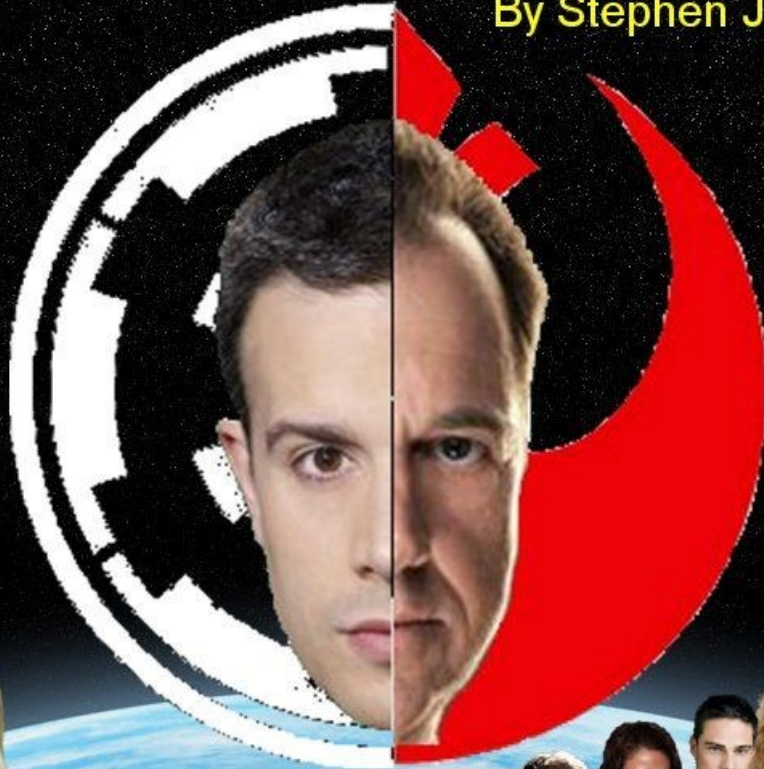


STAR WARS

7-09: The Man Who Would be Emperor

By Stephen J Dutton



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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 GUERILLA 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...

THE MAN WHO WOULD BE EMPEROR

WITH THE EMPIRE STRUGGLING TO DEAL WITH THE LOSS OF EMPEROR PALPATINE THERE ARE MANY BEINGS HOPING TO USE THE GROWING CHAOS TO THEIR ADVANTAGE. WHEN THE ALLIANCE RECEIVES WORD THAT SOMEONE IS ATTEMPTING TO UNIFY VARIOUS OUTLAW GROUPS TO CREATE A CRIMINAL EMPIRE VORN LARCUS AND HIS BAND OF REBELS ARE SENT TO STOP THIS...

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

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1.

"Holy kriff! What happened to them?" Cass Grayle exclaimed as she looked out through a viewport and watched the force of warships drop out of hyperspace close to the ancient space station that served as the headquarters for the Alliance to Restore the Republic in the sector. The Alliance's campaign to restore freedom to a galaxy that for more than twenty years had been dominated by the Galactic Empire had recently received a boost when the Alliance fleet mustered to attack the second of the Empire's planet-destroying Death Stars. This time not only had the battle station been destroyed but also both the Emperor himself and his henchman Darth Vader had been killed in the process, throwing the Empire into disarray as the remaining officials tried to figure out who was in charge.

"Language Cass." her adoptive father Mace said sternly.

"Dad I'm nineteen now, I'm old enough to-"

"Still be grounded." Mace interrupted her, "Now where's the *Renegade*?"

The returning warships had been diverted from the sector to take part in the attack on the Death Star and now that they were returning Mace was eager to be reunited with Captain Malia Mayan of the *Renegade* to whom he was engaged.

"Err, is that it there?" Cass asked and she pointed to a Corellian corvette that was now moving out from behind one of the two much larger mon calamari cruisers. Cass and Mace both stared at this corvette, taking note of the damage that it had clearly taken. One side of the central section had been blown away along with the turbolaser turrets mounted there while it also appeared to be running on only about half of its eleven engine modules. As the corvette came closer to the space station Mace saw that it had also taken damage to the forward pod where the bridge was located and he saw the distinctive markings that identified it as the *Renegade*.

"Holy kriff." he said when he saw this, "We better get to the hangar."

At one hundred and fifty metres long a Corellian corvette was one of the largest classes of starship that could fit into the space station's main hangar and the *Renegade* dwarfed most of the transport craft in there, rivalled only by a pair of bulk freighters that were being offloaded. Cass and Mace ran across the hangar, weaving their way between the various ground and starship crews currently present. Most of them were stationary, staring at the damage inflicted on the corvette and it was easy to get past them without needing to worry about where they were going.

"Malia!" Mace called out when he recognised the *Renegade*'s captain as she descended the corvette's access ramp at the head of a column of stretchers bearing injured crewmen.

"Mace!" she responded and she too broke into a run as they rushed towards one another, embracing and kissing when they met.

"Hi mom." Cass said as she joined them and Malia smiled at her before pulling her close as well.

"Hi Cass." she replied, "So how was Mace while I was gone?" and both women looked at him.

"Partying all day and all night." Mace said before Cass could reply.

"We stole a star destroyer." Cass commented.

"Ah yes, I thought I noticed a venator out there." Malia replied, "So does this mean Vorn's finally getting a fleet command and making you his first officer?"

Major Vorn Larcus III was the commanding officer of the rebel field team assigned to Mace's YT-1300 freighter, the *Silver Hawk* and when an Imperial admiral had planned to defect it had been stated that Vorn would have taken command of his Imperial-class star destroyer when the admiral transferred to the rebellion's strategic planning division. However, the defection had gone wrong and the admiral lost along with his ship and ever since Vorn had been waiting for another similar opportunity to come along.

"Ah." Mace replied, "It doesn't look like it. The major upset General Kain and his staff somewhat.

Malia groaned.

"What did he do?" she asked, "And more to the point did you help him?"

"Kind of." Mace replied.

"We rescued the major's son from Black Sun then let him and Vay go." Cass added.

"Vay? As in Vay Udra? That Dark Side adept Garm Larcus hangs around with?" Malia said and Mace nodded.

"That's the one." he said.

"Well I'm not surprised the general's upset. You let two enemy agents go. Mace are you insane?" Malia responded.

"Crazy about you." he replied.

Then before Malia could reply a voice sounded over the station's public address system.

"Captain Grayle. Captain Grayle to briefing room three. Briefing room three immediately." it announced and Mace winced.

"It never fails does it?" he asked.

"Well maybe if you hadn't been such a bad boy the general would let you have some time off." Malia said, "Now get going. I've got to make sure my crew get the medical care they need."

When Mace reached the briefing room he found that Vorn was already there along with two other rebels that he recognised though they were not part of his team. Shyla Nerin was in charge of the Alliance's support service in the sector and she controlled the supply of everything needed to keep the rebellion going.

Meanwhile Lieutenant Geran Pay was an agent of Alliance Intelligence. He had originally been sent to the sector to track down an Imperial agent within the Alliance but following her death had stayed on.

"Major." Mace called out as he approached Vorn, "What's going on? You know Malia just got back?"

"Yes, I'm sorry about that." Vorn replied, "But it looks like there's been some developments following the destruction of the Death Star."

"You mean that attempt by the rakata to dump a few thousand buzz droids on Estran? I thought the Imperial Navy put a stop to that."

"They did." Geran replied, "This is something different. Someone else trying to take advantage of the current political uncertainties."

"So what's new?" Mace asked, "That's how Palpatine took over in the first place."

"Our privateers have been hearing whispers." Shyla said, "Someone in the underworld is wanting to bring pirate crews together."

"That doesn't sound new either." Mace replied, "Pirates have always banded together to hit bigger targets. Even if the ships that just got back from Endor aren't ready for action yet, we still have the ones that stayed here ready for action."

"But no target." Geran said.

"That's what this is about." Vorn added.

"Yes," Shyla said, "you're familiar with Jacen Karn?"

"Yes, he's one of your procurement agents. Has a store set up at Onell the Hutt's shadow port." Mace said.

"Well he's noticed a lot of pirate vessels gathering there." Shyla said.

"So Onell the Hutt is putting together a fleet then?" Mace asked.

"No." Geran replied, "Our intelligence suggests that Onell's got nothing to do with this. Whoever is setting up this meeting is operating on Onell's turf but isn't part of his organisation."

"That's where we come in Mace." Vorn said, "We're to take the *Silver Hawk* to the shadow port and try to get into this meeting. Jacen will help us find the pirates and we'll try and find out what they're up to."

"I'm sorry about the timing by the way." Shyla commented, "I know Captain Mayan just got back."

"Hey I waited four months." Mace said, "I can wait a couple of days more if I have to. But I'm warning you, try keeping us apart again and we'll just elope and that'll be the last you see of either of us."

Summoned together for the mission, the rest of Mace and Vorn's team met them aboard the *Silver Hawk*. In addition to Cass there was Tobis Dorfus, Mace's engineer and the three rebels who made up Vorn's field team. Kara Larcus was Vorn's much younger wife, a former fighter pilot now turned unit medic. Tharun Verser was an ex-mercenary who provided most of the team's combat skills and finally Jaysica Horbid was their demolition and security expert.

Most of the team busied themselves making sure that equipment was accounted for and properly stowed while Mace and Vorn sat in the cockpit making preflight preparations and setting a course through hyperspace to the shadow port. Glancing up from the control console, Mace looked out through the canopy and saw Malia issuing orders to rebel engineers who had arrived to begin repairs on the Renegade and he paused, staring at her.

"Something wrong Mace?" Vorn asked when he noticed this.

"No." Mace replied, shaking his head, "I've got the feeling I'm not going to see her again."

"Boss!" a woman's voice suddenly called out from the corridor that led from the cockpit and Kara appeared in the doorway, "All the gear is stowed and everyone's ready." she added, "Well almost. Jaysica's got her feet stuck in a bucket and Tobis is trying to get them out." then there came an echoing 'Clang!' and Kara smiled, "Seems like he's managed it." she added.

"Then let's get out of here." Mace said as he started the *Silver Hawk's* engines.

"Something wrong?" Kara asked as she sat down behind Vorn and leant forwards to rest on the back of his seat.

"I think he'd rather be staying behind with Malia." Vorn replied.

"Sure, I get that." Kara said, "I feel the same about our little Vorn. Leaving him with the boss's little princess worries me that she'll turn him into a stuck up over dressed nerf herder." The Vorn she was referring to was not Vorn himself, but their infant son Vorn Larcus IV who was looked after by Vorn's daughter Lyssa. Lyssa

was in fact older than Kara and the two rarely saw eye to eye.

Mace did not respond to this. Instead he lifted the *Silver Hawk* off the deck and flew it straight out of the hangar into space. As they flew past the various rebel warships still positioned outside the station the three rebels in the cockpit saw that if anything the Renegade had come off lightly. Both of the mon calamari cruisers had suffered heavy damage and one of them, the *Ocean Queen*, looked as she was barely space worthy at present with massive holes blasted all down one side of her hull.

"Stang." Kara said softly as she stared at the damage, "Boss we've been in some of those compartments that are open to space."

"I know." he replied.

"Stand by to jump to hyperspace." Mace said as they cleared the swarm of ships and moments later the stars visible outside the cockpit blurred as the *Silver Hawk's* hyperdrive was engaged and it entered hyperspace. Like the space station they had just departed, the shadow port operated by Onell the Hutt was located on the fringes of the sector close to the nebula that bordered it and so it took only a few minutes in hyperspace for the YT-1300 to reach it.

There were no challenges from sentry ships or ground based control towers as the *Silver Hawk* approached the shadow port and entered the atmosphere, all were welcome here just as long as they paid their docking fees when asked and did nothing to annoy Onell the Hutt. The problem was that the environment of the largely barren world was less than ideal for operating a starship in and Mace gripped the controls tightly to maintain control over his ship as it descended through a powerful storm in the upper atmosphere.

Fortunately the shadow port itself was built in the network of canyons that covered much of the planet, the steep walls providing some protection from the storms.

However, although the *Silver Hawk* had not been challenged as it approached the shadow port it had still been tracked and as it set down on one of the available landing pads a group of heavily armed beings was marching towards the ship.

"Looks like the welcoming committee is right on time major." Tharun said as the rebels disembarked from the *Silver Hawk* and Vorn nodded.

"Everyone just keep your hands where they can be seen and don't make any sudden movements." Mace said as he stood with his hands by his side and a roll of bank notes in one.

"Your landing fee is eight hundred credits." the leader of the group of men said.

"Eight hundred?" Kara exclaimed and she looked at Vorn, "Boss this guy is ripping us off."

"These are uncertain times." the armed man said, "The mighty Onell the Hutt only requires a fair contribution for the protection he offers you."

"Don't worry, here's your money." Mace said as he counted out some of the notes, taking care not to let any of the band of thugs see how much was left. Taking the money from Mace the leader of the group then turned around and without another word strode off in the other direction, followed by his men.

"I must say," the golden coloured protocol droid standing just behind Vorn said, "the greeting we receive each time we come here seems to get ruder all the time." and in response R5 Tobis's astromech droid let out a short burst of whistles and chirps, "Well of course you wouldn't notice Harvey." the protocol droid said, "Your manners are no better anyway."

"Never mind that now Jeeves." Vorn told his droid, "We need to find Jacen. I suggest we start with his store. Sergeant Verser, watch our backs if you would."

"Yes major." Tharun replied and he unslung his rifle as Mace sealed the *Silver Hawk* and the others began to move off before he followed them.

2.

Jacen Karn ran a business that bought and sold second hand goods. Officially he dealt in 'unwanted' or 'salvaged' items but he rarely asked any questions about where items he purchased came from and was well aware that many were probably stolen from their legitimate owners. What then happened to the items depended on what they were. If they were items of military use then they often got put to one side, stored up until there were enough to make it worthwhile sending them back to the Alliance for use in its war effort. Otherwise it got sold on for a profit. Jacen also received shipments from the Alliance whenever one of their ships seized goods that were surplus to requirement but could be used to generate a profit.

The store was open when the rebel team arrived and Vorn went in first. As usual the store was filled with various bits and pieces for sale, some of which Vorn could not identify.

"Well, well. If it isn't Vorn Larcus. Good to see you again." Jacen said as he appeared from the back room.

"Jacen. I take it you're well?" Vorn replied as the rest of the team and their droids followed him inside. After Tharun entered he turned around and locked the door behind him to make sure that they were not disturbed.

"I am." Jacen said, "I take it you're here about the pirates." and Vorn nodded.

"The Alliance is understandably keen to find out what's going on. Our ships took a pounding at Endor and we can't afford to waste time dealing with pirates."

"Then you're in luck." Jacen said, "Because the word is that there's a meeting soon. Come with me." and he beckoned for the other rebels to follow him into the back room where he had a computer terminal set up that featured a large monitor mounted on the wall. The image shown on this was obviously a paused frame from a video, "I was just watching a movie." Jacen commented as he tapped the computer keyboard and the image changed to one that was divided up into segments, each one of which showed a still picture of a face that looked as if it had been taken without the knowledge of the individual concerned.

"Who are they?" Jaysica asked, "Wait, don't I know him?" and she pointed to one of the images.

"Oh, err, yes." Tobis replied, "He, err, he's the captain of a privateer vessel."

"So what's he doing in this line up then?" Kara asked.

"He's there because he's been here for more than a week." Jacen explained, "Normally our privateers just come here to off load whatever the Alliance doesn't buy and then leaves again. There's no sense staying here where crew can decide to wander off or get killed by any of the assorted scum and villainy that call this place home."

"Remind me." Mace commented, "Where do you live?"

"Oh ha-ha." Jacen replied, "My point is that there's no reason for him or any of these others to be here right now. Each of them is the captain of an outlaw vessel. Not just pirates, I've got smugglers and slavers too. But none of them are going to be earning money with their ships laid up here."

"Alliance Intelligence said that someone is trying to organise them into a single fleet." Vorn said.

"And that can only mean trouble." Mace added.

"I've heard the same thing." Jacen replied, "Not from any of these beings mind you and I've avoided confronting any of them about it. But other traders here have heard them talking and they aren't here by chance. Someone invited them to come here."

"But why our privateers as well?" Cass asked, "The Alliance would kick them out if they joined some larger pirate gang." Alliance privateers were given a list of approved targets when they signed on to act on behalf of the Alliance and any violation of the code of conduct that went with this meant that they would be cut off from Alliance support and hunted down like ordinary pirates.

"Perhaps whoever's behind it is making them a better offer kid." Tharun said. As a former mercenary he was no stranger to the idea of someone trying to buy off the opposition forces before a battle.

"Or at least one good enough to get their attention." Vorn added, "Jacen have you tried approaching the Alliance liaison officer of his vessel?" but Jacen shrugged.

"I wouldn't know them even if I saw them." he answered, "Apart from those of you who come to my door and identify yourself I know hardly anyone else in the Alliance. Besides, I can't prove who I am either. Even if I could I'd risk exposing myself."

"I guess that's a 'No' then." Kara said, "So I guess we need to start following these nerf herders until one of them leads us to our evil criminal mastermind."

"We could also try asking some of the other traders." Vorn suggested and he looked at Jacen, "What about that fence you introduced us to before?"

"What Jek? Yeah, he'd be a good place to start. He sometimes arranges raids for stuff he knows people want so he has contacts we could use." Jacen replied.

"Okay then. Kara, could you handle that?" Vorn said and Kara nodded.

"Can do boss." she replied, saluting.

"Take Cass as well." Mace added, "The rest of us can see if we can find any of these beings around." and he looked at the display again.

"We'll need copies of the images and information on where they were taken." Vorn said as Cass and Kara headed for the exit.

"Sure." Jacen said, "I can download it all to your datapads easily."

Kara was familiar enough with the shadow port to know where Jek Deray sold his mainly stolen goods from so she led the way while Cass followed close behind. Kara made sure to keep an eye on the teenager just in case any of the unsavoury inhabitants of the shadow port decided that the sporting blaster pistol she carried openly here was not enough of a deterrent.

Entering Jek's place of business it was easy to spot the difference between him and Jacen. As a member of the Alliance Jacen had to operate under a strict code of conduct that barred him from selling certain items. Jek on the other hand would sell almost anything to almost anyone, drawing the line only at any living animal or sentient being.

"Jek? Remember me?" Kara asked as he saw her and smiled.

"Of course I do." he replied, "Where've you been?"

"Oh here and there." Kara replied, "This is Cass by the way." and she indicated Cass.

"So what can I interest you in?" Jek asked.

"Just information for today." Kara replied.

"We're looking for whoever's gathering pirates here." Cass added and Jek, who had been leaning on a counter straightened up.

"What makes you think I know that?" he asked.

"Because you know how to get things people want." Kara answered, "That means you must be speaking to the people who can obtain it."

"That means pirates." Cass added.

Jek was about to respond when the door to his store slid open again and a young red haired woman entered.

"Hey Jek!" she called out, "Jym asked me to see you have any-" and then she suddenly stopped speaking when she saw Cass and Kara, her eyes widening and jaw dropping, "Oh kriff!" she exclaimed before turning around on the spot and rushing back out of the store.

"Tayal Lineer you get back here!" Kara yelled as she set off running after the other woman, knocking over some of Jek's merchandise in the process.

"What the hell was that about?" Jek asked, looking at Cass.

"Oh they've met before." Cass replied, "And I've got a bad feeling about this."

Outside the store Tayal ran as quickly as the crowded street allowed, desperate to escape Kara who was hot in pursuit. It quickly became apparent to Tayal that she could not easily outrun Kara and so she instead looked for somewhere that she could try to hide from her. Here the lack of any formal planning in the construction of the shadow port was an advantage. Over the years that the shadow port had been active many businesses had come and gone, each one either digging out a fresh space in the side of a ravine or making use of an older one and modifying it according to their own needs. As these fell out of use this left a number of unused caves and tunnels scattered all over the shadow port.

Seeing a darkened opening in the rock face, Tayal ducked inside it. As she had expected the tunnel was abandoned and appeared to have been so for some time. Unfortunately for her Kara had been close enough to see her enter the tunnel and she halted at the entrance and looked into it as she produced a glow rod and activated it.

"Oh you think you can get away by running into the dark?" Kara called out as she drew her blaster as well and then she began to creep into the tunnel.

Tayal turned back around and headed deeper into the tunnel. She had a blaster of her own but it was a compact holdout model, much smaller than Kara's military model that significantly out-ranged Tayal's. As she got deeper into the tunnel she found that there were openings along each side that led to rooms dug out of the rock. Whatever function these had served was not obvious and in any case Tayal cared only that they gave her an opportunity to escape. Tayal side stepped into one of the rooms and reached into her jacket for the baton she kept there. Then as she saw the light from Kara's glow rod she flicked her wrist and expanded it.

The sound of the baton expanding gave away her position and Kara spun around, aiming her blaster towards Tayal. But the other woman struck quickly, using her baton to knock the blaster from Kara's hand. Kara winced as she jumped back and Tayal moved forwards to get her back within reach of the baton. To avoid fighting one handed Kara dropped her glow rod as well and then lunged forwards, aiming to grab hold of Tayal's wrist to stop her making use of the baton. Tayal saw what Kara was trying and pulled back the baton, but the move stopped her from attempting to deliver another blow and Kara took the opportunity to keep moving and slammed right into her, pushing her up against the rock wall.

Tayal tried to bring the baton down but Kara was already expecting this and she reached up and pushed the

hand holding it sideways. This caused Tayal's hand to hit the wall behind her as well and the force of the impact knocked the baton from her grasp. But Kara did not let go of her grip on Tayal's arm. Instead as well as grasping it by the wrists she quickly grabbed it just below the elbow as well and twisted the whole lower arm the wrong way. Tayal let out a shriek as Kara attempted to dislocate her elbow, bending over to try and take the pressure from her arm. But the move had just been the first part of what Kara was planning and as Tayal bent over Kara pulled her away from the wall and twisted her entire arm behind her back before shoving her all the way across the passageway to slam her face first into the opposite wall.

"Down!" Kara yelled right into Tayal's ear, "Down on your knees."

"Okay! Okay!" Tayal replied, "You don't need to deafen me."

"Deafen you? Oh laser brain that's the least of your worries right now." Kara said as she forced Tayal first to her knees and then pinned her to the floor. Then kneeling on Tayal's spine Kara reached under her waist and began to undo her belt.

"What are you doing?" Tayal exclaimed.

"Getting something to tie your hands with." Kara answered, "No need to get excited."

3.

Vorn's comlink chimed while he and Mace watched a cantina close to a cluster of landing pads, hoping to see one of the outlaw captains Jacen had photographed.

"Vorn." he said as he answered it.

"Boss I need you back at the Silver Hawk." Kara said.

"What's wrong?" Vorn asked.

"Nothing. Honest." Kara replied, "But I've got a surprise for you."

Vorn sighed.

"Kara what have you done. He said.

"Only what I had to. Though I won't pretend I didn't enjoy most of it." Kara told him, "Just get back here and bring the others. Trust me, you'll love this." and then Kara turned off her comlink and Vorn looked at Mace.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." he said.

"Me too." Mace added, "But we better get back to the ship anyway."

"We'll get the others along the way." Vorn replied.

Walking back to the *Silver Hawk*, Mace and Vorn met up with the other four rebels, including Jacen, watching out for the pirates suspected of being part of the effort to create a united pirate fleet and collected their droids from his store. Arriving back at the *Silver Hawk* they found it quiet, with the access ramp closed and locked from the inside but this was solved simply by Mace entering his access code to lower it.

"I wonder why Kara and Cass locked themselves in?" Jaysica said as she climbed the ramp arm in arm with Tobis.

"I don't know." Vorn replied, "It's as if they were worried about someone trying to get in before we got back." then he called out, "Kara? We're back."

"In here boss." Kara replied, leaning out of her cabin and looking into the lounge, "I was just putting something on my hand. Look. It's all bruised now." and she held out her right hand to show Vorn the mark left by Tayal's baton.

"So what did you bring us all back here for?" Tharun asked and Kara smiled.

"Come with me." she said and she walked past the others to the cargo hold and went inside.

"Is she always like this?" Jacen asked.

"Pretty much." Tharun replied as he turned to follow.

Inside the hold Kara walked up to a cargo container positioned in the middle of the room and sat down on it, smiling and then she slapped the side.

"Here it is." she said.

"It's a box." Jaysica said.

"Err, ah, it's one of ours anyway." Tobis added.

"The box isn't the surprise." Kara replied, "It's what's inside." and she got up and as she opened the box the others crowded round to see, "So do you like it?" Kara asked as she stepped aside to reveal Tayal curled up in the crate with tape wrapped around her hands, ankles and across her face, as well as more around her body to pin her arms against it.

"I don't believe it." Mace said, "Tayal Linear."

"Who?" Jacen asked.

"She used to be one of us." Jaysica said and then she frowned, "But her team decided to defect and ruined one of our missions in the process."

"Was it really necessary to do this to her Kara?" Vorn asked.

"Never mind necessary. It was payback." Kara answered, "She left me tied to a bed when her lot were trying to steal those gems."

"Managed it more like." Tharun commented.

"Get her out of that crate." Vorn said and both Tharun and Tobis moved forwards to lift Tayal out of the container, "And get that tape off her face." Vorn added.

There were two strips of tape on Tayal's face, one over her eyes and the other over her mouth and Tharun reached out to rip each piece off in turn. He started with the one over Tayal's mouth and she let out a cry as it was ripped free suddenly.

"Ow! That hurts." she complained as Tharun handed the use tape to Kara, "Be more-" and then Tharun ripped off the tape blindfold as well, "Ow! You better not have ripped off my eyebrows doing that." she added, scowling.

"Not your eyebrows but I think you lost most of your moustache." Kara replied, holding out the tape she held.

"Enough Kara." Vorn said and he looked at Tayal, "Now why don't you start by telling us where Major Shrell and the rest of your team are?" he asked, "And do be quick about it because we have other things to be

doing.”

“Kriff off.” Tayal replied, “Jym doesn't care about your rebellion any more and we all know you won't hurt me.”

“I will.” Kara said, “Badly.”

“No you won't Kara.” Vorn said and she pouted.

“But boss.” she said in a high pitched, whining voice.

“Don't 'But boss' me.” Vorn said, “None of us is to lay a finger on this woman. But I do expect her to answer our questions.”

“Then you're all out of luck.” Tayal said.

“We can't leave her here alone major.” Mace pointed out, “Someone would have to stay behind to keep an eye on her.”

“Not to worry Mace.” Vorn replied, “If she doesn't want to talk we'll just let her go.”

“You will?” Tayal responded in surprise.

“We won't.” Kara said, frowning and she held up her bruise hand, “Look. She hit me with a stick. I should get to hit her with one as well.”

“Then it's fortunate that I'm in command here.” Vorn said and he walked over to the controls for the cargo hatch in the floor of the hold and opened it, “There you are Miss Lineer. Out you jump. It's just a couple of metres.”

“Fine. Untie me.” Tayal said and she turned to Tharun and held up her hands that remained wrapped and bound together with tape as much as the tape around her body would allow.

“Stand down Sergeant Verser.” Vorn ordered, “No one will take any action to assist this young lady. She doesn't deserve it.”

“Oh so how am I supposed to get free?” Tayal asked, staring at Vorn now and he shrugged.

“I'm sure that after you've hopped your way back to the *Scarlet Knife* your crew mates will untie you.” he said.

“Are you insane?” Tayal exclaimed, “I'd never make it through the port like this.”

“Yes, you'd be lucky to just end up as a door prize at one of the more interesting cantinas.” Jacen said in mock agreement.

“So what will it be Miss Lineer?” Vorn asked, “Will you co-operate or would you like me to ask Kara to give you a hand with that first step?” and Kara grinned.

“Oh go on.” she said, “Don't say a thing. I dare you.”

“What do you want to know?” Tayal asked as she peered down through the open hatch at the landing pad below and considered the possibility that the first being to find her there helpless would have her best interests at heart.

“Let's start with why are you here?” Vorn said.

“Jym got word of work.” Tayal answered.

“What sort of work?” Mace asked.

“My sort of work.” Tayal replied, “Stealing stuff. Someone's putting together a crew to pull large jobs now that the Empire's distracted. More than one crew in fact and we came to see if it was worth signing up.” then she noticed the looks that the rebels were exchanging with one another.

“Major that sounds like-” Jaysica began.

“The major knows little lady.” Tharun interrupted and Tayal smiled.

“That's what you're all here for isn't it?” she said, looking around, “You're here to stop the deal.”

“Never mind that.” Vorn said, “Tell me where we can find Jym Shrell.”

“He's not afraid of you.” Tayal said.

“He should be.” Tharun said, “Unless you've added more members to your crew since we last met we outnumber what he's got left by two to one.” and at that point Mace frowned and looked around.

“Just tell us where he is.” Vorn said, “Alternatively you can always try not only finding a way to get back to your ship but also doing it without us just following you.”

“Okay. The ship's at the north end of the port. Pad forty-two.” Tayal answered, “Now do you have any more questions or are you going to untie me now?”

“I have a question.” Mace said, raising his hand, “Where's Cass?”

“Oh stang!” Kara exclaimed, her eyes widening, “I left her at Jek's place. She's probably still there.”

“There.” Jacen said, pointing out a landing pad to Vorn, Jaysica and Tharun, “That's pad forty-two.”

“And that's the *Scarlet Knife*.” Vorn replied as he recognised the old barloz-class medium freighter that sat on it.

“So do we storm her?” Tharun asked and he lifted a set of macrobinoculars to his eyes to get a better look at the ship.

“No. Not yet at least.” Vorn replied, “We didn't come here to fight Jym's people and provided we get what we want I'm happy to ignore them this time.”

“Will the Alliance see it that way?” Tharun asked, “They got pretty angry that you let- wait. Movement.”

Quickly, Vorn took out his own macrobinoculars and also pointed them towards the *Scarlet Knife*.

"Jym." he said as he saw the man who had been his opposite number aboard the *Scarlet Knife* when its occupants had still been a part of the Alliance.

"Where's he going?" Jaysica said, "I can't see."

"Looks like he's going for a drink." Vorn replied as he watched Jym head for a cantina, "I think we should join him."

4.

Jacen did not accompany Vorn and his two team members into the cantina. The more any of the *Scarlet Knife's* crew saw him with Vorn's rebel team the more likely it would become that they would realise that he was a member of the Alliance as well and that was knowledge that Jacen preferred to keep to as few people as he could. Therefore while the others headed for the cantina he returned to his store, avoiding the *Silver Hawk* where Tayal was being held as well.

Though many cantinas at the shadow port served imported alcoholic drinks, this one served only beverages made on the premises and when Vorn entered with Tharun and Jaysica they saw Jym taking a bottle of something from the bar to a table on the far side of the room, his attention for much of the way focused on the semi-clad twi'lek dancing girl on a central platform surrounded by jeering males of several species.

"I don't like this place." Jaysica said, frowning as she looked at the dancing girl.

"Oh come on little lady." Tharun said, "Don't get jealous of her. If Tobis was here I'm sure he wouldn't mind that you can't dance like that. I mean Lyssa can't and it doesn't bother me."

"That's my daughter you're talking about." Vorn commented, "Even if she is your wife as well."

"Sorry major." Tharun replied.

"I'm not jealous anyway." Jaysica said, "Tobis would never come to anywhere like this."

"You do realise that he came to a lot of places like this growing up?" Tharun pointed out to her, "The crew of the ship he worked on took him to all sorts of-"

"Oh never mind that now." Vorn hissed, "We need to get to Jym. I'll go over and speak to him and I want you two to hang back and be ready to grab him if he tries to run." and he started to head in the direction of Jym's table.

"I still don't like this place." Jaysica muttered, glaring at the dancing girl. But as she turned her head back in the direction of her travel she suddenly found that she was about to walk right into a large aqualish and she squealed as she bounced off him and fell backwards. Enraged the aqualish spun around and yelled at her in his own language as she lay on the floor and the sudden outburst attracted the attention of many in the cantina, including Jym.

"Oh kriff!" he exclaimed and he leapt up from his seat and drew his blaster, a heavy hitting pistol and headed for the exit.

"Quick!" Vorn exclaimed as he turned to help Jaysica to her feet, "We need to get after him." but then the aqualish shoved him and starting yelling again.

"Allow me to explain." Tharun said as he stepped forwards and suddenly head butted the aqualish before driving his fist into the alien's stomach. With the aqualish now temporarily incapacitated the three rebels ran from the cantina, Vorn dragging Jaysica behind him.

In the street outside there was no sign of Jym, however and the rebels looked around frantically as they searched for him.

"He can't have got far." Vorn said.

"Won't he go back to his ship?" Jaysica asked.

"Maybe." Vorn replied, "But he may not know we know where the *Scarlet Knife* is and be looking to draw us away from it. Besides, if he has gone back there then we're in no position to attack their ship. But there is something else we can try. We need to get back to the *Silver Hawk* quickly."

"What for?" Jaysica asked.

"Never mind that now." Vorn replied, "Just hurry. We may not have much time."

Vorn was keen enough to get back to the *Silver Hawk* quickly that he hailed one of the many speeders that acted as taxis around the shadow port and paid the exorbitant fee the driver charged while ignoring the suggestion of how Jaysica could pay off the fee in other ways. Leaping out of the speeder when they returned to the *Silver Hawk's* landing pad the rebels rushed up the access ramp and into the ramp where they found Tayal now secured to a seat with its safety harness her mouth once again taped.

"Where are her things?" Vorn demanded as he entered the lounge, ignoring the fact that he had just walking in on Cass and Kara both using marker pens to draw on Tayal's face while she was stuck to the chair.

"I left them over there boss." Kara replied. Then she added, "Boss, do you she'd look hot in glasses?"

"I'm not bothered." Vorn said as he darted over to the table and peered over it to where Kara had left a bag filled with Tayal's belongings on the couch behind it.

"Well I think she would." Kara said and as Vorn was tipping the bag out on the table she placed a hand on top of Tayal's head to grip it and began to draw circles around her eyes.

"A-ha!" Vorn exclaimed, "Here it is." and he held up a comlink.

"A comlink?" Jaysica said, "What do you need that for major?"

"Because sooner or later the rest of the *Scarlet Knife's* crew will attempt to warn our guest over there about

us.” and Vorn looked at Tayal and groaned when he finally noticed what Cass and Kara had done. As well as the spectacles, they had drawn thick eyebrows above her eyes, written the words 'NERF HERDER' across her forehead and over the tape gag they had drawn a large mouth that had gaps in its teeth, “Oh what have you done that for?” he asked.

“For fun?” Kara replied, “I think she needs some facial hair though. You know, to replace what got ripped off when Tharun pulled off her gag.” and Vorn sighed just as Mace and Tobis entered the lounge from the direction of the cockpit.

“Back already major?” he asked.

“Yes.” Vorn replied, “And I must say that I'm not very impressed with what's happened in my absence.” and he looked at Cass and Kara.

“It's your wife sir.” Mace said, “She's a bad influence on my little girl.”

“Yeah.” Kara added, looking at Vorn and smiling, “I've been a bad girl. What are you going to do with me?”

“Stang that's creepy.” Tharun said, “No man should have to listen to his mother in law making suggestive remarks like that.” and Kara shuddered.

“Stop calling me that.” she said, “You're older than I am.”

“I say it like I see it.” Tharun said before adding, “Mom.”

Well if that's how you see it,” Kara responded as she got to her feet and holding up the marker pen she had in her hand, “then maybe you need glasses as well.”

“Oh no. Stay away from me.” Tharun said as Kara advanced and then he turned and darted through the door leading into the hold.

“Come back here!” Kara shouted as she ran after him and she started to chase Tharun around the central core of the Silver Hawk Vorn turned to Mace and held up the comlink.

“Jym spotted us.” he said, “So I'm betting that he'll try and warn Tayal to get back to the *Scarlet Knife*. I intend to be the one to answer him.” and then he turned on the comlink and sat down. Then as he set the comlink down on the table in front of him he looked at Tayal and added, “Actually you do look good in glasses.” and she scowled.

As it happened Vorn did not have to wait long for someone to try and contact Tayal via her comlink and when it chirped Vorn picked it up and activated it, remaining silent and waiting for the person on the other end to speak first.

“Tayal?” a woman's voice said and Vorn recognised this as belonging to Lannaye Curve, the *Scarlet Knife*'s ever cautious first mate and engineer. When Tayal heard this she tried to call out, her call reduced to almost nothing by the tape over her mouth.

“Hello Lannaye.” Vorn said, “It's Major Larcus. Could you put Jym on for me?”

There was no reply right away and Vorn wondered what was happening right now aboard the *Scarlet Knife* as its crew correctly guessed that Tayal was likely a captive aboard the *Silver Hawk*. But the pause ended when Jym's voice was heard.

“Larcus.” he said simply.

“Hello Jym.” Vorn replied, “We just missed you in the cantina. Why didn't you stay to chat?”

“I've nothing to say to you.” Jym told him.

“Oh really? And your young friend Tayal has been so helpful. How else do you think we found out that your ship's on pad forty-two?” Vorn said and there was another pause.

“What do you want Larcus?” Jym asked.

“To talk. In person.” Vorn told him.

“Okay there's a cantina-” Jym began.

“No.” Vorn interrupted, “You come to us. Unarmed of course. We'll talk and then you can take Tayal with you.”

“What if I don't like what you have to say?” Jym said.

“Then my guess is that you'll pack up and leave this planet for a while.” Vorn answered, “We didn't come here to find you and we can't waste time fighting you when there's other work to be done. At the same time you know you can't take us on and stand a reasonable chance of taking us all out without losing some of your own people as well. In fact since even with Tayal back with you we still outnumber you I'd say the odds in a fight were with us. So what do you say Jym?”

“Alone and unarmed?” Jym replied, “You know I'm not dumb enough to go anywhere unarmed here.”

“Then bring some of your crew. They can wait outside the ship and you can leave your weapon with them.” Vorn suggested and there was a pause during which Vorn thought he heard the sound of people talking too far away from a microphone for it to pick their voices up clearly. Then Jym spoke again.

“Okay I'll be there.” he said, “Where are you?”

“East side. Pad ninety-three.” Vorn said and the channel suddenly went dead. Vorn set the comlink down on the table and looked towards the hatch that led to the crew cabins, “Jeeves.” he called out, “We'll be having a guest for dinner.”

“Oh dear Major Larcus sir.” the gold coloured protocol droid replied as it shuffled out of the cabin Tharun and

Vorn shared, "We have very little in the way of high quality food to offer."

"Oh whatever you can rustle up will do fine Jeeves." Vorn said, "But avoid those packets of hot chocolate Kara put in the cupboard up there. I suspect it's laxative chocolate and she's hoping Jaysica will drink it all again."

5.

Jym Shrell had a stern look on his face as he walked up the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp. At the top both Mace and Tharun waited with rifles in their hands just in case Jym's crew attempted a double-cross. Not far from the *Silver Hawk* the ex-bounty hunter Travis Jesler and the *Scarlet Knife's* owner Anzar Deller waited, both of them also wielding rifles.

"What the kriff happened to you?" Jym said as he stared at the ring in black marker pen drawn around one of Tharun's eyes.

"He was too slow." Mace replied. Then he glanced towards the lounge, "Major Larcus is waiting for you in there." and Jym headed into the lounge. Behind him Tharun looked at the other two members of the *Scarlet Knife's* crew, staring at Travis as Mace closed the ramp.

Meanwhile in the lounge Jym came to a sudden halt when he saw Tayal bound to the chair and her face covered in marker pen.

"So this is how your crew acts is it?" he asked without bothering to look at Vorn who sat nearby at the table that had been laid out with snack food by Jeeves.

"Never mind her. Kara would have been far harder on her given half a chance." Vorn replied, "Now sit down." and Jym sat opposite Vorn who promptly poured two small glasses of Cassandran choholl, "Here." he said, sliding one across the table, "Try a drink that doesn't come with the risk of blindness. Oh and help yourself to whatever food you want." and then as one the two men lifted their drinks and downed them.

"So is that why you called me here Vorn?" Jym asked, "Show me the results of your crew's arts and crafts session and share a drink?"

"So why did you do it Jym?" Vorn asked, "Why betray the Alliance and try to kill my people?"

"Because there was no hope of winning." Jym answered, "The base on Hoth fell and the Empire could get to our headquarters then they could get to any of us. My team lost two people in under a year, one because of you and I'd had enough of watching them die. So we went out on our own. You'd be surprised at what the skills we possess can be applied to."

"Tayal told us why you're here Jym." Vorn said, almost as if he had ignored the answer to his previous question entirely, "And in a roundabout way we're here for the same reason."

"Don't tell me you're thinking of a life of crime." Jym replied, "Other than treason of course."

"No. The Alliance is worried that this joining together of pirates will create a major problem for us. The Empire isn't looking like the invincible behemoth it was a year ago Jym. The Emperor's gone, Vader's gone and Sate Pestage may not be able to hold the Empire together on his own. The Alliance has a real chance now to turn things around but we can't do that if we're having to spend our time dealing with pirate attacks instead of fighting the Empire."

"Vorn, are you asking me to rejoin the Alliance?" Jym asked.

"No." Vorn replied, "I'm asking you to just tell me exactly what's going on here. We know that all of this is the brainchild of just one individual so if we can find out what his plan is then just maybe we can put a stop to it before it starts."

"My crew might not last long if people find out I'm an informer." Jym said.

"How long will they last when they're caught between the Imperial Navy and the Alliance Fleet?" Vorn asked in response and Jym smiled.

"Well there's a problem with what you want anyway." Jym said, "I don't know who's setting any of this up. No body does." and Vorn frowned.

"How is that possible?" he asked.

"Because word of this meeting was just put out to various underworld fixers to be passed onto anyone who fit the profile. Whoever issued the notice obviously didn't want their identity being broadcast even amongst the underworld."

"I've got a bad feeling about this Jym." Vorn said when he heard this, "This could be someone high in the Empire looking to create a mercenary force to stage a local power grab."

"Or someone in the Alliance who thought the war would go on forever and wants to keep hold of what they can gain from it." Jym suggested in return with a smirk.

"Tell me about the meeting." Vorn said but Jym did not reply, "Come on Jym, you must know that it's over for you in this. You must know that there's no way you can attend any secret, meetings without me knowing now."

"But you couldn't get in anyway." Jym pointed out, "You haven't been invited." and now it was Vorn's turn to smile.

"I can if I'm with you." he pointed out, "You've been invited and I'm willing to bet that no-one will be going there alone. So you'll introduce me as one of your crew."

"And what reason can you give me to do that?" Jym asked.

"I can give you ten thousand reasons to to that." Vorn said and from under the desk he produced a pouch filled with Imperial currency, "The Alliance gave me quite an operating budget for this mission. It's all Imperial currency of course but if you're worried about the Empire collapsing before you can spend it I'm sure that Alliance credits-

"No. No Alliance credits." Jym interrupted, "I'll take your cash Vorn and I'll get you into the meeting. But after that I'm done. You'll be on your own, I'm not risking my people for the Alliance ever again."

"Then we have a deal." Vorn said, "For a start you can tell me when this meeting is."

"After I'm paid." Jym replied, holding out his hand.

"Not likely." Vorn said, "You get Tayal back now but you only get the money when I'm inside the meeting." and he put the money back into his pocket.

"Fair enough." Jym said, "It's at midnight local time, about five hours from now. I don't have a location yet but I will have by tonight."

"In that case you can come by and pick me up when you know." Vorn replied, "I want to get there as soon as we can. If we can deal with the organiser before the meeting takes place then so much the better." and then he stood up and walked over to Tayal, drawing a knife as he did so. Then he sliced through the tape around her ankles and released the safety harness so that he could pull her out of the seat before pushing her towards Jym. Jym's first reaction after catching her was to reach for the tape over her mouth.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." Vorn warned him and he frowned.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because Kara's still holding a grudge after what Tayal did to her and she was pretty angry when I said we were letting her go. She ducked out of the ship a few minutes before you got here with a hunting rifle and suggesting she was going to shoot Tayal if she saw her walking about free. So unless you can be sure Kara's not going to be waiting along your route you may want to wait until you're back on your own ship to untie her." Vorn explained and Tayal glared at him angrily, "Hey, it's not my fault." he said, shrugging.

"Come on Tayal." Jym said, scowling as well, "We'll have you back at the ship soon enough." and he turned to leave with her. Mace opened the access ramp for them and he and Tharun watched to make sure that they and the other two crew members of the *Scarlet Knife* left as they were supposed to before closing the ramp again.

It was at this point that the hatch leading from the lounge to the crew cabins slid open to reveal Cass, Jaysica, Kara and Tobis who had all been listening from the other side and Kara walked up to Vorn, put her arms around him and kissed him.

"So what was all that about me heading out with a hunting rifle boss?" she asked and Vorn smiled.

"You're not the only one angry about her leaving you tied up in that hotel room." he replied, "And who says you and Cass get to be the only ones to mess with her?"

Back on the *Scarlet Knife* Tayal winced as the tape was ripped from her face again.

"Stang, that never stops hurting." she said.

"Here." Lannaye said to her, handing her a bottle and cloth, "This should get that pen off your face."

"It better." Tayal replied and then she looked at Jym, "So are you really going to help Vorn's crew out for ten grand?" she asked.

"Ten grand?" Lannaye said, "What's going on captain?" and she looked at Anzar. The dark skinned man was sat in a corner and he looked at Jym.

"He's done a deal it seems." he told his first mate, "Vorn Larcus gives us ten grand and Jym gets him into the meeting."

"Yeah," Travis added, "it seems that the rebellion doesn't want a bunch of crooks like us all getting together. Worried we might be unfair competition with them."

"Thanks to Tayal, Vorn found out what we came here for." Jym said.

"I had no choice." Tayal replied.

"Of course you did. Any threat he made was a bluff." Jym said, "But the damage is done now and there's no way I can get to this meeting without him following me anyway. So I'll get him inside and take his money." then Jym smiled, "After that we'll deal with his crew before they can get word back to the rebellion about us. We'll still be able to sign up with this new group if it sounds any good and we'll even be ten thousand credits up in the process. More if we can take Mace's ship intact and sell it on."

Travis grinned.

"I'm liking the sound of this." he said, "So what's the plan?"

"I don't know." Lannaye commented, "If anyone else at the meeting realises that you've brought an Alliance agent with you there's bound to be trouble."

"It's a risk I know." Jym replied, "But it's a risk we have to take. The only other option is walking away right now. Then we still have the Alliance after us, the Empire after us and if this group works out then we could find ourselves being squeezed by them as well. So we need to make it appear to Vorn's team than we're

going along with the deal.”

6.

"Are you really going in there alone boss?" Kara asked from the doorway of Vorn and Tharun's cabin as he prepared to leave. Jym had signalled them that he now had the location of the meeting and was on his way over to collect Vorn.

"I'll be with Jym Shrell." he replied.

"That's what I meant." Kara said as she walked across the compact cabin and wrapped her arms around Vorn from behind, "Do you trust him? Because I don't."

"I trust that he wants money and if money is what he wants then it's money that he will get."

"I know. Ten thousand credits." Kara said as she rested her chin on Vorn's shoulder and then she smiled, "How about you ditch that sleemo Jym Shrell and we keep the money ourselves boss?" she asked.

"Kara, I think the Alliance would frown on that sort of misappropriation." he replied.

"I love it when you use big words like that boss." Kara said, "Have I ever told you that the reason we first hooked up was because of your use of the word 'asphyxiation'?"

"Well I'm glad my vocabulary has finally had a practical use." Vorn said, "Now hand me that blaster would you?" and he glanced at a compact hold out blaster that was lay on his bunk. Kara frowned.

"That's not yours." she said as she picked up the weapon, "It looks more like Jaysica's."

"It is." Vorn replied, "Jym knows I carry a hold out blaster in a shoulder rig. But I'm betting he won't be counting on me also having this one taped to my arm." and he rolled up his left sleeve enough that he was able to secure Jaysica's blaster to it with electrical tape before rolling the sleeve down again. Then he stepped away from Kara and turned towards her, "Okay, so how do I look?" he asked. Unlike the normal high quality clothing he wore, Vorn was currently dressed in far more utilitarian garments that made him look far less like a nobleman than normal.

"Sexy as hell boss." Kara said, "Do we have time to make out before you leave?"

"I hope so." Vorn replied and he stepped forwards to embrace her. But just as they began to kiss, Tharun appeared in the doorway of the cabin.

"Major, Jym – Oh stang!" he exclaimed, turning away when he saw Kara and Vorn embracing, "Trust me to walk in on my in-laws."

"I wish he'd stop saying that." Kara muttered.

"Well it looks like I have to go." Vorn said as he slipped out of Kara's embrace and as he walked past Tharun he added, "Thank you sergeant."

"You're welcome major." Tharun responded, "Now I think I need to go wash my eyes. That image is going be harder to get off than that marker pen was."

When Vorn entered the *Silver Hawk's* lounge he found Jym waiting for him. Unlike Vorn, Jym was openly armed with his heavy blaster pistol in a holster hanging off his belt.

"If you're ready let's get this over with." he said when he saw Vorn.

"I'm ready." Vorn replied.

"I hope that includes having my money." Jym added.

"Of course it does. You'll get it as soon as we're inside wherever this meeting is to take place." Vorn said.

"Something you still haven't told us." Mace said.

"You think I'm stupid?" Jym responded, glaring at Mace, "I tell you that and you don't need me any more."

"Never mind that now." Vorn said, "Jym, you're not the only who wants to get this over with so let's go."

"Sure. Just follow me." Jym said and he turned for the access ramp that stood open.

Mace followed Jym and Vorn as far as the top of the access ramp and watched as the other two men left his ship and walked off into the darkness. Then immediately after he pressed the control to close the ramp again he activated the intercom panel beside it.

"Tobis they're moving. Send the signal." he said.

"Oh, err, yes captain." Tobis replied from the cockpit.

Jacen stood not far from the *Silver Hawk*, watching it closely and he saw the figures leave the transport where only one had gone inside just a few minutes earlier. Then his comlink chimed and he activated it.

"Go ahead." he said, keeping his voice low so that anyone listening in would not be able to recognise it.

"Oh, err, It's me." Tobis responded, also not making use of his name but Jacen could instantly tell who it was, "They, err, they're on their way."

"Yes I see them." Jacen replied, "I'm following now. I'll keep you up to date." and then he shut off his comlink and put it away as he headed after Jym and Vorn, keeping enough distance between them that Jym was unlikely to notice that they were being followed while not letting them get so far ahead that they had the chance to get out of sight in the crowd that existed all day in the shadow port.

As well as pads for smaller ships like the *Silver Hawk* and *Scarlet Knife* the shadow port was also quite capable of handling larger ships. Often these would be offloaded before their cargoes had been sold and this required a number of warehouses be established beside the larger landing facilities and it was towards a cluster of these that Jym led Vorn. As they passed some of the larger landing pads Vorn looked at the ships currently at the shadow port and he recognised one as the vessel of the Alliance privateer he had seen in the images recorded by Jacen. It was an old Gallofree Yards transport that had been extensively modified to be capable of acting as a carrier for several equally old Z-95 headhunter starfighters and for a few moments Vorn began to wonder if the meeting would be held aboard that ship. But he breathed a sigh of relief as Jym led him on past this vessel and towards one of the warehouses themselves. Like most of the structures of the shadow port these were all at least partially underground, excavated into the rock face.

Standing outside the door of one of the warehouses, sheltered so that they were not visible until someone approached to within a few metres of them were three guards. Two were obviously gamorreans despite their faces being hidden by goggles and strips of cloth wrapped around their heads but the third was not so obvious. Though humanoid this figure wore a hooded cloak and like the gamorreans had his, assuming that it was a 'he', face hidden under goggles and a mask.

"Who are you?" the hooded figure demanded.

"Jym Shrell." Jym replied, "*Scarlet Knife*. And this is my navigator." and he nodded towards Vorn.

"Inside." the hooded figure said and with a wave of one of his gloved hands the two gamorreans stepped aside to allow Jym and Vorn to enter through the door that stood open behind them.

Jacen came to a halt when he saw Jym and Vorn disappear into the warehouse and he took cover nearby where he could keep an eye on the guarded entrance as he took out his comlink again.

"They're in." he transmitted to the *Silver Hawk* where he knew that at least one of the crew would be listening for his signal, "Warehouse near eastern docking ports."

Entering the warehouse Vorn saw that it contained a large number of cargo containers of various types of goods and Vorn suspected that it had been stolen by whoever it was that was hosting this get together. This meant that whoever it was they were probably involved in piracy and the possibility of it being the privateer that operated the improvised fighter carrier landed not far from the warehouse returned. But as Jym and Vorn continued to make their way through the stacks of cargo containers they reached an area that had been left empty and given the regular shape it looked to Vorn as if this had been done deliberately. To one side of this clearing there was just a single layer of cargo containers that were all the same size. These had been pushed together to form an improvised stage and Vorn saw that on the far side of this was another door that obviously led deeper underground.

Within the clearing between the containers there were already several other groups of beings, some of whom were eyeing one another with suspicion and it did not take much for Vorn to realise that these were members of rival criminal gangs who had been invited here the same way that Jym Shrell and the crew of the *Scarlet Knife* had been. Vorn was relieved when he recognised the captain of the Gallofree transport among one of these groups, suggesting that although he had been invited to the meeting he was not the one organising it while feigning loyalty to the Alliance at the same time.

"Now I guess we just wait." Jym said to Vorn softly, "But how about you give me my money while we do?"

"How about we wait until I know who I'm dealing with first?" Vorn replied as he continued to look around at the gathered groups of criminals whose numbers continued to grow as more and more of them arrived, "This place really is just a wretched hive of scum and villainy isn't it?" he added as he overheard some of the other invitees bragging about their crimes. This was understandable enough to Vorn though, after all Vorn himself had no intention of showing any weakness amongst this crowd and he guessed that the ones bragging saw their boasts as a sign of strength.

"Over by the door." Jym said suddenly and he nudged Vorn who responded by looking at the door beyond the improvised stage and he saw that it had opened. From whatever room lay beyond a male human entered who wore the uniform of an Imperial Customs agent and an eerie quiet descended over the gathered criminals. The idea that they had been lured to this place so that they could be arrested was out of the question, if the Empire knew about the location of the shadow port they would send more than a few customs agents to deal with it. But the appearance of someone in such a uniform, even if it was either stolen or fake still unnerved many of those present. Including Vorn himself.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." he said.

"Thank you for coming." the man in the customs uniform announced, taking advantage of the quiet in the room.

"How about whoever invited us here comes out and tells us what this is all about?" a gruff voice called out.

"That's precisely why I'm here now." the man on the stage responded, "My captain has signalled that he is on his way now and -" and then the man looked around at the still open doorway as he spotted movement there,

"In fact here he is now." and he stepped back, extending his arm towards the doorway.

"Kriif it's him." Vorn hissed as he saw another man in an Imperial Customs uniform appear, climb up onto the stage and walk towards the front where he could address the assembled crowd of criminals from around the sector.

"Who is he?" Jym asked, not recognising the man himself. But before Vorn could reply the man stopped and began to speak, effectively answering Jym's question for him.

"Most of you won't know me." he said, "As my uniform suggests I've been a captain in the Imperial Customs service and I've been both a pirate and a privateer. I've worked for myself and for organisations that didn't care about me or my crew. My name is Lazarus Shallak and today I'm going to explain how we can take advantage of the chaos we can all see coming to make ourselves rich."

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." Vorn said.