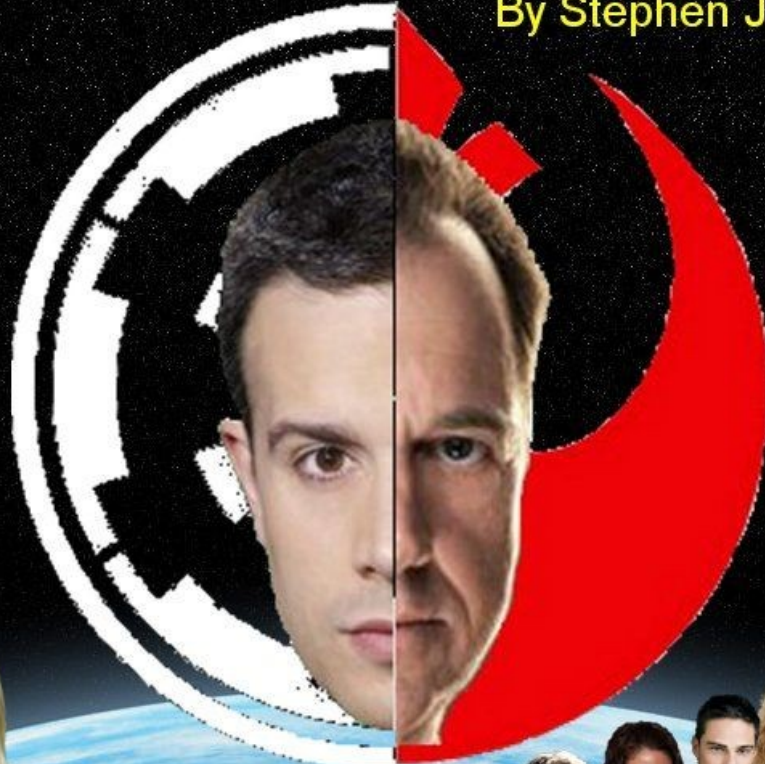


# STAR WARS

## 6-08: A Little Job on the Side

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 GUERRILLA WARFARE AND HIT AND FADE STRIKES BY SMALL GROUPS AGAINST STRONGER FORCES.

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

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

## A LITTLE JOB ON THE SIDE

WHEN CRIME LORD ODRAS BALVE DISCOVERS THAT ONE OF HIS SUBORDINATES IS WORKING FOR THE RIVAL BLACK SUN ORGANISATION HE KNOWS THAT HE NEEDS TO DEAL WITH HIM. BUT NOT KNOWING WHO HE CAN TRUST HE TURNS TO AN UNLIKELY SOURCE FOR HELP...

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

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# 1.

The explosion had destroyed most of the warehouse in an instant, along with the majority of its contents. But as far as Odras Balve was concerned the loss of his stock was secondary when compared to the fact that what had not been destroyed by the blast or burnt up in the fire had been recovered when the local firefighting service arrived to deal with the blaze before it could spread to other buildings. So now the local police were crawling all over the site looking for clues about who owned the contraband goods that were now being collected together in plastic evidence bags.

"Who did this?" he said as he watched from the end of the street and his wookie bodyguard looked around at the small group of men standing nervously behind him and let out a growl, "No." Odras told the wookie, "Let them keep their arms for now. But I want to know who did this and how much danger we're in. The one to get me the answer earns himself a cash bonus." then he turned around and began to walk back to his speeder. Meanwhile the wookie looked at Odras' men again and let out another roar before following the crime boss to his vehicle.

It was six hours later in his office at the cantina Odras used as his headquarters that one of the men who had been with him at the warehouse burst through the door. His wookie bodyguard reacted immediately, this would not be the first time someone had tried to kill Odras and not even the first time that it had happened here in his office. Therefore, as the man stumbled into the office he suddenly found himself being grabbed by a pair of large furred hands that promptly lifted him off the floor and slammed him up against the wall, all accompanied by a loud roar of anger.

"Wait!" Odras snapped when he noticed that the man was unarmed. In his experience would be assassins tended to bring a weapon of some sort with which to carry out the deed, "Let him speak."

The wookie growled again, but softly this time as he let go of the man he had held against the wall and he collapsed in a heap at the wookie's feet.

"Mister Balve." the man croaked as he use the wall to help steady himself as he got back to his feet, "Mister Balve I know what happened at the warehouse."

Odras smiled.

"Take a seat." he said, "And I'll pour you a drink while you tell me." then as the man staggered to a chair and sat down Odras produced a bottle of Corellian whisky from a desk drawer along with two glasses that he began to pour the expensive beverage into.

"There was a freighter." the man said as Odras slid a glass across the table, "A YT-2400."

"A freighter?" Odras repeated, "But the warehouse didn't have any landing facilities. I know this because I made sure that customs would have no call to launch any spot inspections."

"It didn't land Mister Balve, it just flew low over the building and dropped an incendiary."

Odras scowled. Rival crime gangs attacked one another's holdings on a regular basis, but to launch such a brazen attack in broad daylight was almost unheard of because of the repercussions – such levels of violence could just lead the local authorities into requesting help from the Empire and that meant streets crawling with incorruptible stormtroopers.

"Where does your information come from?" Odras asked, sitting down and picking up his own drink.

"I got into a security recording and I saw the ship Mister Balve."

"A security recording? What security recording? There are no public cameras covering any of my properties."

Odras replied, snarling. Security cameras positioned so that they recorded events at his properties meant an evidence trail that could result in disaster if they got into the hands of either the authorities or, worse yet, any of his rivals.

"The club at the end of the street, the one above the speeder workshop, has had them fitted. They've had several break ins recently."

Odras scowled again.

"And why weren't we doing anything about that?" he demanded, "Break ins right down the street from one of our warehouses? Someone should have been losing kneecaps for that."

"The club owner didn't tell us sir. But I found out from one of the barkeeps that they also use the cameras to watch for couples sneaking out the back to-"

"Yes, I get it. Now what exactly did you see on these recordings? And don't tell me about anyone you saw getting it on while they didn't realise they were being watched."

"Well one of the cameras at the club covers the roof and that had a view of the transport as it came in and dropped the incendiary. But more importantly they caught the guy who threw it from the hatch."

"Show me." Odras said and the man produced a datapad that with a handful of taps of his finger he used to call up an image that had been taken from the club's security recording. The lower part of the freighter was

visible at the upper part of the image and its access ramp was clearly in shot. Standing on this, with one hand gripping one of the ramp's supports and a canister of liquid in the other was a human looking figure. Odras pressed a finger against this figure and zoomed in for a closer look that revealed not only that the figure wore no safety harness despite being stood at the end of the ramp while the ship was in flight but also why. The arm gripping the ramp support was cybernetic. The man who had thrown the incendiary from the transport was a cyborg. At this level of magnification it was also possible to see the bright yellow colour of the cyborg's remaining flesh. So not only was Odras looking for a cyborg, he was looking for a borneck cyborg. Odras knew of only one such individual in the sector and it just so happened that he was known to travel on a YT-2400 freighter.

"Black Sun." he hissed, the contempt for the galaxy spanning criminal organisation clear in his voice and on his face. Black Sun's presence in the sector had been fairly limited, though in recent years they had begun to expand their operations and some of this had come at Odras' expense. However, this was something new for them and there was still one unanswered question, "How did they find out about the warehouse?" he asked.

"Go to the next image." the man sat opposite said, waving his hand in the manner that would cycle the datapad display to the next file stored on it and Odras repeated the gesture.

"Ventor!" he exclaimed when he saw the picture. This showed the borneck cyborg along with the sullustan he was known to work with and also a male human. Odras slammed the datapad down on his desk so hard that the other man flinched at the impact, "He's been on my payroll for more than a decade."

"I followed that Black Sun pair myself Mister Balve. They went right up to him and he obviously recognised them. As you can see in the picture, they looked to give him-

"Yes I see it." Odras interrupted, "It's blatantly obvious that they've bought him out from us."

"What do you want to do about him Mister Balve?"

"He's dead." Odras hissed, "He's bantha poodoo."

"Shall I get some guys together then Mister Balve? We can pay him a visit tonight."

"Yes. But remember killing him isn't enough, I want him made an example of. There needs to be enough left so that everyone knows it was him but not so much that they can tell what bit of him is what. Otherwise we may end up with more people-" and then he suddenly stopped talking as a worrying thought occurred to him.

"Mister Balve? Are you okay sir?"

"They may already be more." Odras said, "I need to know who I can trust before I dispose of that sleemo Ventor."

"I'll go tag those two-

"No." Odras said suddenly, "It could take days for them to make contact with anyone else and we'd never be sure that we'd found them all. We need to find out from the one person that we know is likely to have the information we want. Ventor. But we can't just bring him in. Anyone we get to do the job may be on Black Sun's payroll themselves and tip him off."

"Then what do we do Mister Balve?" the other man asked and Odras smiled.

"I'm going to bring in someone from the outside." he said, "Someone I know I can trust and that has the skills to get the job done right."

"Die damn you!" Jaysica Horbid yelled as she jabbed her finger repeatedly on the trigger button.

"Whoa, nice language little lady." Tharun Verser replied as he used his own control device to move out of the way of her attack before returning fire with the virtual weapon his game character was armed with.

"Ahh!" Jaysica exclaimed, "Tobis help me." and she reached out and shoved the man in overalls sat on the floor beside her.

"Oh err, I'm trying." he replied, "But, err, well, Kara will shoot me if I move."

"Oh you bet I will." another young woman replied and she looked at the teenage girl sat beside her, "See Cass, I told you we'd beat all these laser brains."

"Wait Kara-" Cass exclaimed as Kara's attention was drawn away from the game and all of a sudden Kara's display turned red and her jaw dropped.

"Okay who killed me?" she demanded.

"Sorry mother. You were in my way." the woman sat beside Tharun replied with a smile and Kara scowled.

"Stop calling me that Lyssa." she hissed, "You're older than I am."

"Yet you still married my father." Lyssa said, still smiling as she shot Kara's character again the moment it re-entered the game.

"Oh, err, I think you're supposed to give people the chance to move before you shoot them again." Tobis commented, despite using Kara's temporary absence to move his character to what he hoped was a better position.

"Oh my the grandmother to be is just slowing down." Lyssa replied, briefly rubbing her stomach that was starting to bulge with pregnancy.

Just then two more men entered the lounge of the YT-1300 class freighter the *Silver Hawk* and looked at the six people sat on the floor all staring at the individual floating holographic images being projected by the

game console in between them all. One of them was the ship's owner, Captain Mace Grayle while the other was the commanding officer of the rebel team assigned to the ship, Major Vorn Larcus III.

"Can I have your attention please?" Vorn asked but the other rebels continued playing their game, seemingly oblivious to his presence. Vorn cleared his throat loudly, "Could you stop that please?" he called out.

"Die!" Jaysica shouted loudly. Then as she realised that she had just come close to accidentally shooting Tobis she added, "That was an accident."

"This isn't." Cass said as her character fired on Tharun and she frowned when he remained in play.

"Body armour power up." he said with a smile, "Oh, and I've got the repeating blaster upgrade as well kid. Take this!"

"I told you this would happen." Vorn said to Mace in frustration, "You gave them toys and now all they want to do is play."

"Strangely playing at something they can do in real life if they want." Mace replied and then he took a deep breath, "Cut it out!" he yelled and the rebels looked around, Tobis remembering to pause the game.

"Boss!" Kara said to Vorn with a smile, "Come over here and help me. Cass is rubbish and she's slowing me down."

"I am not." Cass protested. Then she looked at Mace, "Dad, can we just finish this round? Please?"

Vorn sighed.

"Kara give me that controller please." he said, approaching the group and holding out his hand.

"But I want you on my team boss." she protested.

"Just give it to me." Vorn said and Kara handed over the controller, "Okay, end of this round is it?" Vorn asked, tucking his datapad under his arm and remaining stood up as he looked at the display. Then he glanced at Kara, "And you've no upgrades?" he asked.

"She killed me." Kara hissed, scowling at Lyssa, "Twice in a row."

Vorn looked at Lyssa.

"Didn't you even give her five seconds to move?" he asked and Lyssa shrugged.

"Okay here goes." Vorn said and he started the game running again. Then before any of the other rebels playing had the chance to react he had his character perform a series of leaps and dashes that took him on a course between them and allowed his character to fire off a succession of shots that turned the displays of the other players red one after another.

"Daddy what have you just done?" Lyssa asked in amazement.

"Game over." the console announced, "Winner player four, Pretty Brown Eyes Kara."

"I still say that's a stupid game name." Jaysica muttered.

"Way to go boss!" Kara exclaimed, still staring at the now blank displays.

"Major where did you learn how to do that?" Tharun asked as Vorn put down the controller and pulled his datapad from under his arm.

"That game came bundled with the console right?" Vorn asked and the rebels nodded, "Well the reason for that is that it's about forty years old. I played it almost non-stop when it first came out. You lot are noobs. Now can we get to work?"

The rebels set down their controllers and got up. Tharun helped Lyssa to her feet while Vorn offered Kara his hand.

"So how are we sticking it to the Empire today boss?" Kara asked as she reached the table and took a seat.

Vorn looked at Mace.

"Actually we're just paying a quick visit to Estran." Mace said, "I need to pay Odras."

"Plus we'll be making a supply run." Vorn added, "I ran into Shyla Nerin and she'll be giving Lyssa a list of things she wants us to get."

"Does this mean I get to go daddy?" Lyssa asked.

"Would that mean I get to stay?" Kara added, glaring briefly at Lyssa.

"Yes it does and no it does not." Vorn replied, "In that order. This is a basic run, but I want everyone on hand just in case. We'll leave Vorn with Captain Myrell. The *Artist's Impression* is laid up for maintenance so her team's going nowhere any time soon and she's offered to look after him." The Vorn he was referring to here was his and Kara's infant son, Vorn Larcus IV.

"Probably hoping to persuade the other Captain Myrell that they should have one of their own." Tharun commented.

"Well whatever, make sure you've got all your gear stowed within the hour because we're leaving then."

Mace said, "Odras Balve doesn't like to be kept waiting."

## 2.

Mace's long standing contact with Odras Balve meant that he knew exactly which customs agents had been bought off by the crime lord and thus which docking bays he could land the *Silver Hawk* at without them wanting to search the ship. The customs agents all required a payment to look the other way each time the ship landed, but compared to the difficulties of explaining a ship filled with contraband weapons and wanted fugitives this was trivial. On this occasion however, there was no customs agent present waiting to be bribed. Instead through the canopy of the *Silver Hawk's* cockpit Mace and Vorn saw Odras Balve himself approaching the vessel accompanied by a group of his men, all of them clearly armed.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Vorn said as he counted the gangsters and determined that his team plus his daughter and the *Silver Hawk's* crew were outnumbered by more than four to one.

"Me too." Mace added and the two men leapt out of their seats and hurried back into the lounge.

"Daddy what's wrong?" Lyssa asked when she saw the looks on their faces.

"Trouble." Vorn replied, "Or possibly."

"Balve's outside." Mace added.

"Stang." Tharun said, taking his arm from around Lyssa and getting to his feet.

"Everyone grab blasters." Vorn ordered, "Mace and I will go outside and try to figure out what he wants."

Mace and Vorn then headed for the ship's access ramp and Mace paused by the controls.

"Ready?" he asked and Vorn took a breath as if he was about to speak but then paused.

"Not really." he said eventually as he took out his compact hold out blaster and checked it, "But go ahead anyway." and Mace lowered the ramp.

"Ah Mace." Odras said as the two rebels descended the ramp. Around Odras his henchmen were all clutching their weapons but their leader kept his hands in the open where the rebels could clearly see they were empty, "It's so wonderful to see you again. And Lord Larcus as well of course. I do hope we'll be doing more business soon."

"It's not normal for you to turn up in person to collect a payment Odras." Mace said, "Why are you here?"

"A payment? Oh of course, your next instalment was due last week. I tell you what, let's just ignore the late fee this time shall we?" Odras said and Mace and Vorn glanced at one another, now convinced that Odras was up to something. Loan sharking was a key element of the gangster's business and he took his business very seriously.

"Here's your money Balve." Mace said, producing a roll of banknotes and he tossed it to Odras. Catching the roll Odras simply handed it to the closest of his men.

"Mace I'd like a word in private." he said, "In your ship will be fine."

"Over my-" Mace began but Vorn placed a hand on his shoulder and he stopped.

"Perhaps we should find out what he has to say." Vorn suggested.

"Fine." Mace said, "But private means just you Odras. None of your men and that includes the wookiee."

The wookiee growled and snarled but Odras just smiled and nodded.

"That sounds reasonable." he said.

"And unarmed as well." Mace added, "I know you're carrying."

"Again reasonable." Odras said and he produced a weapon similar to Vorn's that he handed to his bodyguard, "Wait at the base of the ramp." he ordered, "If anyone tries to get aboard or if anyone but me tries to leave the ship then kill them." The wookiee growled again and then Odras strode towards the two rebels on the ramp, "After you." he said.

When Odras followed Mace and Vorn into the *Silver Hawk's* lounge he found himself facing an assortment of blaster rifles and carbines. Only Lyssa aimed a pistol at him, in her case a lightweight sporting type.

"Relax." Vorn said, "Mister Balve is just here to talk. Isn't that right?"

"That is correct." Odras responded, "After all, relations between us all have never been anything but amicable."

"You wanted to sell me as a slave." Kara pointed out.

"And me." Jaysica added.

"But only if Mace had agreed to it." Odras reminded them, "Which of course he never did." then he caught sight of Cass, "Ah, I see you've added the little waitress to your crew Mace." he added before noticing Lyssa, "And who is this beautiful young lady and why have we never been introduced before?"

"She's my daughter." Vorn said.

"And my wife." Tharun added, stepping between Lyssa and Odras.

"Then you are lucky men. Both of you." Odras said before sitting at the table.

"Not that lucky." Kara muttered.

"Any chance of a drink while we talk?" Odras asked and Mace nodded at Tobis. Without speaking the

engineer took a bottle of beer from the fridge, opened it and gave it to Odras who winced as he took a mouthful, "You know Mace, if you'd just work for me full time you'd get a better class of beverage. I've got a bad feeling that this will taste the same when it comes back out."

"Well I don't work for you Balve." Mace said, "And I never will. So just tell me why you want because all this acting friendly poodoo is just creepy."

Odras smiled.

"I have a job for you." he said and Mace snorted, "No I'm serious Mace. I've got a job that I need you to do for me."

"And why would we help you out?" Kara asked.

"Money?" Tharun suggested.

"Well I suppose if there was enough of it." Kara replied, nodding.

"There's no money." Odras said.

"Even if there was enough to buy a palace on Coruscant I still wouldn't work for you." Mace said, "So if that's the best you've got then you can-"

"In return your precious rebellion will gain vital information." Odras interrupted and then he took another drink of his beer, "This really is terrible." he added, "I think I'll throw in some proper drink for you as well."

Vorn rested his hands on the table and leant towards Odras.

"Explain yourself." he said, "And this had better be good."

Odras set down the beer.

"There is a certain individual who has chosen to violate the terms of an agreement that we both entered into in good faith and have found mutually profitable who has since seen fit to violate certain agreed terms of confidentiality." he explained.

"Someone's jumped ship and started talking." Mace said, "So what is it Balve? The cops finally about to catch up with you? Maybe the sector rangers or the ISB even?"

"Worse." Odras said, "The authorities I can handle. But he's been bought by Black Sun."

Vorn straightened up.

"Black Sun has been shattered." Mace said.

"Not entirely." Odras said, "Since the rumoured untimely death of their leader his various subordinates do seem, to be concentrating on trying to get the top job for themselves, but a lot of the organisation is going to extreme lengths to try and stop rivals from capitalising on their difficulties."

"We aren't assassins." Vorn said and Odras grinned.

"Don't pretend there's no blood on your hands, any of you. I bet you've all killed at least one person in your time." he said.

"I most certainly have not." Lyssa exclaimed.

"Then I apologise my dear lady." Odras said, "But my point is that when the need arises your little group is quite capable of killing. However, that's not what I need. What I need is information about who else in my organisation may have been turned by Black Sun. For that I need someone who can get into a secured building, access encrypted computer files and provide me with copies. Then I've plenty of people who can handle the killing myself. I'm sure they'll make it far more memorable than you would as well. Now I can provide you with his address, schedule and some basics about his security arrangements but-"

"You've missed out one vital piece of information Mister Balve." Vorn said.

"Oh really and what's that?" Odras asked.

"Why should we care about a falling out between criminals?" Vorn said and Odras smiled.

"Because of what else he might know." he answered, "Perhaps I should have mentioned that Henris Vantor is a senior member of COMPNOR and as far as I'm concerned whatever classified data you find on his computer is yours to keep."

Mace and Vorn looked at one another. COMPNOR, or the Commission for the Preservation of the New Order was a massive Imperial organisation that transcended the boundaries of social club for supporters of the Empire and official government department. Its members were among the most trusted of Imperial citizens and it offered them a fast track to success.

"Major tell me you're not thinking about this." Tharun said.

"Black Sun are dangerous." Jaysica said,.

"They tried to kidnap me." Cass said, "And remember what they did to Kara?" and Kara frowned.

"Yeah, having my arms and legs broken isn't something to be overlooked in a hurry." she said.

"Surely that's all the more reason to strike at them while they're still weakened from the loss of their leader?" Odras said.

"Okay we're in." Vorn said.

"Daddy, are you really suggesting that we should deal with this nasty little man?" Lyssa asked, indicating Odras.

"My lady, I am shocked and hurt that you would-" he began.

"Oh shut up." Vorn interrupted, "Neither of us is innocent. Now hand over what you've got on this guy and we

can get your job done and be out of here.”

Odras smiled as he got to his feet and from under his jacket he slid a mem-stick that he placed on the table. “Everything I have is there.” he said before looking at Mace, “You know where to find me when you’re done.” he said.

“Yeah,” Mace replied, “we’ll just flip over a rock and you’ll come scurrying out.”

Odras snarled and then headed for the access ramp.

“Okay, we’re done here.” the rebels heard him call out as he disembarked from the ship and then they heard the sound of him and his men leaving.

“So, err, ah, are we really going through with this?” Tobis asked.

“I think we are.” Mace replied.

“Yes we are.” Vorn said as he picked up the mem-stick, “Like it or not Odras Balve has come through for us in the past and we may just get something useful out of this.”

“I don’t know boss,” Kara said, “I’ve got a very bad feeling about this.”

“Welcome to the Dark Side everyone.” Tharun muttered.



### 3.

Xizor Transport Systems was a perfectly legitimate company that just so happened to have been the perfect front organisation for its late owner to use to support his criminal empire. But with the recent death in orbit around Coruscant of Prince Xizor himself there had been a sharp decrease in the amount of orders relating to Black Sun reaching Treego, the rodian who headed this front organisation in the sector and he was now spending far more time actually acting as the legitimate businessman he claimed to be. However, that was not to say that Treego was neglecting his duties with Black Sun. Quite the opposite in fact, in the absence of orders from higher up in the organisation he was doing his best to expand its influence on his own initiative, hoping to impress whoever ended up replacing the late Prince Xizor as its head.

Part of this strategy relied on his superiors knowing exactly how useful he was and as such was only too happy to meet with an individual who he was certain had been sent to spy on him and report back about his effectiveness.

"How may XTS help you today Prince Zenzar your highness?" Treego asked the green skinned falleen sat opposite him.

"The usual." Zenzar answered, "I have goods I wish to send home. Frankly it surprises me that you deal with such matters personally."

"Well there are special considerations in your case your highness." Treego replied, "I am certain that you require your shipment expediting as quickly as possible and with the minimum amount of official interference. Am I correct?"

"That would be appreciated." Zenzar answered, "Though I fear that the taxes on this particular-"

"The taxes will be dealt with by us your highness." Treego said.

"But Imperial law-"

"We have the best experts." Treego interrupted without thinking and then he suddenly wondered if his interruption would cause offence. However, before he could attempt to find out the intercom on his desk chimed and Treego frowned as a small holographic image of his secretary appeared over his desk, "What is it?" he asked, "I am in a vital meeting with an important client."

"My apologies Mister Treego." the secretary replied, "But I have Mister Vantor on the line and he insists that he needs to speak with you immediately."

"I am most sorry your highness." Treego said to Zenzar, "But I can assure you that I will give your package my personal attention."

"Of course." Zenzar replied, bowing his head as he stood up and then he calmly walked out of Treego's office. Then as soon as the door closed behind the falleen, Treego turned back to the hologram.

"Put him through." he hissed, "But warn him that this had better be good for both our sakes."

"Yes Mister Treego." his secretary said and then the image changed to show the head and shoulders of a middle aged and somewhat overweight male human.

"Treego!" he exclaimed, "I need your help. I need Black Sun."

"Do not say that name ever!" Treego snapped, "What if someone was listening in?"

"There's no one listening in at my end I can assure you. But I need your help, you're my only hope."

Treego sighed. He knew that Prince Xizor had never really trusted humans and right now Treego was wishing that he had been able to do without them entirely as well.

"Go ahead." he said.

"I've been hearing rumours that Odras Balve is on to me." Vantor said.

"On to you? How?" Treego asked.

"I don't know. But I heard it from another of our people in his organisation that he was given proof the day after you hit the warehouse."

"Then why are you still alive?" Treego said. "If Balve even suspected you of betraying him he'd send a team of his goons to deal with you. Since he hasn't already done that I think that it's safe to assume that you are in no danger."

"But I've heard that he's hired a team of assassins from off world. They're on Estran now." Vantor replied.

"Just think for one second." Treego hissed, "You are a member of COMPNOR. You can request security from them if you are concerned. But I tell you what, if you are so concerned then I'll have some of my people ready to evacuate you. Would that satisfy you?"

"Yes, yes it would. But what if-" Vantor began but Treego shut off the communicator before he could finish.

Then he activated the channel to his secretary again.

"If he calls again then tell him I am not available." he said, "Oh and get me Mister Sall. I have a job for him."

Vorn studied the mem-stick provided by Odras carefully, staying up late after the other rebels had gone to

bed. From what he could see the crime lord had been correct in his assumption that Henris Vantor would be of interest to the Alliance. A member of COMPNOR since it had first been formed from the remnants of the earlier COMPOR, the Commission for the Preservation of the Republic, he worked in the commerce branch of the Coalition for Progress and was tasked with harmonising regulations between the Imperial sector authorities and those of the planetary government of Estran. That meant that he would be party to a great deal of intelligence regarding the inner workings of both governments. The information may not include explicit details about military operations, but it could be used to determine what resources were being diverted to support the Imperial war machine and that meant that they could be instead be seized by the Alliance.

But Vantor's position in COMPNOR also made him a difficult target to strike. His home was in a neighbourhood that Vorn knew well featured homes where security was of paramount concern. There were private security patrols and each home possessed an advanced anti-intruder system. In addition the community itself was isolated by a shield wall to limit access to one or two points that were always guarded. To further complicate matters Vantor's place of work was the Estranian Parliament building, from where he could easily meet with its members. This was another building that Vorn knew to be well protected. He had worked there himself for many years prior to his exile while he was a member. However, he knew that the building was not impenetrable. On several occasions he and his team had been able to infiltrate it, even protecting it from a terrorist attack on one occasion.

"Found anything boss?" Kara asked as she appeared from her cabin wearing her night dress and a robe.

"That depends." he replied as she approached and sat beside him, leaning her head on his shoulder.

"Depends on what?" she asked, yawning.

"You should be in bed if you're tired." Vorn said.

"It's no fun without you boss." Kara replied, "Besides, I'm used to waking up whenever Vorn cries. Now tell me what's keeping you up this late."

"Well it would seem that Mister Vantor is not the upstanding citizen that he claims to be." Vorn said.

"Oh he's a very naughty boy is he?" Kara asked, closing her eyes.

"Indeed he is." Vorn replied, "He's been manipulating regulations for Odras Balve for years and the pair of them have been making a lot of money out of it. In fact I'm impressed. Why bother circumventing the law and risking being caught when you can just alter it and make what you're doing legal? Or at least less illegal than it was. Especially if you're using a loophole that no-one else knows about. The problem is that according to Odras' information both his home and office are difficult to gain access to without proper authorisation. He lives in a shielded community and works in the Parliament building."

"We've got into Parliament before boss." Kara reminded him.

"Yes, but each time we've been able to falsify some sort of permission and I'm not sure we can manage that again on such short notice. If we try using Mace's connection to Lady Sharva again we risk exposing him."

"What about Kay?" Kara asked.

"What, Lady Sharva's handmaiden? Same problem. We risk exposing her if we rely on her again." Vorn said.

"Then look elsewhere boss. How about your old friend Couran?" Kara suggested.

"Lord Desh could certainly get us enough passes for all of us to get inside." Vorn admitted, "But I'm even more loath to risk exposing him than I am to expose Mace. Couran still feeds us information and we'd lose that source if he's linked to us."

"Then that just leaves hitting him on the way-" Kara began before opening her mouth wide to yawn, "On the way to or from work."

"No." Vorn replied, shaking his head, "If we were interested in abducting him then that would be ideal. But we need access to his computer and that means either at home or at his office."

"Ask nice boss. Maybe he'll just let us in." Kara said softly.

"Somehow I doubt he'll let us in voluntarily." Vorn said and then a thought occurred to him and he smiled,

"But maybe we can make him think that he doesn't have a choice." he said, "Kara you're amazing." but as he turned his head towards his wife she let out a sudden snort as she began to snore. Still smiling he kissed his wife on the forehead, "Even if you do sometimes sound like a wookiee with a lisp while you sleep."

"We need to speak to Odras again." Vorn told Mace over breakfast.

"You're kidding." he replied, frowning, "What for?"

"Because we need some items that only he will be able to provide us." Vorn answered and then he looked at Lyssa who was sat beside him and she sighed.

"Sadly daddy is correct." she said, "That Mister Balve person may be an odious little nerf herder but from what I understand he is the one most likely to have what we need at short notice. He may also be able to supply certain other items of use to the Alliance."

Mace's frown deepened.

"If you want my advice, the Alliance can do without buying anything off him." he said.

"Oh I'm not suggesting that we pay for anything from him." Lyssa said, "But I thought that perhaps your

criminal past could be made to work for use for once.”

“What criminal past?” Cass asked from the end of the table as Mace set down his fork and stared at Lyssa.

“Well he was a smuggler before he convinced daddy to join the rebellion.” Lyssa said and Vorn winced.

“Lyssa dear, perhaps this isn’t the best time to discuss this-” he began.

“No.” Mace said sternly, “It isn’t. Now how about you just tell me why you want me to go and ask Balve for favours.”

“Kara gave me the idea last night.” Vorn replied, looking towards the crew cabins just as Kara appeared, drying her hair with a towel.

“I did what when now?” she asked, “Was I drunk? Because if there are pictures then-”

“I was just explaining how you gave the idea for how we’re going to gain access to Ventor’s computer.” Vorn said.

“I did that? Wow. I’m smart and gorgeous. You’re lucky to have me boss.” and she walked over to Vorn and kissed him, glancing briefly at Lyssa as she looked on and scowled, “So what’s my great idea?”

“Look, both Ventor’s home and work are in highly secure areas.” Vorn explained, “And I’m concerned that using any of our normal ways in and out of them will risk exposure for our sources.”

“So how do we get in?” Cass asked.

“We get Ventor to take us in.” Vorn said and he smiled while the other rebels around the table other than Lyssa looked at him and then each other.

“But isn’t he the bad guy?” Cass asked.

“I think daddy knows what he is doing.” Lyssa said in support of her father, “Perhaps you should all let him explain.”

“Yes.” Vorn replied to Cass’ question, “And bad guys get arrested. Which is exactly what is going to happen to Ventor. We need to disguise ourselves as ISB agents and detain him on his way to, or preferably from work.”

“Why preferably from?” Cass asked.

“Because then he won’t be missed by anyone official.” Mace told her.

“Indeed.” Vorn added, “Then once we’ve got him in our custody we’ll take him back to his home and simply have him get us past the security detail. Then it’s just up to Tobis to slice into his computer and we can be out of there.”

“Just one thing boss.” Kara said, “What about Ventor?”

“Yeah, I think we all know what Balve will do to him once he has the information he wants.” Mace added.

“That’s not our concern.” Vorn replied, “Henris Ventor made deals with organised criminals of his own free will. Added to which he is an Imperial official. We weren’t sent here to help him.”

“Technically we weren’t sent here to help Odras either boss.” Kara pointed out.

“Then what would you all have us do?” Vorn asked, looking around the table. But the reply came from the direction of the crew cabins where Jaysica and Tobis had just appeared.

“Err, well, ah, couldn’t we just take him with us?” Tobis asked out loud, “If, well, if he is so important then he will probably know more that the Alliance could use than is just in his computer.”

“Hey that’s right.” Jaysica added, smiling.

“Wow, the klutz backs here boyfriend.” Kara muttered. Then she looked directly at Vorn, “He is right though boss. He may have more information than is on his home computer and we can’t exactly just leave him to hacked up by any of Balve’s goon squad.”

Vorn sighed.

“Balve will still have a copy of whatever we find on the computer.” Mace added, “Plus we can agree to give him anything that Alliance Intelligence gets out of him about Black Sun.”

“Oh very well.” Vorn said, “If we can we will retain custody of Ventor and return him to headquarters for questioning by Alliance Intelligence. But first we need those uniforms.”

## 4.

"Here you go Mace." Odras said as he escorted Mace and Tharun into a room behind his cantina, "Six ISB uniforms in the sizes the charming Missus Verser specified while trying to pretend she thought I was poodoo."

"Oh Lyssa doesn't pretend about things like that." Tharun commented as he inspected a pale ISB tunic, "These are good." he said, "Whoever, you've got knocking these things up has a good eye for detail."

"Oh these aren't replicas." Odras said with a smile, "I prefer to avoid supplying counterfeit goods to beings that I actually like."

"These are real?" Mace asked in amazement, "And you just so happened to have them lying about?"

"Of course not." Odras replied, "But I do know a rather nervous individual who works in the laundry at an ISB station house. I agreed to write off his debt in exchange for these."

"So long as they do the job." Tharun said as he began to sort through the box accompanying the uniforms that contained various rank insignia.

"What about speeders?" Mace asked, looking directly at Odras.

"There are two out the back." he replied, "Standard civilian models with modifications so that anyone inside would believe it was an official vehicle."

"Sirens?" Tharun asked hopefully and he looked up from the rank badges.

"Lights only." Odras replied, "Getting the proper siren pitch would take longer." and Tharun frowned, disappointed.

"Just lights will do." Mace said, "It's not like we'll be involved in any high speed pursuits anyway. In fact we need to avoid drawing that sort of attention from anyone who may be inclined to check we are who we say we are."

"Which we aren't." Tharun said.

"But Vantor won't know that." Mace said, "Or at least he better not."

Odras waited while the rebels loaded the uniforms aboard the speeders parked outside and waved them off. Then he turned to one of the men that had been lurking close by.

"Get a team together." he said, "You don't need to know anything about what we're doing but we'll need some heavy weaponry. I've got a bad feeling that Captain Grayle may be about to modify the terms of our agreement."

Cass leant up against the wall watching the rebels putting the finishing touches to their disguises. The assortment of weapons they usually carried was of no use for this operation and only Kara, Tharun and Tobis were openly carrying standard issue blasters on their hips. Meanwhile both Jaysica and Vorn had tucked their compact hold out blasters into their tunics while Mace would be unarmed for this mission.

"Dad why can't I come with you?" Cass asked.

"Because you're only eighteen and passing you off as an ISB agent is going to be next to impossible even with a uniform that fit. Besides, if anything goes wrong we may need a pick up and I trust you to fly the Silver Hawk more than the droids." and upon hearing this the R5 astromech droid waiting close by produced a sudden rude sound. At which point the two protocol droids standing beside it looked at one another.

"Does this astromech droid frequently use such crude language Jeeves?" one of them asked in female sounding tones.

"Oh yes Emsee," Jeeves replied, "I'm sorry to say that Harvey can be very ill mannered at times." and the astromech droid produced another abrupt sound.

"How rude." Jeeves said.

"And impossible given even our superior physical design." Emsee added.

"Here you are Tharun darling." Lyssa said as he finished fastening his tunic and she began to pin a rank badge on his chest.

"Hey." Jaysica exclaimed, "I thought we were sticking with rank pins as close to our genuine ranks as possible."

"Everyone outranks you anyway." Kara commented.

"But she's putting a senior agent badge on him." Jaysica said, "That's like an officer."

"Well I think it suits him." Lyssa replied and Tharun smiled.

"It'll do fine." Vorn said as he checked his own rank badge that was also of a senior agent. Then he looked at Tharun, "Just don't let it go to your head sergeant."

Henris Vantor generally found the drive home from his office relaxing once he had left the very centre of the capital city. There the mass of traffic control measures required to channel vehicles through the city as

rapidly as possible frequently failed and traffic slowed to a crawl. That local regulations limited the altitude available to private vehicles only made the congestion worse and it was once he had cleared this that Vantor was able to really put his foot down on the accelerator. But as he was driving along a quiet stretch of road that he knew well enough that he felt confident in going somewhat faster than the local speed limit allowed for he suddenly became aware of a pair of other speeders following him. Both were identical unmarked landspeeders but all of a sudden both began to produce pulses of blue light from concealed emitters and Vantor winced as he checked his speed.

"Oh not now." he said to himself as he slowed his vehicle and pulled it over to the side of the road, still hoping that the two other landspeeders would continue on by. At first this seemed hopeful as the lead speeder drove past his own but it rapidly came to a halt and pulled in just ahead of him while the other pulled up behind, the pair effectively boxing him in. Sighing Vantor took out his driver's permit and was prepared to present it to the peace officers when he saw that the individuals getting out of the two speeders were not members of the Estranian police, instead all four wore the uniforms of ISB agents. On closer inspection he also saw that there was an additional agent left in each vehicle in the driver's seat, obviously ready to give chase if necessary.

"You are Henris Vantor?" Vorn asked as he stood beside Vantor's speeder and Vantor noticed that although Vorn appeared to be unarmed the other three standing close by all had blaster pistols holstered and two of them, including a second senior agent had their hands resting on their weapons," I asked if you are Henris Vantor!" Vorn snapped and Vantor flinched.

"Yes. Yes I am." he replied and he held up his permit, "I hope you have a good reason for this agent." he went on, "I am a senior member of COMPNOR and I-

"We know who you are and what you do." Vorn interrupted, "And we are also aware of what else you have been doing. Now step out of the vehicle." and he pulled at the door release. It was locked so did not open immediately but aware of the armed agents surrounding him Vantor unlocked the door and got out of the speeder as quickly as he could.

"Now look here agent - agent, what is your name?" he said to Vorn.

"I'm under no obligation to provide you with my name." Vorn told him, "Now step over here and empty your pockets while my team searches your vehicle."

Reluctantly Vantor went with Vorn towards his speeder and began removing the contents of his pockets. Vorn checked each item in turn before Kara came walking up to them.

"Speeder's clean boss." she said and Vorn hoped that her far too informal way of addressing a superior would not be noticed by Vantor.

"Very well." Vorn replied, "Instruct Senior Agent Verser to return to his vehicle while Agent Dorfus takes control of the suspect's vehicle."

"Suspect?" Vantor snapped, "You haven't even told me what this is all about."

"You'll find out all about that soon enough." Vorn told him, "But for now we are going to return to your home and search it for evidence. Agent Bilstran you will ride with us."

Kara nodded and headed back towards Tharun and Tobis while Vorn led Vantor to the back of their speeder. Scowling as he was put inside the vehicle Vantor scowled at Vorn.

"Don't think that this won't be forgotten." he hissed, "When COMPNOR hears about how you've treated me they'll throw you out of the service."

"I don't think that's likely." Mace commented from the driver's seat with a smirk that Vantor did not notice.

As soon as Kara returned to the speeder Mace set off, having already memorised the route he needed to take to reach the community where Vantor lived. This was located far enough from the centre of the capital city that walking between the locations would be impractical but no so far as to make the commute too great. The community's builders had had people who worked in the city in mind when they undertook construction and so had taken care to select a site that remained convenient for them.

The first thing about the community that came into view was the effect that the shield surrounding it had on the atmosphere, producing what looked like a sparkling effect from a distance. Vorn knew that although this was mainly intended as a particle shield to prevent unauthorised individuals from doing just what the rebels wanted to do – enter the community – the shield would also stop the energy of blasters and other similar weapons. The three speeders moved in a convoy, with the mock Imperial vehicles at the front and rear while Tharun drove Vantor's speeder between them.

"Okay we're here." Mace said as he pulled up to the gatehouse positioned by a gap in the shield that was instead blocked by a heavily polished gate.

"Okay, tell the guard to let us through." Vorn told Vantor. Had the rebels been genuine ISB agents they could have compelled the guard to allow them entry just by presenting their rank cylinders for the guard to plug into his security panel. But on their rebels' disguises these were in fact cosmetically identical Imperial military devices that would not stand up to such scrutiny so they needed Vantor to get them through.

"Why not tell him yourself?" Vantor asked but before he could feel too smug Kara suddenly placed a hand on the back of his head and slammed it forwards into the back of one of the front seats. Then she yanked his

head back again and glared at him.

"You're in enough trouble without adding an obstruction of justice charge." she said, "Now just talk to the damn guard."

The guard could see the ISB uniforms worn by the rebels and he approached the speeder nervously.

"Can I help you?" he asked, first looking at Mace and then at the two rebels in the back with Ventor.

"Let us through." Ventor said, his hand nursing his injured nose but the guard hesitated.

"Didn't you hear him?" Vorn snapped, "Open this gate immediately."

"Yes of course." the guard said before triggering the gate release.

"Drive on." Vorn told Mace and the speeder convoy drove through the open gate and headed for Ventor's home, leaving behind a somewhat confused security guard.

Ventor lived alone but had several droids to take care of his housekeeping needs and it was one of these that opened the front door as the speeders pulled up outside.

"Master Henris," the droid said as he and the rebels walked towards the door, "I do wish you had warned me that there would be guests for dinner. I now calculate a thirty minute delay in serving time due to the need to-

"Shut him up." Vorn told Kara as he pushed past the droid.

"With pleasure." she replied and she simply reached out and flicked the droid's deactivation switch causing it to slump forwards and collapse onto the floor as the rebels simply stepped past it.

"Search the house." Vorn ordered, "Shut down any other droids and locate any computer terminal or other data storage device. Tharun, keep an eye on the prisoner."

"Yes sir." Tharun replied and as the other rebels began spreading out to conduct their search he led Ventor to the first chair he could find and shoved the man down into it, "Now stay put." he said sternly with his hand still resting on his blaster, his fingers tapping against it.

When the rebels gathered together again they had in their possession several mem-sticks and a portable computer that Mace set down on a table.

"Okay Tobis," he said, "what do you make of this?" and Tobis leant in for a close look.

"Err, this isn't a full computer." he said.

"You mean someone's used it for spares?" Kara asked.

"Oh, err, no." Tobis replied, "I, err, I mean that this is just an access terminal that connects wirelessly to a computer built into the house itself."

"Probably controls everything from the lights to the air conditioning." Vorn said. The he added, "Can you crack it?"

"Oh, err, I'm not sure. I need to check." Tobis answered, turning on the terminal and when it had started up he began to try out some of the applications and navigating the file structure. Then he stood back and looked at Vorn, "Err, eventually yes. But not in the time we have. I need to know the correct protocol for accessing the main core. If I had Harvey here then he could plug into it directly. But-

At this point Ventor frowned.

"Wait a moment." he said, getting to his feet.

"Just sit down." Tharun told him.

"No I will not!" Ventor snapped, "Just who are you people? I want to see your authorisation to be here."

"We're the only chance you have of avoiding having Odras Balve rip pieces from you." Mace told him, "Now tell us how to access your computer and we'll look after you."

"Balve? You're not the ISB at all!" Ventor snapped and before Tharun could react he darted past Tharun and grabbed hold of a lamp, ripping it free from the power socket on the wall.

"No you don't." Tharun said, drawing his blaster and clubbing Ventor with the butt causing the man to drop the lamp and collapse to the floor clutching at his head.

Inside the cockpit of the YT-2400 freighter that his superior in Black Sun owned the borneck cyborg Derl Corack waited, keeping watch over the instrument panel when all of a sudden a light began to blink accompanied by a high pitched chirping.

"Sliet!" he yelled as he sat up straight, "Sliet, come quick."

"What's wrong?" the sullustan Sliet Sall asked as he peered into the cockpit.

"It's Ventor." Derl replied, "He's in trouble."

"Then go check the guns." Sliet said, "We're going to get him."

## 5.

"Okay so how long to slice into the core now?" Vorn asked as Tobis peered into the hole in the wall behind which the house's computer core was located. After a brief search Tobis had been able to track the wiring back to a storage compartment located behind a hidden wall panel upstairs and removed it to reveal the computer core that in the absence of his astromech droid he was now connecting his datapad to. Though relatively low powered, the datapad was the best tool the rebels had available to them for accessing the core.

"Err, I'd say an hour at least major." he replied and then added, "Sorry." and Vorn sighed.

"Tharun, Kara." he called out, leaning over the banister and shouting downstairs.

"What is it boss?" Kara responded, appearing to peer back up at him.

"Go out front and make sure that the neighbours don't come looking too closely. Same goes with any security patrols. Make sure they just keep going past."

"What do we do if they won't leave major?" Tharun asked, appearing beside Kara.

"You're the ISB." Vorn replied, "First you threaten them and then you shoot them."

"Set to stun though right?" Kara asked.

"I'll leave that up to you." Vorn said, "Now get going." then as he turned back to face Tobis again he sighed once more, "I've got a bad feeling about this." he muttered.

Sliet piloted the YT-2400 towards Vantor's home. The moment that the lamp had been pulled from the socket it had triggered the emergency beacon inside that the sullustan was now following. Like the rebels who had approached on the surface the first indication to Sliet that he was nearing his destination was the sight of the shield flickering in the distance. Fortunately for him the shield was of the form of a vertical wall about ten metres tall rather than an all enclosing dome. Such a shield would have made the community almost impenetrable but would have done so at the risk of restricting access by emergency vehicles that tended to travel at higher altitudes. This meant that Sliet could fly his ship right over the shield wall, intending to set it down right in front of Vantor's house. However as the ship flew closer he saw the three landspeeders parked in the street outside and two figures standing close by. Using the freighter's optical sensors he zoomed in on the two figures and snarled when he saw ISB uniforms. Openly engaging Imperial authorities was an easy way to end his life amongst a ball of flaming wreckage plummeting towards the ground while a TIE pilot performed a victory loop behind him. But when he saw the face of the female ISB agent he zoomed in even closer and smiled. He had encountered this woman before, having abducted and tortured her to find out exactly who she and her companions were. Now Sliet knew that he was not facing ISB agents at all, he was facing rebels.

"Derl." he said into the intercom, "Its that rebel team. Take out their transport."

"Copy Sliet." Derl replied from the ship's ventral turret and he turned his weapons to face the speeders.

A handful of the local residents either peered out of their own homes to try and see what was going on at Vantor's house or found reasons to happen to be walking past when they tried asking Kara and Tharun why they were there. But in each case they got nothing more than a warning to keep moving and since that instruction was apparently backed up by blasters they did as they were told.

"What's that sound?" Tharun asked just after sending another local who had been out exercising their pet canine.

"What? I don't." Kara replied but then she too heard the sound of a powerful repulsorlift engine from overhead and looking up the two rebels saw a YT-2400 freighter swooping down towards them.

"Down!" Tharun yelled, tackling Kara and pushing her to the ground just as Derl opened fire with a short burst from his laser cannon that blew apart all three landspeeders and produced a blast wave that shattered every window on the street.

"Holy kriff!" Kara exclaimed as she felt the heat of the laser blasts and heard the sounds of shrapnel from the destroyed speeders landing all around, "Tharun, are you okay?"

"Urgh. I'm fine lieutenant." Tharun responded as they both lay on the front lawn.

Meanwhile the sound of the repulsorlifts grew louder as the YT-2400 descended and came to a halt hovering just above the street. Then its access ramp lowered to reveal Dern standing there wielding a blaster rifle that he aimed towards the house and then fired on fully automatic.

"Kriff!" Kara exclaimed again as she and Tharun desperately scabbled clear of the blaster fire, not risking stopping to draw their own weapons as the borneck rushed towards the house itself.

"In here!" Vantor yelled from inside the house while Jaysica and Mace took cover. Jaysica's hold out blaster had been quite adequate for keeping the unarmed Vantor under control but against a military specification

blaster rifle wielded by an armoured cyborg it was hopelessly outclassed and the two rebels remained under cover as the continued fusillade of fire blew chunks from the walls of the room they were in.

Assisted by his body armour, Derl smashed his way through what remained of the front wall into the room and pulled a grenade from his webbing.

"Move!" he yelled at Vantor before he tossed it into the ruins of the room. As Vantor got to his feet and began to scabble towards Derl the grenade went off. But rather than another explosion that produced heat and shrapnel it went off with a 'Pop!' followed by a hissing as a thick cloud of smoke began to fill the room.

As Derl then crashed back out onto the front lawn dragging the coughing and spluttering Vantor behind him Tharun was ready with his blaster but the combination of Derl's power assisted body armour and cyborg body meant that his shots barely seemed to slow him down. Normally Derl would have paused to deal with both Tharun and Kara properly, but since on this occasion since he was mainly concerned with protecting Vantor he responded with just another generally aimed burst of fire from his rifle that sent the two rebels diving for cover once more while he pulled Vantor aboard the still hovering YT-2400.

The sound of the freighter's engines then increased as it ascended out of reach of the rebels, taking with it Henris Vantor.

It was then that the other rebels came stumbling out of the house, coughing from the smoke they had inhaled.

"What happened?" Vorn asked.

"Those Black sun goons turned up boss." Kara answered.

"Yeah and decided to just start shooting at anything that moved." Tharun added.

"Then they left." Kara said.

"With Vantor." Mace said.

"We can't stay here." Vorn said, looking around at the crowd that was now starting to gather, "All this is going attract the wrong sort of attention and we need to get Vantor back. Mace, make the call."

Mace nodded and took out his comlink.

Alone in the cockpit of the *Silver Hawk* Cass peered out of the canopy and tried to determine precisely where she was. She was circling in a holding pattern just beyond the controlled airspace of the Estranian capital, but that was about all she knew. So far her flying lessons had concentrated on just that, flying. Navigation was another matter entirely. She could of course call for either Harvey or Lyssa to come and help her, but Cass had the feeling that neither of them would be exceptionally happy about being disturbed.

"*Silver Hawk* come in. Cass are you there?" Mace signalled and Cass activated the *Silver Hawk's* communications.

"I'm here Dad." she replied, "At least I think I am, I'm not one hundred percent on where 'here' is."

"We need a pick up Cass, quickly." Mace said.

"Right. Err, where are you?" Cass asked in reply.

"Just follow the smoke." Mace told her, "It'll lead you right to us. Oh and hurry up, we're attracting an audience down here."

As Mace put the comlink away Vorn looked back at the house.

"We need that computer core." he said, "We can take it back to headquarters and let Lieutenant Pay slice it."

"Yeah, that nerd's got too little to do since I killed that bitch Lerner." Kara commented, referring to the spy that Imperial Intelligence had been able to insert into the Alliance and that Geran Pay had been sent to find.

"Tobis is the one who knows what to do." Mace commented.

"But the house is full of smoke." Jaysica pointed out, "He'll choke."

"We won't have time for Mace or Kara to suit up when the *Silver Hawk* gets here." Vorn said as he tried to think of a way for someone to safely reach the computer core.

"Emsee and Jeeves could get it." Kara suggested.

"But they'd need directing to it." Vorn replied, "We really need to get it before Cass gets here to pick us up."

"Oh, err, what about the housekeeping droid?" Tobis asked and he looked towards the front door where the deactivated droid was still just about visible through the smoke, "If I reactivate it then it should be able to retrieve the core for us."

"Do it." Vorn ordered and Tobis rushed back towards the house. Then Vorn looked at the growing crowd of locals, "In the meantime I suggest that we try and keep these people back." he said, "The longer we can act like the ISB the less likely someone is to call the police."



## 6.

The *Silver Hawk* arrived just as the housekeeping droid reappeared with the computer core and like the Black Sun YT-2400 before it, Cass hovered the ship low over the street while Lyssa waved the rebels on the ground aboard.

"Tharun!" Lyssa called out, "Quickly."

Tharun leapt onto the ship's access ramp and into his wife's arms. Then he turned to take the computer core from Tobis while Kara leapt onto the ramp and continued running up it into the ship. Mace and Vorn followed while Tharun helped Tobis up. This only left Jaysica and she too leapt up towards the access ramp, but she lost her footing at the last moment and let out a scream as she fell, barely managing to grab hold of the end of the ramp. Believing everyone to now be aboard Cass increased the power to the engines and the *Silver Hawk* began to rise up into the air with Jaysica still dangling from the access ramp.

"Help me!" she cried out as she hung on.

"Stang!" Tharun exclaimed as he looked around, "Quick lad, your girlfriend needs a hand." and he and Tobis reached out to drag Jaysica up onto the ramp.

As soon as everyone was safely aboard Mace and Vorn headed for the cockpit.

"Kara," Vorn called out without stopping, "Get on that turret."

"We're going after them?" Jaysica exclaimed, "But their ship-"

"Is getting further away each minute little lady." Tharun interrupted, "Now go strap in while the officers do what they need to."

Once in the cockpit Mace changed places with Cass while Vorn sat down beside him.

"Okay I think I see them." Vorn said as he looked at the sensor readouts, "Heading east away from the capital. Looks like they're flying casual to avoid anyone taking notice of them."

"Setting course major." Mace replied and he steered the *Silver Hawk* after the Black Sun vessel.

"What's that?" Cass asked from the seats behind Mace and Vorn and she pointed to another contact on the sensor display.

"Oh dear." Vorn responded, "Mace we've got company. Looks like a light corvette."

"What's it doing?" Cass asked.

"Coming after us probably." Vorn told her, "When starships start shooting up residential neighbourhoods people take notice. Even if they think that the ISB are already on the scene they call the police and they call the Empire."

"I don't think they've been able to get a sensor lock on us yet." Mace said, "We may still be able to lose them."

"Stay after that Black Sun ship though." Vorn ordered, "We mustn't let them escape."

"I'm on them major." Mace replied.

Accelerating the *Silver Hawk*, Mace was able to close the distance between them and the Black Sun ship. Being unaware that the rebels had been collected by their ship the gangster ignored the approaching vessel until they were within visual range.

"Der!" Sliet yelled into the intercom, "We've got company. Looks like a clapped out old YT thirteen hundred. Better show them what a modern ship is capable of."

A sudden flash of red from one of the YT-2400's turrets let the rebels know that they had been spotted.

"That was close." Cass said as the energy blast flew over the canopy.

"Well this ship still has a few surprises in her." Mace said, "Shields up." and moments after he raised the *Silver Hawk's* enhanced shields another laser blast from the YT-2400 they were chasing slammed right into them, causing the whole ship to shudder violently.

"Kara, returning fire would be good right now." Vorn said into the intercom.

"I would if Mace could hold her still long enough for me to get a clear shot." Kara replied from the turret before she fired a short burst at the YT-2400. However, the more modern vessel had a shield generator of its own and combined with a thickly protected hull the blasts did not noticeable damage, "That armour's too thick for my cannon." Kara said.

"Keep trying." Vorn told her, "I want that ship brought down."

Just then Cass spotted a flash of light from the ground while Mace and Vorn were focused on the YT-2400 ahead of them.

"What's that?" she said, pointing out of the canopy towards a small cluster of vehicles on the surface.

"Missile!" Vorn snapped.

"There's no lock." Mace said, "Either someone let it off too soon or-"

"Or it's not aimed at us." Vorn interrupted as he saw the vapour trail of the missile turning towards the YT-2400.

The missile's proximity fuse caused it to detonate just underneath the other ship and it lurched as the shock wave of the explosion struck it. Along with the shock wave came the shrapnel packed in around the concussive charge of the warhead and this ripped through the YT-2400's armoured hull. Pale blue lightning arced across the stricken ship's hull and its nose suddenly tilted downwards as Sliet lost control and his vessel began to plummet towards the ground.

"She's going down." Mace said, "The pilot will never pull out that, his controls are fried."

"Take us down after them." Vorn said, "We need to beat that corvette and whoever it is that shot them down."

"Who do you think it was?" Cass asked.

"I'm not sure." Vorn replied, "But I've got a bad feeling that we don't want to come face to face with them."

The Imperial corvette was still circling over the community where Venter had lived as Mace set the *Silver Hawk* down close to where the YT-2400 had crashed, apparently unable to locate either of the ships involved in the fighting.

Aware that the corvette could detect them at any moment Vorn had Tobis remain aboard the *Silver Hawk* with Cass and Jaysica as well as Lyssa to watch for any sign of it's approach while he Kara, Mace and Tharun rushed down the access ramp and headed towards the YT-2400. They still wore their ISB uniforms but not needing to maintain any disguise they were fully armed this time around with Tharun carrying his heavy Blastech A-280 rifle while the others were all armed with standard issue E-11 rifles.

The Black Sun ship had ploughed through woodland as it crashed and behind it there was a trail of destroyed forest. However, the missile had not caused any catastrophic damage to any of the systems that would have caused the ship to simply explode on impact so it remained relatively intact. The force of the crash had ripped open the freighter's access ramp though and it was here that the rebels boarded the ship. Inside the ship was in darkness with the only illumination coming from several panels that flickered on and off. The air was filled with the acrid smell of burning electronics and every so often there was the crackle of an uncontrolled electrical discharge.

"Careful not touch anything." Mace warned the others, "There could be a lot of power running through some of these exposed cables."

Tharun led the way, creeping slowly forwards until he heard a soft groaning sound and he spun around, aiming his rifle at the source of the sound.

"Venter." he said softly.

"Secure him." Vorn said, "Mace take the cockpit and Kara and I will check the turrets."

Mace nodded and began to move slowly towards the cockpit while Kara and Vorn headed the other way. In the cockpit Mace found Sliet slumped over the control console, bleeding from a large cut across his face. However the sullustan was alive and Mace quickly bound his wrists with a cable tie brought aboard for just that purpose.

While he was doing this Kara and Vorn searched the ship's two turrets. The one Vorn chose was empty but Kara found Derl in the other one. He seemed to be unconscious as well and she scowled at him as she remembered how he had tortured her for information and then left her for dead. All of a sudden Derl's one organic eye flickered open and the cybernetic one lit up as it came back online.

"You rebel scum!" he snapped, lashing out with his cybernetic arm. But Kara ducked in time to avoid the blow and he instead just buried his metal fist in the bulkhead behind her. Then as he struggled to try and free himself from the bulkhead she pressed the muzzle of her rifle against his cybernetic arm near the shoulder.

"So you remember me then?" she asked and then she pulled the trigger.

Though the arm was not really Derl's, it did contain an array of sensors designed to let him know of any damage just like in the original one before he had lost it and so when the blaster shot blew the arm off entirely the remaining sensor elements sent so many signals to his brain that Derl screamed in agony.

"Kara are you okay?" Vorn called out from the other turret.

"Oh I'm fine boss." she replied, "But there's a guy up here who could do with a hand."

Derl and Sliet were dragged into the lounge area of the YT-2400 with Venter and lined up. Though groggy they were all now awake and they glared up at the rebels.

"Well isn't this nice?" Kara said and she looked at Vorn, "Think Balve will pay a bonus for these other two nerf herders?"

"I doubt it." Mace said.

"But I bet Alliance Intelligence will be interested to-" Tharun began before Vorn's comlink came to life.

"Daddy! Tharun! Help! We're-" Lyssa's voice cried out before the channel went dead.

"The Silver Hawk! Quick!" Mace snapped and the four rebels rushed for the access ramp, leaving the three Black Sun operatives behind. However as they rushed out of the crashed ship they found themselves face to face with a large group of men armed with a variety of blaster rifles and carbines.

"Lower your weapons." one of them told the rebels, "Mister Balve would like a word with you."

Odras' men entered the YT-2400 and brought out the rebels' three prisoners and then escorted them all back towards the Silver Hawk at the base of their ship's access ramp where the rebels who had remained behind lined up on their knees with their hands on their heads while more of Odras' men stood watch and Odras himself stood behind them smiling.

"Mace!" he called out, "I had a feeling that you may try to spirit Mister Vantor here away before I could get to him so I had you tracked. Fortunately as it seems. Without my missile they'd have got away." then he looked at Vantor, "My, my. You are popular today aren't you?" he asked with a smirk, "The rebellion wants you and Black Sun wants you. Too bad you belong to me. Take him away."

"What are you going to do with him?" Vorn asked.

"Oh I've come into possession of an Imperial interrogation droid." Odras replied, "I'm sure that its mind probe will get me the list of who in my organisation is loyal and who else I need to deal with."

Vantor's jaw dropped at the mention of an interrogator droid.

"No!" he screamed as he was dragged away, "No, not the mind probe!"

Then Odras looked at Derl and Sliet.

"I don't care about those two though." he said and he looked at Vorn, "So you can keep them. That way we all walk away with something and everybody's happy."

"Happy?" Mace replied.

"Well, not exactly perhaps." Odras said, "But we all have something to show for today's events at least. Oh and Mace one last thing."

"What now Balve?" Mace asked.

"Your next payment is due in three weeks. Try not to be late this time."