr added, “So what do you think?”

“Arrested? Why not just kill him and be done with it?” Lady Sharva asked, “You know he’ll just use a trial for publicity and to spread seditious nonsense.”

“Justice must be seen to be done Lady Sharva.” Rodge Larrs responded, “We can edit out anything he says from footage that we release. Simply seeing him on trial at all will show the people that traitors will be dealt with according to the law.”

“Sir, someone’s on their way.” an unseen voice said.

“My Lord it appears that Vorn Larcus could be on his way.” Corva said.

“Good. Now go and make sure that you get a good close up of his face when he finds out that he’s just walked into a trap.” Lord Torr ordered. Then he looked at his guests, “Not long now.” he said.

6.

There were no specific signs of life coming from the warehouse as Vorn walked towards it but someone had turned the lights on which suggested that it was occupied by someone. Though alone he was not defenceless, he had his hold out blaster tucked into his pocket where he could easily reach it and he watched carefully for any indication that he was being watched or followed. Vorn did not hesitate as he walked up to the door and opened it before entering the warehouse.

"Hello?" he called out from just inside the doorway, waiting to see if anyone would reply but he did not advance any further.

"Wait." Corva whispered into his comlink as he watched from his hiding place, "Let him get further inside. Sentries, can you see anyone else outside?"

"No sir." one of the sentries outside the warehouse replied, "He came alone."

"Oh this is too easy." Corva said, "All we need to do is wait for him to get further inside and we'll have him." Still standing just inside the door Vorn drew his hold out blaster and started to advance cautiously further into the warehouse. Though the building had not been used in a long time there were still a few scattered containers present around the edge of the building, but other than that the interior was mainly empty, "I came as agreed." Vorn called out, "Is anyone here?"

"Right here my lord." Corva called out suddenly as he sprang up from behind one of the containers and pointed his blaster at Vorn, "Now if you wouldn't mind putting your blaster down you're under arrest." This was the signal for the mercenaries hired by Lord Torr to make their presence known and Vorn saw them emerging from their own hiding places all around him, advancing towards him with their weapons aimed at him.

"If you say so. There's no need for anyone to become violent." Vorn said and he tossed his blaster to the floor.

Corva grinned as he walked towards Vorn, looking him in the face. Meanwhile Vorn raised his hands but remained calm as Corva picked up the blaster.

"This is fake." he said, "Cast rubber."

"There is a war on you know." Vorn said, "Real weapons are somewhat hard to come by."

"Search him." Corva ordered, "He's hiding a weapon somewhere."

Several of the mercenaries rushed up to Vorn and started to go through his pockets, removing the contents and tossing them onto the floor while Corva watched. Meanwhile Vorn looked down at one of the mercenaries, a woman who had her hand in his trouser pocket.

"I don't suppose you could teach my wife to do that could you?" he asked, smiling.

"You know Max," Couran said as he watched the feed from the warehouse, "Vorn doesn't seem to be taking being captured too seriously."

"He's up to something." Lady Sharva added.

"It's too late." Lord Torr responded, "He's our prisoner now and there's no way his associates can fight their way through all those troops. Just watch."

"Oh I am watching Lord Torr." Rodge Larrs said, "Rest assured I'm paying close attention."

Nothing that the mercenaries found in Vorn's pockets looked remotely like a weapon but Corva noticed something odd when he saw Vorn's comlink as it was tossed to the floor and he bent down to pick it up. Brightly coloured electrical tape had been wrapped around the device to keep the switch in the transmit position, meaning that it had been sending a continuous signal all the time that Vorn had been inside the warehouse.

"What's going on?" Corva demanded, "Do you really think your friends can help you now?"

"I'm going to give you some free advice Mister Dratt." Vorn replied, "Duck."

"What?" Corva responded before he was interrupted by one of the sentries outside.

"Sir! Incoming aircraft from the east. Coming in low over the ocean." and then the sound of powerful repulsorlifts drowned him out.

Sat in the co-pilot's seat of the *Silver Hawk*, Cass squealed as Mace flew the ship in low over the water directly towards the warehouse where Vorn was located.

"Here comes the fun bit." he said and Cass flinched and closed her eyes.

Mace kept the *Silver Hawk's* altitude low as he flew the ship over land, calculating it carefully so that he passed over the warehouse at just under the speed of sound at a height less than ten metres above its rooftop. The atmospheric shock wave that the freighter was dragging behind it tore the roof right off the

building, sending debris flying and inside Vorn ducked in time to avoid being injured with Corva and the mercenaries diving for cover from the falling debris that remained within the warehouse.

Mace then turned the *Silver Hawk* sharply through one hundred and eighty degrees before flying straight back towards the warehouse and bring the ship to a complete halt above it. The he rotated the ship again, only this time vertically so that it was upside down and he and Cass could look down into the warehouse at Vorn and the mercenaries surrounding him.

But more importantly the *Silver Hawk's* only weapon, a laser cannon in a dorsally mounted turret now had a line of fire into the warehouse.

"Kara," Mace said into the intercom, "now."

Sat in the turret, Kara smiled as she swung her cannon to face downwards and fired a single blast towards the side of the warehouse. Everyone inside the warehouse felt the heat of the laser blast as it slammed into the floor and produced a powerful explosion as the foundations of the building were torn up. Kara then adjusted her aim and fired again, this time directing her fire towards the opposite side of the warehouse to produce another explosion. The effect of this was to scatter the mercenaries whose small arms were incapable of damaging the hovering *Silver Hawk*.

"No!" Corva called out as he saw the mercenaries run, knowing that the only real way to avoid being hit by the laser cannon was to stay as close to Vorn as possible where firing the laser cannon would endanger him as well.

Kara fired again, wiping out groups of mercenaries in threes and fours as they tried to escape. On the other hand Corva got his feet and charged at Vorn, dragging him back to his feet and pressing his blaster to the rebel's head.

"Tell your people to back off!" he yelled but Vorn just smiled at him.

"Unfortunately I appear to have misplaced my comlink." he said.

With most of the mercenaries now fled or killed, Mace flipped the *Silver Hawk* back over again so that opening the lower cargo hatch enabled Tharun to point his heavy blaster rifle out of it and he opened fire on the remaining mercenaries, firing short bursts at each of them. Then he took aim at Corva.

"I think maybe you ought to drop your weapon." Vorn told him, "My people know I don't like shooting people who can't shoot back."

Corva snarled.

"This isn't over." he said before he tossed his blaster aside, stepped back from Vorn and raised his hands over his head, "Sooner or later I'll find you again. You won't escape me a third time."

"Maybe not." Vorn replied as a line was lowered down from the *Silver Hawk*, "But bear this in mind. Twice now you've escaped with your life while trying to take me prisoner. It might be you who isn't so lucky next time. Thank you for transmitting that camera feed back to Maxamillion Torr by the way. Tobis sliced into the signal and we were able to figure out how many men you had and where they all were. That information was most useful."

Sat in Lord Torr's office, his dinner guests watched the footage of Vorn being lifted up into the *Silver Hawk*.

"Tell me Max old boy," Couran said as the freighter's cargo hatch slid shut once Vorn was taken aboard, "when exactly is your man going to arrest Vorn?"

"You should have just killed him when your men had him in their sights." Lady Sharva added, "Don't you see that he played you? Vorn knew what was going on and yet he still walked right into the middle of your little trap. Don't you see that he was rubbing your face in that?"

"I think I ought to be going." Rodge Larrs said, getting to his feet, "I need to report all this to the ISB. Perhaps they can salvage something from this amateurish debacle. You ought to have brought what you knew to us immediately, now you've let a dangerous terrorist slip right through your fingers. I am very disappointed with this." and then he turned around and walked out of the room.

"Better luck next time hey Max old boy?" Couran added as he too got to his feet, "Lynn, may I escort you home?" he asked, extending his hand towards her.

"Why thank you Lord Desh. I would be most grateful." Lady Sharva replied as she accepted her hand.

Meanwhile Lord Torr just stared at the feed still coming in from Corva's camera.

"Corva." he said.

"Yes my lord?" Corva responded.

"You're fired."

Cass accompanied Vorn and Mace to a cantina. Not the one owned by Odras Balve, but one that looked of even lower quality.

"What are we doing here?" she asked.

"Meeting a friend." Vorn replied, "You've already met him before."

The trio then walked over to a private booth at the back of the cantina where a hooded figure sat and four drinks were laid out on the table.

"Thanks for the warning." Vorn said as the rebels sat down, "So how did Maxamillion take it?"
"Oh don't mention it my boy. But poor old Max didn't seem too happy. I think he's looking for a new retainer."
Couran responded. Then he added, "I got the drinks in."
"Our usual?" Mace asked.
"Of course. It is a memorable beverage." Couran said, "Oh, I got one for your young lady here as well. I thought it was the gentlemanly thing to do though I wasn't sure if she was old enough to drink."
"I'm eighteen." Cass replied.
"It doesn't matter anyway." Vorn commented, "I doubt the owner is checking IDs."
"Go on then Cass." Mace said, "Drink up. The trick with this one is to gulp the whole thing down in one go."
Cass smiled as she picked up the glass in front of her and just as Mace had suggested she tilted her head back and tipped as much of the contents into her mouth as she could.
Then she leant forwards and promptly spat it all right out again.
"Stang!" she snapped, "That's vile."
"And that young lady," Couran said with a smile, "is why you should beware of strange old men buying you intoxicating drinks." then he and the other two rebels all took a drink from their own glasses, wincing as they struggled avoid spitting it out as well.