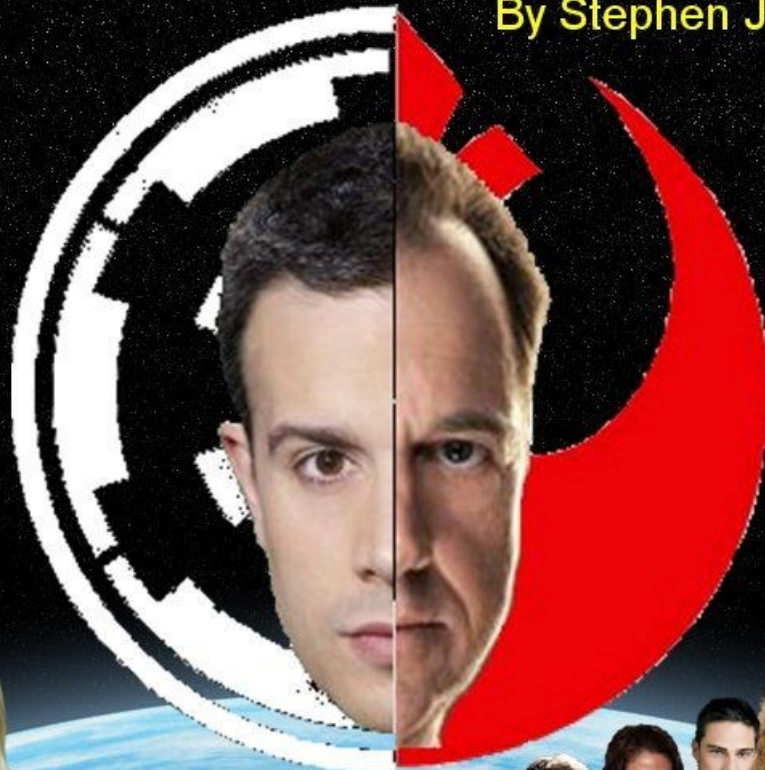


STAR WARS

7-10: Double-cross

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...

DOUBLE-CROSS

WITH THE IDENTITY OF THE MAN WANTING TO CREATE A NEW CRIMINAL EMPIRE
REVEALED, VORN LARCUS FINDS HIMSELF HAVING TO TRY AND DISRUPT HIS PLANS
AS WELL AS DEALING WITH BETRAYAL FROM A DIFFERENT SOURCE...

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

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1.

For many years Captain Lazaras Shallak had been commanding officer of an Imperial customs corvette. Deserting from the Empire and taking his ship with him he became a pirate before he signed on to help the Alliance to Restore the Republic as a privateer. But that too was not to his liking and he deserted once more before returning to the life of a pirate. Now he had gathered together a large number of other outlaws such as other pirates, slavers and smugglers with the promise of a new organisation that would profit them all. "Others have made promises about making people rich." one of the gathered pirates called out, "What makes you so special?"

"This does." Lazaras replied and from his pocket he produced a small electronic device that looked like a datapad that had been modified with an extra circuit board, "Ask any privateer for the rebellion and they'll tell you that the rebel officer assigned to look over their shoulder is issued with a communications device that allows them to send and receive transmissions that even the Empire can't decipher. When I parted ways with the rebellion I hung onto mine and even though the actual transmitter system was later destroyed I was able to save the encryption unit and adapt it so that it can be plugged into any subspace communicator. Times are changing and if we band together we can turn it to our advantage. The Empire is on the back foot and it's inevitable that the rebellion will start to strike hard against them soon. That will leave the Empire with fewer warships to protect its precious cargo transports, leaving them ripe for the taking."

"The Alliance won't sit idly by while civilian ships are attacked." another of the gathered beings commented. This man was a rebel privateer that Lazaras hoped to convince to turn his back on the Alliance so he was familiar with the Alliance's list of approved targets and the penalties for straying from that list.

"Which is why being able to decode their transmissions is so vital." Lazaras replied, "The rebels won't be able to spare any more ships than the Empire can. But with the ability to decode their most secret transmissions will let us know when raids and ambushes are planned. Added to which we'll be able to make use of their intelligence of Imperial fleet deployments as well." then he turned to look elsewhere in the crowd, "Isn't that right Lord Larcus?" he called out.

Major Vorn Larcus III had watched the speech quietly. As leader of a team of rebel field agents he had been sent to investigate the reports that someone had been seeking to gather together as many pirates as possible into one large force to take advantage of the spreading confusion following the destruction of the Death Star and the deaths of both Emperor Palpatine and Darth Vader. He had infiltrated the meeting with the help of another deserter from the Alliance, former Major Jym Shrell whose entire team had gone rogue following the destruction of the rebel headquarters on Hoth. Jym had been one of those invited to attend and Vorn had offered him ten thousand credits to take the rebel leader with him. But even though Vorn had done his best to disguise his usual appearance it seemed that someone had recognised him and now he had only one option open to him. So he reached into his jacket, moving his hand towards the compact blaster pistol he kept in a shoulder holster.

"It's a trap!" he hissed in warning to Jym, but the other man was already moving as well. However, rather than reaching for his own heavy blaster pistol to support Vorn, Jym lashed out towards him and just as Vorn drew his weapon it was knocked from his hand.

"I know." Jym replied, glaring at Vorn as two other members of the crowd grabbed hold of Vorn's arms and held him still, "I arranged it."

"Indeed he did Lord Larcus." Lazaras said loudly as he stepped down from the improvised stage made of cargo containers and made his way through the crowd, "Your former comrade knows where his best interests lie and they aren't with a rebellion that is little different from the Empire it claims to despise." and as he reached Vorn he slipped a hand into the rebel's jacket and removed the bundle of Imperial banknotes that Vorn had brought along to pay Jym, "Ten thousand credits." he said as he handed the cash to Jym, "As agreed."

"What about him?" Jym asked, staring at Vorn as he accepted the money and put it away and Lazaras smiled.

"We'll find out what the rebellion knows and then you can have what's left." Lazaras replied.

"I'm not so sure about any of this Shallak." the Alliance privateer present in the crowd said.

"Then go." Lazaras said, "Stay with the rebellion if that's what you want. But Lord Larcus stays with us." The privateer looked at Vorn.

"I'm sorry." he said, "But there's nothing I can do." and he turned around and started to walk away. But just after he disappeared from view into a gap between the cargo containers that filled much of the warehouse where the illicit gathering was taking place there was the sound of a blaster shot followed by the sound of a body hitting the floor.

"I'm afraid that no-one's going to be telling anyone where you are my lord." Lazaras told Vorn. Then he

looked at the two men holding onto him, "Take him to the ship." he said as he handed Vorn's blaster to one of the thugs now holding him, "I'll question him myself."

"Yes captain." one of them replied and they began to push Vorn through the crowd towards the doorway behind the improvised stage.

"I need to go." Jym said to Lazaras as they both watched Vorn being taken away, "Vorn's crew will figure out something is wrong sooner or later and my people need to be ready to hit them before that."
Lazaras nodded.

"Then go." he said, "But hurry back. There is still a great deal for us to discuss."

Vorn did not try to struggle, instead allowing himself to be taken from the warehouse into the passageway that led deeper into the rock face that the structure had been partially dug into. At some point in the past someone had decided that the warehouse would be a good place for using either as living quarters for employees and had excavated numerous small chambers to be used for this purpose. Vorn glanced into these as he continued to be escorted along the passageway by the pair of thugs from Lazaras's crew and saw that they were empty, meaning that the only people he needed to worry about were the two now walking along behind him, no longer holding his arms that they thought he was not trying to escape and had nowhere to go in any case.

Sliding his right hand up his left sleeve he took hold of the second holdout blaster that he had taped to his forearm without Jym's knowledge just in case of an eventuality just like this and he came to a sudden halt.

"Hey!" one of the two thugs snapped, "Keep moving!" and he went to shove Vorn.

But before he could push him, Vorn spun around and pulled the blaster from his sleeve. Both of the thugs gasped in surprise when they saw the weapon that Vorn had been able to conceal from them and they reached for their own sidearms. Vorn pressed the compact blaster against the chest of one of the thugs and fired, using his target's own body to help muffle the sound of the discharge.

The second thug managed to get his blaster out of its holster before Vorn turned towards him and the rebel agent rolled out of the way as his opponent tried to take aim. Reacting too slowly to this the thug fired at where Vorn had been a moment earlier and instead managed to just blow a chunk of rock from the wall behind where Vorn had stood. Meanwhile Vorn aimed his blaster upwards from a crouching position and fire again, sending the energy bolt up under the thug's jaw and roasting his brain in an instant.

Vorn then pointed the holdout blaster down the passageway back towards the warehouse just in case anyone had heard the exchange of blaster fire. Then with his free hand he rummaged through the pockets of one of the thugs to recover his own blaster and returned it to his holster. Then he picked up one of the larger military style blasters that the thugs carried and stuffed his other hold out blaster in his pocket so that he could recover the second larger pistol as well. Getting back to his feet Vorn then turned away from the warehouse and hurried along the passageway, deciding that it was probably safer to try getting out from that direction.

Jacen Karn was a procurement agent for the Alliance who ran a used goods store in the shadow port where Lazaras had decided to hold his gathering and he had been one of the first rebels to hear the rumours of it. Because he was not widely known to be a rebel agent and was not known to Jym or any of his crew he had been chosen to follow Vorn to the meeting while the rest of his field team remained back at their ship, the YT-1300 class transport *Silver Hawk*. Watching the warehouse he had seen Jym and Vorn enter past a trio of armed guards Jacen saw Jym suddenly appear. At first he considered the possibility that the meeting had ended but no-one else emerged from the building, including Vorn and Jacen knew something had gone wrong. Taking out his comlink he signalled the *Silver Hawk* straight away.

"It's me." he said on the pre-arranged channel, "Is anyone there?"

"Right here." the voice of Mace Grayle, the *Silver Hawk's* owner and captain responded. Both men avoided using any of their names just in case someone was listening in who would then be able to connect Jacen to the rebel ship.

"Our guide just appeared from the get together." Jacen told him.

"Alone?" Mace asked.

"Alone. No sign of our friend. He must still be in there. I've got a bad feeling about this." Jacen replied.

"I'm on my way." Mace said, "I'll bring help."

"That wasn't the plan." Jacen pointed out, "We're just supposed to wait."

"Someone has to find out what's going on in there." Mace said and at that moment Jacen spotted a doorway in the rock face at the side of the canyon the warehouse was built in for protection from the violent sand storms on the planet's exposed surface above. Looking towards the doorway Jacen saw a single figure emerge, running as fast as he could and it took a few moments for him to recognise Vorn.

"Hold that thought." he signalled, "I think our friend just made an appearance." and then he shut off his comlink and started to run in the direction Vorn was taking, "Over here." he called out as he neared the other rebel agent and Vorn ground to a halt and looked in his direction.

"Jym set us up." Vorn told Jacen when he recognised who was heading towards him, "It was a trap. We need

to warn the others that Jym's team is going to be coming after them.”

Quickly Jacen reached for his comlink again.

“It's me again.” he transmitted, “Our friend says to watch yourselves. You could have company coming.”

“Everyone grab a blaster.” Mace exclaimed as he rushed from the *Silver Hawk's* cockpit to the lounge where the other five rebels aboard his ship were gathered as they waited for word of Vorn. Foremost among these was Vorn's much younger wife Kara. But there was also Mace's adopted daughter Cass, the ship's engineer Tobis Dorfus and the other two members of Vorn's field team the ex-mercenary Tharun Verser and demolition and security expert Jaysica Horbid.

“What's wrong?” Kara asked, “Has something happened to the boss?”

“Kind of.” Mace replied as he hurried through the lounge towards his cabin where he kept the weapons he did not carry around, “Shrell set him up. Took the money and sold us out. Now it looks like his team plans to come here and finish the rest of us off.”

“Okay you heard the captain.” Tharun called out, “Everyone arm themselves. Grab the biggest gun you can and get ready to use it.”

“Sergeant Verser sir.” a golden coloured protocol droid that had been stood in the corner of the lounge along with an R5 astromech and a mouse droid responded, waving its arms, “I'm almost afraid to ask, but do you expect me to bear arms as well?”

“Not unless the major's done something about that pesky life preservation programming of yours Jeeves.”

Tharun answered as he disappeared into the cabin he shared with Vorn

Over the years the rebels aboard the *Silver Hawk* had been able to gather an impressive array of blasters and even Cass emerged from her cabin with a military carbine and a sporting pistol.

“Okay so now what do we do?” she asked.

“Tobis we need to see them coming.” Mace said, looking at his engineer, “What do you suggest?”

“Oh, err.” Tobis responded as he thought. Then he looked towards the trio of droids, focusing on the mouse droid “What about Penny?” he suggested.

“What about her?” Jaysica asked in response.

“Well she does have that holocam fitted to her little lady.” Tharun pointed out.

“Tobis is right.” Mace agreed, “Jaysica you need to put her outside and have her hide somewhere near the ship. Then we can watch the feed from her camera to get advance warning of an attack.”

“Oh alright then.” Jaysica replied and she turned towards the droids, “Penny come here.” she said to her mouse droid and it whistled as it rolled across the room.

“It might be a good idea to get someone up on top of the hull with that hunting rifle you've got in your cabin as well captain.” Tharun said and Mace nodded.

“I'll take care of that.” Kara said.

“My closet's open.” Mace told her and she hurried to his cabin, emerging soon after with a long barrelled blaster that mounted a scope on top of it. Then she headed for the storage room adjoining the lounge that also doubled as an air lock for the rooftop hatch.

“I've got my comlink.” she called out when she reached the ladder that led up to the *Silver Hawk's* upper hull.

“Okay so we've got Kara on the roof and Penny at ground level.” Mace said, looking around at the other rebels, “Now I'd expect the *Scarlet Knife's* crew to come at us from the direction of the main access ramp so they can fire up if we try and disembark that way. So I suggest we be ready to drop through the cargo hatch instead. Tobis how long to get some crates set up under the hull for cover?”

“Ah, err. About five minutes.” Tobis answered and he looked at Tharun, “Well, err, that is if Tharun helps.”

“I'm on it.” Tharun replied, “Come on lad, let's get to work.”

2.

While the crew of the *Silver Hawk* and the rest of Vorn's team were preparing their defences Vorn and Jacen were inspecting the starships occupying the larger landing pads of the shadow port. Most of these were transports, some of which had been modified with some defensive armament. But Vorn ignored all of these as he searched for a very specific type of vessel.

When Lazaras had deserted from Imperial Customs he had taken his ship, a customs corvette, with him and retained it all the time he was acting as a privateer for the Alliance. This had allowed him to impersonate a customs vessel and order targets to halt before boarding them without resistance. The original corvette had been destroyed when he had subsequently deserted the Alliance to return to piracy but after that Vorn knew he had procured another vessel of the same class from a black market shipyard that manufactured exact copies. This meant that Vorn knew exactly what sort of ship he was looking for as he tried to locate Lazaras's vessel.

"What if he brought a shuttle from orbit?" Jacen asked, "Some people prefer to leave their primary vessel in space to hide it from prying eyes on the surface."

"I get it." Vorn replied, "This is a wretched hive of scum and villainy and the locals can't be trusted. But if Lazaras was keeping his corvette in orbit then why bother with the warehouse to hold his meeting? He'd have found a cantina with a back room for hire much cheaper. I'm guessing that his corvette is close by and that the crates we saw in the warehouse are what he's stolen recently." then ahead of him Vorn saw the distinctive twin forward hull sections of a Rendili Stardrive light corvette and he smiled, "There!" he exclaimed, pointing towards the ship and he and Jacen ran towards it.

With little cloud cover to retain heat, the shadow port cooled down quickly after dark and Kara shivered as she lay on the *Silver Hawk's* upper hull and kept watch for any members of Jym's team.

"I should have brought a coat." she muttered to herself as she peered through the scope of Mace's hunting rifle.

Unlike most star ports that conducted most of their operations during daylight hours the shadow port of Onell the Hutt operated round the clock, with vessels coming and going at all hours. This meant that there were always people and droids moving around the landing pads and this continuous activity provided many opportunities for someone to get relatively close to the *Silver Hawk* unnoticed, making Kara's task much harder than she had assumed it would be.

Meanwhile Penny patrolled the area around the *Silver Hawk* at ground level, darting from one hiding place to another. There were two reasons for the droids to do this, firstly to avoid being seen by any of Jym's team and fired upon but also to avoid any of the passers by in general. Mouse droids were small enough for most humanoids to be able to just pick them up and walk off with them and the last thing the rebels wanted was for a valuable resource like Penny to be stolen. The feed from Penny's camera was then transmitted to the *Silver Hawk* where Tobis's astromech droid Harvey projected it as a large holographic image in the lounge and it was on this that the first signs of attack came.

Harvey let out a sudden whistle that made the rebels sit up and take notice of the hologram they had been staring at without seeing anything for some time.

"What's wrong?" Cass asked as she searched the image, "I don't see anything."

"Miss Grayle," Jeeves announced, "Harvey indicates that there is movement up on the rock face."

"I think I see it." Tharun said and he walked over to the hologram and pointed to a place where there looked to be something on the canyon side close to the *Silver Hawk*, "Right here." then he looked at Jaysica, "So tell me little lady, can you get your droid to zoom in on that?"

"I'll try." Jaysica replied and she picked up her comlink, "Penny, it looks like there's someone moving around above us. Can you see who it is?" and in reply there was a whistling sound from the mouse droid.

"I am afraid that Penny is somewhat confused Mistress Horbid." Jeeves said, translating the response, "She says that it is Kara."

"No, not on the roof. Up on the rocks. We can see them on your camera and we want a better look." Jaysica said to clarify her instructions.

There was a whistle of compliance and the image being projected by Harvey shifted to focus more on the rock face, zooming in so that the figure moving across the rock face became more recognisable as humanoid and Penny then zoomed in closer. It now became more apparent that it was a masked human of slender build making their way along a narrow ledge about two thirds of the way up the canyon wall.

"We can't see his face." Cass commented.

"Her." Mace responded.

"How do you know that dad?" Cass asked as she leant in closer and squinted as she tried to focus on the

figure.

"Because it's Tayal." Mace answered, "She was a professional thief before Jym rescued her from prison on her homeworld. My guess is that she's planning to drop down onto our hull and break in through the top hatch."

"Oh, err, but Kara's on the roof." Tobis pointed out, "Should – shouldn't we warn her?"

"No." Tharun replied, "Not yet at least."

"But what if she shoots Kara?" Jaysica asked.

"Then I'm down a mother in law and you get teased a lot less." Tharun replied.

"I wouldn't let the major hear you speaking like that." Mace commented and Tharun shrugged.

"In all seriousness I doubt that Tayal will risk a blaster shot." he said, "She's obviously not carrying a rifle so she'll have to get a lot closer. That means either firing while she drops or waiting until she hits the hull. If she fires on the move that will make her aim less effective and all it takes is one miss for the flash to alert Kara. So she'll wait until she's right on top of us. She may even try to land on Kara and take her out in close combat. Either way I think it's best if Kara doesn't know. That way she can't give away that she knows by her behaviour. Then when Tayal lands on the hull we pop out of the hatch and shoot her. That deck sweeper of yours could be useful captain." and he glanced to where a bulky weapon with a flared barrel was lay on the table. This was designed to emit a powerful stun pulse in an expanding cone rather than as a concentrated bolt and had been designed specifically for use in boarding actions.

A wide smile suddenly appeared on Jaysica's face.

"I'll do it!" she exclaimed, rushing to the table and scooping up the weapon.

"Oh, err, are we talking about stunning Kara?" Tobis asked, looking back and forth between Mace and Tharun.

"Yes lad, that's exactly what we're talking about." Tharun replied.

"Then – then won't she be angry when she wakes up?" Tobis said and Jaysica's face fell.

"Too late corporal." Mace said, "You already called dibs."

"Can someone call dibs on shooting someone?" Cass asked, frowning.

"They can when it involves stunning someone who'll be really mad when they recover and it gets the rest of us off the hook kid." Tharun said.

"I hope you're not thinking of storming that ship with just the two of us." Jacen said as Vorn studied Captain Shallak's corvette closely.

"What? Against upwards of fifty crewmen plus however many extra hands he's got as a boarding party? Not likely." Vorn replied, "Even if we could get the crew of that privateer ship to help us we'd still be outnumbered and I doubt they'd take orders from me anyway."

"So how about you share what you're planning?" Jacen asked.

"I'm wondering whether there's some way that we can get Onell the Hutt to decide that Captain Shallak's presence here is not in his best interests. Then he'll send all the troops he needs to to get rid of him." Vorn said.

"Tricky." Jacen said, "So long as Shallak agrees to pay off Onell, he's not likely to do anything to risk his cut." Vorn did not respond to this right away, instead frowning briefly as he thought.

"What's wrong?" Jacen asked.

"Maybe we're looking at this wrong." Vorn answered, "How do we know that Shallak's agreed to pay off Onell? That meeting wasn't exactly widely advertised. It was invitation only."

"Lae Chen would know." Jacen replied, referring to the man who was Onell's head enforcer in the shadow port, "Plus it's easier to get to see him than Onell. Safer too, he's less likely to have you tortured to death for fun."

"Will he be at Onell's palace?" Vorn asked and Jacen shrugged.

"I couldn't say. But I'll bet that someone there can point us towards him if he isn't." he answered.

The two rebels then hurried to Onell the Hutt's palace. Like most of the other structures in the shadow port this was set into one of the canyon sides but it was much larger. Instead of occupying just a small stretch of rock wall it filled the whole of a free standing column of rock almost a hundred metres across. Inside this were hangars for vehicles including Onell's personal shuttle, quarters for his employees, armouries and workshops and of course the throne room of Onell the Hutt himself.

Jacen and Vorn simply rushed up to one of the entrances that, like all of the others, was well guarded and as they approached, the guards raised their weapons at the sight of the armed men coming towards them.

"State your business!" one called out.

"We're here to see Lae Chen." Vorn replied, "We don't have an appointment."

"Go away." the guard said, "Come back in the morning."

"Hey come on now. We went to all the effort of coming here." Jacen said and from inside his jacket he slipped a hundred credit note. Smiling, the guard stepped forwards and took it, "Seems we do have an appointment after all." Jacen added, looking at Vorn.

"Come with me." the guard said. But before he took the rebels inside he looked at the blasters they displayed prominently and added, "But those get left out here."

"As you wish." Vorn replied, happily handing over the two full sized blaster pistols he still carried while not mentioning either of the hold out blasters he had concealed as well.

The guard then escorted Vorn and Jacen through the passageways of the palace, heading towards the area dedicated to the private quarters of Onell's more favoured employees where each of them had a suite of rooms to themselves. Music of various forms could be heard through the doors that the rebels passed and that included the large one that the guard led them too before he knocked.

"Someone to see you sir." he called out and in response the door slid open to reveal Lae Chen's quarters. Lae Chen himself was sat on a couch across the room beyond, one hand on the control device that had opened the door and the other holding a blaster just in case it was a trick. He was not alone in his quarters, instead there were three female twi'leks in revealing outfits performing a dance routine in the centre of the room.

"Mister Chen." Vorn said, "If I may-"

"Lord Vorn Larcus." Lae interrupted, "This is not your first visit to this world and I never forget a face. Come in and take a seat, both of you."

"Of course." Vorn said and he and Jacen entered Lae's quarters, walking over to the seats that surrounded the open area where the twi'leks continued to dance while Lae himself closed the door and turned his attention back to the performance.

"They're very flexible aren't they?" Jacen commented as he and Vorn sat down and Lae smiled.

"Onell got bored with them. He's got himself half a dozen cloned hapan women to replace them now. With appetites engineered to test even my master's limits." he said and with a smile he added, "Fortunately for me because now it means I get to take my pick of them. Of course that means that there'll be two left over if either of you want to make use of their services when we're done here."

Vorn held up his left hand to show off the ring on his finger.

"I have a wife who would never forgive me." he said.

"How would she know?" Lae asked.

"I couldn't." Vorn replied.

"Then what about your friend?" Lae said and he looked at Jacen who was now watching the performance closely.

"We didn't actually come here to discuss the services of courtesans." Vorn said.

"Courtesans? Ha! They're whores Lord Larcus." Lae said, "Now how about you tell me why you are here?"

"There's a man here at the shadow port called Lazaras Shallak." Vorn said and Lae frowned.

"Another name I know." he said, "There has been trouble between you before hasn't there?"

"Lots." Jacen answered.

"Onell doesn't care about your squabbling." Lae said.

"Does he care about a potential rival?" Vorn asked and Lae suddenly turned away from the dancers. Then he look back at them again.

"Leave us." he said, "Wait in the bedroom and be ready for me. All of you." and with a wave of his hand the three women stopped dancing and headed for the door leading to Lae's bed chamber. Then he looked at Vorn, "Shallak is no rival of Onell." he said.

"Not yet maybe. But that's what he's planning." Vorn said, "Or did you think that his little gathering tonight was intended to create a pirate fleet that would continue to pay a percentage of its profits to your master?"

"Meeting? What meeting?" Lae asked and both Vorn and Jacen smiled.

"You called it." Jacen said to Vorn, "Shallak was keeping it a secret."

"And why would he keep it a secret if not because he was planning on cutting Onell out of his deal?" Vorn added, looking at Lae.

"Tell me more about this meeting." Lae said.

"Shallak plans to bring together as many crews as he can." Vorn said, "Mainly pirates, but he's after others as well. Slavers and smugglers, people who know how to move goods without being seen. He's promising them that with the chaos since the destruction of the Death Star over Endor the Empire will be too desperate holding on to its worlds to be hunting them. He's also promised that he can keep them one step ahead of the Alliance."

"Ah, now we get to the heart of the matter." Lae said as a smile spread across his face, "This Shallak has something on your Alliance. You want my master to take care of your problem for you."

"I won't deny that Onell's forces here are far stronger than my own." Vorn replied, "But surely you must see that he poses a threat to what Onell has built here. You've no fleet to protect you and if Onell can't guarantee the safety of ships arriving and leaving here then people are going to stay away."

Lae snarled.

"I can't just take your words to my master." he said, "Onell will require proof. Or at least testimony from someone without an axe to grind against Shallak."

“What if I brought you someone that was to be involved in the plot? Someone who was at that meeting and heard everything Shallak had to say?” Vorn asked, “Then you could interrogate them. In return I ask for just one thing.”

“You think that you are in a position to make demands?” Lae replied.

“No, not a demand, a deal.” Vorn answered, “Captain Shallak has a device that will allow him to listen in on Alliance communications. I want it handed over to myself or Mister Karn here.” and he glanced at Jacen.

“That sounds reasonable.” Lae said, “Onell is not interested in your revolution.”

“Then we have a deal?” Vorn asked and Lae stood up and extended his hand.

“Yes, we have a deal.” he said.

3.

Tayal looked down at the *Silver Hawk* from the ledge and saw that there was someone on the upper hull. "Oh like we didn't expect that." she said to herself as she dropped her snooper goggles into place and activated them, zooming in on the transport below her enough that she recognised Kara and a smile appeared on her face, "Oh I'm going to enjoy this." she said, "Pay back's a rancor, nerf herder." then she took out her comlink and activated it, "Jym are you there?" she transmitted.

"Right here." Jym replied as he and the former Imperial bounty hunter Travis Jesler made their way through the crowd towards the *Silver Hawk* at ground level.

"Larcus's lot have put Kara on the roof of their ship." Tayal told him, "I'd say she doesn't have a clue I'm up here though."

"Excellent." Jym said, "Travis and I are almost in position down here and Anzar and Lannaye are heading in from the other direction. Wait for the signal that we're all in place before you make your move."

"Understood. Standing by." Tayal replied before shutting off her comlink and crouching down on the ledge, peering over the edge and staring at Kara through her snooper goggles.

Meanwhile Jym and Travis continued towards the *Silver Hawk*, sticking to the street that led past the row of landing pads and losing themselves in the crowd rather than attempting to sneak through the landing pads and using the other vessels present at the shadow port for cover.

Approaching from the opposite direction, this was the method used by the owner of the *Scarlet Knife* and his first mate, Anzar Deller and Lannaye Curve. The dark skinned owner towered over the woman who had served him loyally for many years and Anzar found himself having to duck far more often as they crept under starships.

"I've got a bad feeling about this captain." Lannaye said, "All it takes is one of the crew to spot us and start asking questions and Vorn's lot will see us."

"So what if they do?" Anzar replied, "As far as they know we're on the same side."

Anzar then came to a halt and he held out his hand in front of Lannaye to block her path as well.

"What's wrong?" she whispered.

"The *Silver Hawk*'s dead ahead." Anzar said, "And I see packing crates under the hull."

"Packing crates?" Lannaye repeated as she looked for herself, "But that doesn't make sense. Leaving cargo under the ship like that is tantamount to inviting someone to steal it."

"Unless they're there for a specific purpose." Anzar said, "Look, they're not quite under the cargo hatch. Just where you'd put them to provide someone leaving the ship that way with cover."

"It's a trap." Lannaye said, "They know we're coming."

"Too right they do." Anzar responded, reaching for his comlink, "Jym," he signalled, "I think they know we're coming."

"What makes you say that Anzar?" Jym replied.

"Pre-prepared defensive position under the ship. We should watch for a sentry-"

"Kara's on the upper hull of the ship." Jym interrupted, "Don't worry though, Tayal's going to deal with her and she won't be alerting anyone."

"Dad!" Cass's voice called out from the *Silver Hawk*'s cockpit and Mace hurried to see what was going on there.

"What is it?" he asked.

"The major's calling." she replied, pointing at the communications panel.

"Mace here." Mace said as he sat down beside his daughter.

"Mace, it's Vorn. Jacen and I have just left Onell's palace. What's your situation?" Vorn asked.

"We've got a visitor major." Mace told him, "Tayal's on the ledge above us. Tharun expects her to try and drop a line down so we're ready to deal with her when that happens. No sign of any of the rest of Jym's crew out there yet though."

"They'll be there somewhere. But I need you to try and take Jym alive." Vorn said and Mace frowned.

"What for?" he asked.

"Because I've done a deal with Lae Chen. We get him one of the people at Shallak's meeting and he'll take them to Onell the Hutt. Then Onell's enforcers will deal with Shallak and we get the communication's module back."

"What? I thought we fried that." Mace said.

"Well Shallak's claiming to still have key parts of it and I don't need to tell you how important it is that we get it back. But Jym can't answer questions if he's dead." Vorn replied.

"You do realise that handing him over to Onell is as good as killing him right? Only slower most likely." Mace

pointed out.

"I know, but I can't think of any other way of dealing with this. So pass the word, we need Jym alive." Vorn ordered.

"Captain!" Tharun's voice then called out from in the lounge, "Game time!"

"Got to go." Mace said, shutting off the communication system and both he and Cass rushed back into the lounge where Tharun pointed to the holographic feed from Penny. Or more specifically to where the camera had captured Jym and Travis.

"It's about to start." Tharun said.

Unaware that they had been detected by Penny's camera, Jym and Travis had found an alcove on the opposite side of the street from where they were watching the *Silver Hawk*. Both men were armed with blaster rifles that they held pointing downwards so as to avoid any passers by mistakenly thinking that they were threatening them.

"Lannaye and I are in position now." Anzar signalled using his comlink and Jym glanced towards the starship on the far side of the *Silver Hawk*, an Incom explorer-class scout ship and he saw Anzar and Lannaye positioned behind an energiser unit that would conceal them from view from inside the *Silver Hawk*.

"Understood." Jym replied. Then he looked up to where he knew Tayal was located even though she was out of sight from his current position, "Tayal, go." he added.

"Finally." Tayal said to herself, aiming a line thrower across the street at the opposite side of the canyon. She fired the line thrower at a downwards angle so that it passed over the top of the *Silver Hawk* by several metres. The grappling hook on the end of the line was designed to embed itself in rock and that was just what it did, penetrating deep enough into the far side of the canyon to hold firmly in place when Tayal tugged on the line to test it. Then she secured her own end of the line of the ledge by wedging the line thrower in place behind a rock. Then she attached the harness she wore to the line and leapt from the ledge.

Tayal let herself slide freely along the line, gaining more speed as she descended towards the *Silver Hawk*.

Knowing that to hit the vessel at the speed she was going would risk injury she applied a breaking force using the wheels from her harness that sat directly on the line and she heard the sound of them starting to drag. As soon as she saw that the *Silver Hawk* was directly below her, with a drop of about four metres being all that separated her from its hull, she released the harness from the line entirely.

Only at the last moment did Kara become aware of Tayal's approach, hearing the sound of her descent along the line and she rolled over and looked up.

"Holy kriff!" she exclaimed, recognising Tayal immediately and she tried to bring the hunting rifle to bear on Tayal. But the other woman landed right beside her and kicked the blaster away before Kara had chance to get off a shot. Kara did not bother trying to draw her pistol, knowing that in the time it took Tayal would be able to strike directly at her, so instead she swiped her leg sideways and kicked Tayal at the side of her knee. This produced a startled cry as Tayal found one of her legs knocked out from under her and dropped to one knee, saved from collapsing face first on to the hull only by reaching out an arm to stop herself. With her other hand she reached out to grab hold of Kara, catching her by the ankle. Then she pulled Kara towards her, causing her to fall backwards and she winced as she struck her head against the hull.

Kara still retained enough of her senses to be able to lash out with another kick, however and she aimed this one upwards to plant the sole of her boot in Tayal's chest with enough force to knock her backwards and force her to let go of Kara.

Both women then hurried to get back to their feet at the same time as they were reaching for their holstered blasters. Kara's military grade sidearm was bulkier than the hold out blaster Tayal carried but Tayal was slowed by just having had the breath knocked from her. Seeing what one another were up to, both women lunged at one another as they were starting to stand up, each one hoping to disarm the other. The net effect of this was that both women reached out with their free hands to grab hold of the other by the wrist of the arm holding their blaster and both scowled at one another as they simultaneously fought to get their own blaster pointing at the other while keeping their opponent's weapon pointed away from them.

There was no telling how long this would have gone on had the commotion not attracted the attention of the rebels inside the *Silver Hawk* and the upper hatch slid open just as Jaysica was reaching the top of the ladder leading down into the ship.

"Jaysica!" Kara yelled when she noticed the other rebel appear, "Get out here and help me." But before Kara could say anything else and before Tayal could try to disengage from the struggle Jaysica produced the deck sweeper and aimed it towards the pair, "No wait!" Kara snapped but she was too late and Jaysica fired the deck sweeper. There was a flash of bright blue light as the weapon discharged and the stun pulse spread out from its flared muzzle to envelope both Kara and Tayal. Their nervous systems overwhelmed by the energy pulse their muscles instantly relaxed and both women dropped their weapons before collapsing onto the hull.

"I did it!" Jaysica exclaimed, looking down into the *Silver Hawk* at where Tharun waited at the bottom of the

ladders ready to take Kara's place on the hull and she began to climb back down the ladders.

"Hey little lady you might want to watch-" Tharun began.

"I'm fine I-" Jaysica interrupted before she suddenly lost her footing on the ladder and with the deck sweeper still being held with both her hands she fell, hitting her head against the side of the hatch as she dropped.

"Stang!" Tharun exclaimed as Jaysica came plummeting towards him. Then as he dropped his rifle so that he could catch Jaysica while also dodging the deck sweeper that came clattering down the ladder after her he looked around and called out, "Tobis! Tobis get in here your girlfriend's hurt."

Tobis was in the *Silver Hawk's* cargo hold with Mace when he heard the call and he came rushing out to see what had happened just as Tharun was carrying Jaysica into the lounge, watched by Cass, Harvey and Jeeves.

"Oh my!" Jeeves called out, "Mistress Horbid is injured."

"What- what happened?" Tobis asked as Tharun set Jaysica down on the floor.

"She wasn't watching what she was doing and fell from the ladder." Tharun replied, "Now I need to get outside. You grab Kara's medical bag and make sure Jaysica's alright."

"Tayal do you read me?" Jym transmitted. From their position both he and Travis had seen the flash from the decksweeper as well as seeing both Kara and Tayal fall. But when no reply came Jym knew that Tayal was out of the fight, "Tayal's down." he signalled to Anzar and Lannaye, "Move in now." then he stuffed the comlink back into his pocket and he and Travis broke into a run.

"Move!" Travis yelled as he barged through the crowd in the street who had barely reacted to the discharge of the deck sweeper, clearing a path for both himself and Jym.

4.

"Dad they're coming!" Cass yelled as she saw Jym and Travis approaching in the hologram and she rushed into the hold.

"Stay back Cass." Mace ordered her as he opened the hatch in the hold floor.

"But you'll need my help." she said.

"Not like this." Mace said, "I'll manage alone, "Just go and make sure no-one gets in through the access ramp." and then he suddenly leapt through the open hatch.

The cargo containers below the *Silver Hawk* had been positioned specifically so that when Mace landed he was in the centre of the pre-prepared defensive position and sheltered from all sides. He immediately positioned himself to fire over the containers across the street towards Jym and Travis and fired. His blaster rifle was set to semi-automatic and Mace fired several shots in rapid succession above the heads of the crowd.

The effect of this was dramatic as the passers by that had ignored the stun blast on top of the *Silver Hawk* now found themselves in the line of fire and scattered. Some of them drew blasters and returned fire as they ran but their aim was poor and although one of the cargo containers was ripped open to reveal the sand that had been packed into them to give them the strength to resist small arms fire Mace remained unharmed.

Suddenly finding themselves devoid of cover Jym and Travis threw themselves to the ground and returned fire, sending short rapid bursts towards Mace that forced him to take cover.

On top of the *Silver Hawk* Tharun crawled across the hull, eager to stay low while people were firing blasters. The hull where he was located angled down slightly and he could just about make out Jym. The leader of the rival team wore an armoured vest that would probably absorb the energy of a stun blast, even one from a weapon as powerful as Tharun's Blastech A-280 heavy blaster rifle so Tharun instead left the weapon on its lethal setting and lined up to try and shoot Jym where it would not be instantly lethal. The drawback to this was that it meant aiming towards the edge of Jym's body, his leg in this case. Just a slight movement from Jym at the moment Tharun pulled his trigger was enough to send the shot passing by Jym. It was close enough for the heat of the energy blast to make Jym recoil and disrupt his fire but not enough to do any real damage.

At the same time Tharun's attack gave away his position to Anzar and Lannaye as they crept towards the *Silver Hawk* from another direction. Lannaye came to an immediate halt and fired her pistol. The shot narrowly missed Tharun himself, instead just clipping the back of the protective blast helmet he wore.

"Stang!" Tharun exclaimed as he ripped the helmet from his head as he felt the heat on his neck and he turned to fire several rapid shots at this new threat. Then he lay prone on the hull and took out his comlink, "The other two are approaching from the front." he transmitted, "I may be able to hold them back but Captain Grayle is going to need cover."

Inside the *Silver Hawk* Tobis reached for his carbine and was about to head for the hold when Cass called out to him.

"I've got it!" she shouted, "You stay with Jaysica." and she slammed her hand down on the control to open the ship's access ramp.

Even as the ramp was still dropping Cass rushed down it, doing her best to take cover behind one of the narrow pistons that supported the ramp while it was open and then firing her carbine towards Jym and Travis.

Seeing this Travis turned his attention towards the ramp.

"I'll deal with the brat." he hissed and Jym nodded.

"Go now." he said, unleashing a volley of fire towards Mace and Travis began to run. He did not head directly towards Cass however, instead heading sideways and not firing so that she did not realise the immediate danger she was in while she continued to focus on trying to provide cover for Mace.

At the same time Tharun had turned his attention to Anzar and Lannaye, both of whom were firing towards him. The difficulty for Tharun though was their proximity to the scout ship on the pad next to the *Silver Hawk*. Tharun had no idea of whether or not the ship was occupied but it was a reasonable assumption that if any of his shots struck it then anyone inside would interpret that as a hostile act and could well join in the attack on the *Silver Hawk*, multiplying the rebels' problems. So instead he waited until they chose to advance, with Anzar emerging from cover and scurrying towards the *Silver Hawk* while Lannaye used her pistol to provide him with covering fire. Tharun opened fire anyway, setting his rifle to fully automatic and firing blindly at the ground between the two ships that Anzar had no choice but to cover. But like Tharun, Anzar had once been a mercenary and had seen his share of combat. This meant that he knew how to react and he threw himself out of the line of fire, rolling across the ground until he found himself in the shadow of the *Silver Hawk* where

Tharun could not target him.

"Anzar! Over here!" Travis called out and Anzar looked around to see the ex-bounty hunter crouched behind a large rock at the side of the street. Without a word Anzar dashed towards it and slid to a halt next to Travis who immediately pointed towards the open access ramp, "See that?" he said.

"What? The kid with the carbine? Who is she?" Anzar asked.

"Don't know. But she's fighting with Larcus's lot so I say she's our enemy." Travis replied, "But I reckon that the pair of us can take her. Look, she's focused on Jym. If we rush her quick enough we can take her by surprise."

"Okay let's go." Anzar said and both men leapt out from behind the rock and charged towards the access ramp, neither of them firing or making any noise that might alert either Cass or Mace to the fact that they were both exposed.

Travis reached the ramp first and at the last moment Cass turned towards him, her jaw dropping as she gasped. She tried to turn her carbine towards Travis but he kicked it from her grip and then swung his rifle like a club, striking her across the forehead with the butt to produce a sharp 'Crack!'. Cass fell to the ground and Travis pointed his rifle straight at her. But before he could pull the trigger Anzar reached out and grabbed the barrel of the weapon and dragged it aside.

"No!" he yelled, "I didn't sign on to shoot helpless kids."

Mace heard this and turning his attention away from Jym he saw the two men standing over his daughter.

"Cass!" he yelled. His cry alerted Anzar and Travis to the fact that they had been seen and both of them threw themselves to the ground as a burst of blaster fire passed over their heads.

"So now what do propose we do laser brain?" Travis demanded, scowling.

"Deal with this kid first." Anzar said.

"I already tried-" Travis began before Anzar interrupted him.

"Not by killing her." he said and he reached out to Travis's belt. The former bounty hunter still retained many of the tools of his old trade and among these were two sets of binders, one of which Travis snatched from his belt before using them to secure Cass's wrists around one of the ramp's supporting pistons. Then he grabbed the second set of binders and secured her ankles around the other piston, not only completely immobilising her but also leaving her blocking the closure of the ramp, "There." he said, "Now we can deal with the others without worrying about her. Now if I keep Mace's head down can you deal with Tharun? He's on the roof."

"Sure." Travis replied as a smile spread across his face and he took a stun grenade from his webbing, "Just say when."

"Now!" Anzar yelled and he started firing at Mace, forcing him to duck down behind the containers as he now came under fire from both Anzar and Jym at the same time.

Seeing his opportunity Travis darted out from under the *Silver Hawk*, pulled the pin from the grenade in his hand and hurled up onto the upper hull of the ship.

Tharun heard the grenade bounce as it hit the hull and looked around to see what it was.

"Stang!" he exclaimed, recognising it as a grenade immediately and in response he reached out and grabbed hold of the still unconscious Kara and dragged her towards the upper hatch as quickly as he could. He made it to the hatch just in time, tossing his rifle down into the ship and the grenade detonated as he was climbing through it.

5.

"Lannaye!" Anzar yelled, "Now!" and Lannaye emerged from her hiding spot and charged towards the *Silver Hawk*, joining Anzar and Travis at the base of the access ramp where Cass was groaning as she started to recover her senses.

"Who's this?" she asked, looking down at Cass.

"Some kid Anzar doesn't think it's fair to shoot." Travis replied, "Now you two stay here and cover me. I'm going in."

Balancing Kara over his shoulder, Tharun slid down the ladders and hurried into the lounge where he found Tobis still crouched beside Jaysica and the contents of Kara's medical kit spread around.

"She – she won't wake up." Tobis said, looking up at Tharun.

"Well she did take a nasty knock on the head lad." he replied as he set Kara down., "Now where's Cass?"

"Oh, err, she went to cover Mace from the ramp." Tobis told him and Tharun frowned.

"Stang I've got a bad feeling about this." he said to himself as he retrieved his rifle. Then as he re-entered the lounge he added, "Grab that carbine lad. I think you're going to-" but before he could finish Harvey let out a sudden shrill warning as the droid spotted Travis coming up the ramp.

Acting quickly, Tharun raised his rifle and fired twice without a visible target, both shots slamming into the bulkhead close to the access ramp and prompting a curse from Travis as he was forced to rethink the idea of storming into the lounge.

"Stay with the little lady lad." Tharun said, "Keep an eye on her and Kara."

"What? Oh, err, where are you going?" Tobis replied, "Into the hold. Captain Grayle's in real trouble if they decide to head in there." Then he hurried into the nearby passageway that led to the *Silver Hawk's* hold.

Inside the hold Tharun could hear the sound of firing from through the open cargo hatch as Mace continued to divide his fire between Jym.

"Captain are you okay down there?" Tharun called out.

"Hanging on just about." Mace replied, "But Cass needs help. She's at the bottom of the ramp."

"On it." Tharun replied, rushing around the power core that was set into the hold's forward wall and towards the doorway that opened beside the access ramp. But just as he was approaching the door it slid open as Travis decided to try his luck in the hold instead of the lounge.

Both men came to a sudden halt as they saw one another and they raised their weapons towards one another. Each man could see that the other was planning to open fire and to try and counter this they both dived aside and started firing early, sending two streams of energy blasts slamming into bulkheads as their intended targets evaded them.

"Hey!" Mace yelled when he heard this exchange of fire, "Tharun you better not be putting holes in my ship."

Tharun had had plenty of room in which to avoid Travis's attack and as soon as he landed he slid himself across the floor to get out of the way of the doorway while he waited to see what Travis would do next. On the other hand the confined space at the top of the access ramp where Travis had been located gave him only two choices of directions to try diving in. The first of these was back down the ramp and he viewed that negatively, not only because of the increased risk of injuring himself in tumbling all the way to the bottom even if Cass would have broken his fall, but also because he had only just made it inside the *Silver Hawk* and did not want to be forced out so soon after. Instead he chose to dive in the only other direction left open to him, towards the lounge. But this brought him into Tobis's line of fire and the engineer raised his carbine and fired a short burst that struck Travis on the hip, narrowly missing his armoured vest.

The pain caused the ex-bounty hunter to cry out and he lost his focus on what he was trying to do, instead landing heavily and awkwardly. But he still had his rifle in his hand and he opened fire at Tobis in return. The burst was poorly aimed however, most of the shots going into the ceiling. One of these struck a power conduit and produced a shower of sparks that spread out in a cone below. In turn some of these sparks hit the unconscious Jaysica and the heat of these was enough to suddenly shock her back into consciousness with a squeal. Meanwhile Tobis fired again, this blast hitting not Travis himself but his rifle and as it became too hot to keep hold of he dropped the ruined weapon and instead reached for the pistol holstered at his hip. Seeing his chance, Tobis charged towards Travis and reached him just as he drew his sidearm. Aiming it upwards Travis intended to shoot Tobis, but the engineer kicked his arm aside and brought his foot down on Travis's wrist, pinning it and the blaster to the floor.

"Don't move!" Tobis snapped, pointing his carbine directly at Travis.

Travis looked back up at Tobis and then glanced at his trapped arm, looking at where it was pointed. Then he smiled and Tobis realised that the blaster was aimed at the still badly dazed Jaysica and before Travis could pull the trigger Tobis shot him in the chest.

"Tobis what's happening?" Jaysica asked as she sat up slowly.
"Jaysica." he replied, hurrying to her side, "Are you okay?"
"I'm not sure." she replied, "My head hurts." then she saw Travis, "Is he dead?" she asked.
"Oh, err, yes. He was going to shoot you I think. So I - I shot him." Tobis replied, Helping Jaysica to her feet,
"To save you." and Jaysica promptly wrapped her arms tight around him and kissed him.
"I love you so much." she said.
"Oh, err, I -" Tobis began.
"No time for that now lad." Tharun called out as he appeared in the lounge. Then he looked down at Travis's body, "Nice work by the way. But there are still three more of them to deal with. Now if the little lady's fit to carry a blaster she should find herself one. Otherwise she can stay here and watch Kara while we do something to help Captain Grayle and Cass."

Jym had avoided being shot thus far by staying low and keeping moving. Fortunately for him where the crowd in the street had scattered at the start of the firefight a number of them had dropped various containers that they had been carrying and these included several that were large enough to offer some cover if Jym crouched or lay down. But the simple fact was that the assault on the *Silver Hawk* was not going as it should have. Only Travis had made it inside the ship, but given that there were blaster shots now being fired down the ship's access ramp it appeared that he had been neutralised by its occupants. This meant that Anzar and Lannaye were the only personnel that Jym had left to him and both of them appeared pinned down at the base of the access ramp as they were fired on from inside the *Silver Hawk* and also occasionally by Mace from within his improvised bunker made of sand filled cargo containers. However, they had rapidly decided that they were relatively safe if they stayed low. Thanks to Anzar's refusal to allow Travis to kill the helpless Cass she was now tied across the bottom of the access ramp and her fellow rebels were wary of aiming too low for fear of hitting her by accident. Knowing that he needed time to assess the situation properly and decide on a suitable course of action Jym suddenly leapt up and started to run, spraying blaster fire towards Mace's hiding place that prevented him from being targeted while he was exposed. Jym's intended destination was the large rock that Anzar and Travis had sheltered behind before they had rushed the access ramp. Upon reaching this he began to take stock of what had happened so far.

Having made his deal with Lae Chen, Vorn headed back towards the *Silver Hawk* as quickly as he could with Jacen accompanying him.

"Do you hear that?" Jacen said as they approached the cluster of landing pads where the *Silver Hawk* was docked.

"Yes. Blaster fire." Vorn replied.

"And lot's of it." Jacen said, "Far more than I'd expect for around here."

"Jym's attack has started then it seems." Vorn said, "We should hurry." and he broke into a run.

"Is this what field operations is always like?" Jacen asked.

"Like what?" Vorn responded.

"Running towards the sound of shooting." Jacen said.

"Pretty much." Vorn replied just before he and Jacen rounded a corner to see the exchange of blaster fire up ahead from underneath, within and close by the *Silver Hawk*.

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

"Same here." Vorn added, "Makes me wish I'd brought my rifle with me."

"So how do we handle this?" Jacen asked, "We need to get closer to be of any help." and both he and Vorn looked around for inspiration.

"Do you have any money on you?" Vorn said as a smile appeared on his face, "All I had were the credits Jym took."

"I always keep a couple of grand on me just in case I see something useful to the Alliance." Jacen replied, "Why?"

"Because I need you to buy us a speeder." Vorn told him and he pointed towards a battered looking landspeeder that was parked close by with several beings sheltering behind it even though none of the blaster fire was coming even remotely close to them.

"Here." Jacen replied, producing the credits from inside his pocket and handing them to Vorn, "Now give me that scarf so I can disguise myself if I'm going to be joining in with this."

"A fair exchange." Vorn said, handing Jacen the scarf that he then began to wrap around his face to hide his features. Though Onell the Hutt and his inner circle were well aware of Jacen's affiliation, most others in the shadow port were not and he preferred to keep things that way.

While Jacen was disguising himself Vorn ran towards the speeder, skidding to a halt and crouching down beside the beings using it for shelter.

"Excuse me." he said in the friendliest manner he could manage under the circumstances, "But would one of

you happen to be the registered owner of this vehicle?" and he slapped the speeder.

"Registered?" one of them, a grey skinned duros replied, "Ha! I don't need no datafile to say I own this thing."

"Of course not." Vorn said, "In fact that may simplify matters somewhat. Tell me sir, would you be interested in parting with your speeder for a suitable sum of money? Say five hundred credits?"

"Five hundred?" the duros exclaimed, "She's worth four times that."

Vorn looked at the speeder again and frowned. He had the two thousand credits that the duros wanted and he was in a rush but he still did not like the idea of being ripped off.

"Eight hundred." he said.

"I can go to fifteen." the duros said.

"And I can go to twelve." Vorn replied, "Cash. Here and now."

"Done." the duros said, "Give me the money."

"Give me the keys." Vorn responded as he held up twelve one hundred credit notes and the duros held out the keys to the speeder, "Thank you." Vorn said as he climbed into the vehicle, "Oh and you may all want to find somewhere else to hide." then he started the engine and accelerated away.

Vorn turned the speeder sharply and brought it to a halt next to Jacen who promptly jumped into it beside him and drew his blaster, a powerful DL-44 heavy blaster pistol.

"Okay let's do this." Vorn said, "I'll drive straight down the street as fast as possible and you just keep shooting." and then he put his foot down on the accelerator, sending the speeder racing towards the *Silver Hawk*.

Jacen aimed his blaster towards Anzar and Lannaye at first, but the proximity of Cass made him think twice about shooting at them. But when Jym came into view he wasted no time in opening fire, keeping his aim low to try and hit him in the legs and cripple rather than kill him. But his volley of fire missed and Jym reacted by pulling himself over the rock he was using for cover.

"I need backup!" Jym called out as he repositioned himself to make it harder for the rebels in the speeder to target him.

"Lannaye go." Anzar said, "I'll cover you." and his first mate nodded before leaping up to run towards Jym. But Mace saw what she was doing and fired a quick burst from his rifle before Anzar could prevent him. One of the shots struck Lannaye on her hip and she screamed as she fell, a gaping hole blown in her clothing at the side where the energy blast had burned it away before burning her flesh as well, "Lannaye!" Anzar exclaimed and he got up and rushed to where she lay, "Lannaye can you hear me?" he asked as he crouched beside her, ignoring the firing still going on around him.

"I had a bad feeling about all this." Lannaye gasped as she struggled to stay conscious.

"Don't worry, I'll get you out of here." Anzar said and he scooped up the woman and began to carry her away.

"Anzar what are you doing?" Jym called out as he fired at the speeder again.

"Saving my first mate." he replied.

Seeing that Cass was now alone Mace climbed out from behind the cargo containers and hurried to the bottom of the access ramp where she was bound.

"Cass are you hurt?" he asked.

"I'm fine dad." she replied, "Get after them."

"Someone get down here and help Cass." Mace called out before he started to run after Anzar.

Meanwhile Jym was overcome with rage. His team had either been incapacitated or had now deserted him and to make matters worse Vorn Larcus, who had supposed to have been a prisoner of the pirate Lazaras Shallak had returned to help out the rebels aboard the *Silver Hawk*. Focusing his rage on Vorn, Jym climbed up onto the rock that he was using for cover, switching from his rifle to a more compact pistol and waited for the vehicle to come past again. When it did he hurled himself from the rock, landing on the front of the speeder and grabbing hold of the curved windscreen to prevent himself from falling off.

"Damn you Vorn Larcus! Damn you to hell!" he yelled, pointing his blaster directly at Vorn.

"No!" Jacen yelled and he reached out to grab hold of Jym's wrist, knowing that to shoot him would risk killing him. But just as he pulled Jym's arm aside he fired the blaster. The powerful energy bolt struck one of the speeder's engine pods and it exploded, causing the vehicle to lurch and suddenly veer off to the right with smoke and fire trailing behind it.

Vorn slammed on the speeder's brakes before it could plough into any of the starships landed close by but this rapid change in speed proved too much for Jym and he lost his grip on the windscreen and flew forwards, landing on the street and bouncing along it.

"No!" Vorn exclaimed as he leapt from the now stationary speeder and ran towards where Jym had come to a stop, "Get Kara!" he yelled, "We need him alive!"

Vorn dropped to his knees when he reached where Jym lay facing upwards but with his eyes closed and was horrified to see the large pool of blood now spreading out from under his head.

"Major!" Tharun yelled as he and Tobis rushed towards Vorn with Cass close behind them, the binders now removed thanks to the keys recovered from Travis's body, "Kara's out cold but Tobis has her kit."

"Good. He's still alive. Try and keep him that way." Vorn said as he got up and stood back to allow Tobis to

take a look at Jym.

"Err, I – I'm not sure what to do." Tobis said, "I can stop the bleeding but I think that there's internal damage." Stang." Vorn hissed, "We need him."

"Soon as well it seems." Jacen added as he joined the other rebels by Jym and he looked towards where a column of armoured vehicles had just appeared from around the corner and were now approaching. As they drew nearer several armed beings jumped down and aimed weapons towards the rebels but held their fire. Then when the lead vehicle came to a halt a hatch opened and Lae Chen emerged wearing body armour and also carrying a weapon.

"Vorn Larcus." he said, "I take it that this disturbance is a result of your trying to prove the actions of Lazaras Shallak?"

"It is." Vorn replied and he looked down at Jym, "Unfortunately he was the witness I told you about."

"Unfortunate indeed. He does not appear to be in any condition to answer Onell's questions. In fact I would not be surprised if he never answered anyone's questions again."

"We've still got Tayal." Tharun suggested.

"She wasn't at the meeting." Vorn replied, shaking his head. Then he looked around and frowned, "What happened to the rest of Jym's team?" he asked.

"Travis is dead." Tharun answered, "Tobis nailed him."

"And Anzar and Lannaye ran off. Dad went after them." Cass added.

Vorn then looked at Lae.

"I don't suppose there's anything else we can do to convince you that Shallak's up to no good is there?" he asked.

"Onell cannot simply start raiding any ship he wants." Lae replied, "The beings who come here must know that their ships are safe or they will stop coming and Onell will lose business." then he looked down at Jym, "But I will take him and the other you have. Maybe he will recover enough to give us a confession and then we can take action."

"And our deal?" Vorn said.

"Still stands. When Shallak is dealt with the device you are after will be returned to you. But until then there is nothing I can do." Lae answered and Vorn sighed.

"So Shallak's going to get away again. Only this time he's got an entire fleet behind him. I've got a very bad feeling about this." he said.

6.

Even though Anzar was much larger than Lannaye and in excellent physical condition, carrying her through the streets of the shadow port was proving tiring. Especially when he suspected that he was being followed. In an effort to evade this pursuit he tried heading down a quieter side street that thanks to the lack of activity was almost completely dark at this time of night. But his hopes were dashed as when he was about half way down it he suddenly found himself caught in the beam of a glow rod.

"Hold it right there Anzar." Mace said and Anzar came to a stop and slowly turned around.

"She'll die if I don't get her back to the Scarlet Knife." he said and he looked down at Lannaye.

"Cass could have been killed." Mace replied and Anzar frowned.

"Who?" he asked.

"Cass. My daughter." Mace told him, "You saved her when Travis was going to kill her."

"I didn't sign on for killing kids." Anzar said, "Would you believe that all I wanted was a life where no one was trying to kill me?"

"I know the feeling." Mace said, "But that doesn't mean I can let you go on the way you have been." then he paused before adding, "Do you have a datapad?"

"What? No. Wait, maybe Lannaye has one." Anzar said.

"Give it to me." Mace said and Anzar set Lannaye down on the ground and rummaged inside her jacket until he found the compact datapad she carried and he tossed it to Mace. Catching the device one handed Mace slung his rifle over his shoulder and began to type. Then he tossed it back to Anzar, "Take it." he said and Anzar looked at the screen and frowned.

"What's this?" he asked when he saw an address shown on the screen.

"That's where you can find a man called Odras Balve." Mace said, "He's a heartless criminal who'd sell his own grandmother for a credit but he can get you work. Illegal work but work nonetheless. Just make sure you don't borrow money off him or you'll be paying it back for the rest of your life."

"Why are you doing this?" Anzar asked.

"Because you saved my daughter and now I'm trying to return the favour. Now get out of here. The sooner you get Lannaye to your ship the better her chances will be."

Anzar bent down to pick up Lannaye again and turned to leave. But Mace called out to him.

"But Anzar." he said.

"What?"

"Do anything that puts me or any of my friends in danger again and I'll see to it that Balve gets well paid to deal with you."