

STAR WARS

2-09: In the Shadow of a Black Sun

By Stephen J Dutton



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...

IN THE SHADOW OF A BLACK SUN

WHEN A REBEL AGENT REALISES HE IS BEING TAILED THE OCCUPANTS OF THE
SILVER HAWK ARE DESPATCHED TO HELP. HOWEVER, THEY ARE SOON THE ONES
BEING HUNTED BY A VICIOUS FOE...

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

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1.

Treego studied the video hologram carefully. The image that floated above the rodian's desk showed a male of the falleen species, a species rarely seen away from their homeworld of the same name.

"Mister Sall to see you Mister Treego." His secretary's voice told him over the intercom.

"Send him in." Treego replied and he leant back as the door opened to reveal a mouse like sullustan as he entered the office.

"You sent for me Mister Treego?" the sullustan said.

"Indeed I did Sliet." Treego replied, "Take a seat." And Treego pointed to one of the chairs on the opposite side of his desk. Sliet did as he was told and sat down. "Do you know this being?" Treego asked him, indicating the falleen.

"No sir. I do not."

"As you can see he has managed to insert himself into high society in the sector, despite having arrived only recently."

Sliet nodded slowly as he watched the hologram. It showed the falleen at some sort of social gathering along with many influential figures from around the sector. Sliet noted at least four current and past Parliamentarians from Estran as well as the billionaire industrialist Edvars Kurrad.

"The falleen are able to bend others to their will." Sliet said, "Perhaps-" then Treego held up his and shut off the hologram.

"He's here for us. I'm certain of it. Black Sun has sent him to replace us."

"Replace? But why?"

Treego slid a tiny metal flask across the desk.

"I sent an agent to contact Onell the Hutt to negotiate his surrender of the shadow port he controls. He sent us this in return."

Sliet picked up the flask and opened it. Inside was a pale grey powder.

"What is it?" Sliet asked.

"Our agent."

Sliet almost dropped the flask as he realised he was looking at the ashes of someone in the same line of work as himself. Instead he closed the flask again and set it back down on the desk.

"But why?" Sliet asked, "Why would he risk the wrath of Black Sun?"

"Because he does not take us seriously. It is not long since we returned to this region of the galaxy and there are others who have filled the vacuum left by our absence."

"I have encountered others with this attitude." Sliet said, remembering an incident in which two human Black Sun agents had been lost while attempting to infiltrate the local Imperial hierarchy.

"Indeed, though the hutt's response is perhaps more extreme than most, several of our agents have encountered such attitudes."

"Will we be avoiding Onell's territory then?" Sliet enquired.

"Of course not. If word of that got back to our leaders then this falleen will be sat where I am right now by the end of the week. We must show progress." Then he leant forwards and pointed at Sliet, "You will provide it to me."

"Me?" Sliet replied, his eyes darting back to the flask of ashes as he briefly wondered if he would be the next to be cremated.

Treego activated a different hologram, one that showed a male human.

"This man is a black marketer who operates out of Onell's shadow port." Treego said, "But his behaviour is atypical of the traders there. He mainly buys and sells in bulk and most of his trades have an off world connection."

"Then he is part of a larger operation?" Sliet said.

"That is what it looks like. Such an organisation could be a rival to Onell the Hutt's and perhaps by absorbing it into Black Sun we can put more pressure on Onell. Go to the human and find out who he works for."

"And if the human is uncooperative?"

"He must cooperate. Whether he does so willingly or not is irrelevant."

Returning to the store that was also his home Jacen Karn noticed that he was being followed. He paused at a food stall and bought one of the fried meat on a stick offerings. It was not that he was hungry and certainly not hungry enough to eat the food the vendor was offering, but by stooping here it gave him the chance to take a proper look behind him without giving away that he had seen the being following him.

The being following Jacen was humanoid, that much was obvious. But he or she was sticking to the shadows at the edge of the narrow street carved into one of the many grooves that criss-crossed the planet.

Picking up his pace Jacen continued on his way home, tossing the meat snack away and causing a small pack of hungry rodents to rush from their burrows to fight over it. He stuck his hands in his pockets casually, but in reality he was placing one on the grip of the vibroblade he kept in one. Hopefully an attacker would be too distracted by the heavy blaster pistol on his leg to notice the concealed melee weapon until it was too late.

A group of armed beings came into view ahead. Each of them wore a coloured armband that marked them out as being in the employ of Onell the Hutt, the crime boss who owned the planet where the shadow port was located. On most worlds the sight of a group of enforcers would be a welcome sight to someone being followed, but here it meant little. Onell did not care about how the residents of the shadow port acted towards one another so long as he got his cut and the place kept on running smoothly. However, Jacen could still make use of them.

"Hey guys!" he called out and he calmly walked towards them.

The armed group eyed him suspiciously as he approached.

"What do you want?" one of them asked. He was a muscular red-skinned twi'lek and from the way the others in the group stood around him Jacen guessed that he was their leader.

"I don't suppose you've seen a blonde haired woman around here have you?" Jacen asked, "She was my date, but she skipped out as I handed over the cash."

Several of the group smirked.

"That's what you get for paying up front." The twi'lek replied.

"Yeah, I know." Jacen replied and he turned his head as if he were looking for the fictional woman. In fact he was looking to see if he was still being tailed. Sure enough he could just about make out a figure in the shadows opposite, "That might be her." He said, pointing into the shadows, "Does one of you have a light?"

One of Onell's enforcers pointed a glow rod towards the figure and Jacen saw enough to recognise it as a wroonian. The near human species differed from the baseline only in that their skin and hair was a deep blue. As soon as the light was shone up him the wroonian turned around and began to walk the other way.

"Oh well." Jacen said, "Guess I'll be spending the night alone then. Thanks anyway." And he took a five credit coin from his pocket and handed it to the twi'lek. Then he continued on his way home, still checking over his shoulder every step of the way.

"Alledran?" a gruff sounding voice said from behind the wroonian while he waited for his drink.

"Who wants know?" he asked in return and he spun around on the bar stool to see who was talking to him,

"Oh its you Derl." Before him stood another near human, but unlike the blue-skinned wroonian this one was a borneck. Like wroonians the bornecks were marked out by their skin colouration, in this case yellow. What made this particular borneck stand out more were the numerous cybernetic prostheses down one side of his body. From what Alledran could see Derl had replaced his leg, arm and eye with bionics.

"The boss wants you." Derl said, "Now."

The barman placed Alledran's drink on the bar and Alledran tossed him a coin in payment. Then he got up and took his drink with him as he followed Derl to a private booth that was isolated by a curtain from the rest of the bar. The owner appreciated that many of his customers desired their privacy even in a port with no laws so he made his bar as supportive of this trait as possible.

"What have you learned?" Sliet asked before Alledran could even sit down.

"I've learned your mystery man is cunning." Alledran answered and he took a drink.

"So nothing then!" Sliet snapped, "Do you even have a name yet?"

"Not as such. But-

"But nothing! You have failed me for the last time. If you cannot find out who he is then we will do it ourselves." And he nodded to Derl.

"Yes well, if you thought it was going to be that easy you'd have- gaack!"

Alledran's protest was cut off suddenly when Derl reached out with his bionic arm and grabbed him by the throat. Alledran struggled as the borneck tightened his grip, but resistance was futile against the powerful artificial limb and there was a 'crunch' as his windpipe collapsed. Derl relaxed his grip and Alledran slumped backwards, blood dripping from his mouth and staring wide eyed across the table.

"Thank you for the drink." Sliet said and he picked up Alledran's near full glass and poured what was left of the drink into his own empty one.

"What now?" Derl asked as he sat down beside Alledran's corpse.

"What else?" Sliet answered, "We find him ourselves."

There was the sound of breaking glass as the tray slid from the young woman's grasp.

"That wasn't my fault!" she cried out as she fell to the floor along with the broken drinks containers.

"For once I agree with you Jaysica." another woman called out from the nearby table and she held on to it as the light freighter the *Silver Hawk* lurched violently on re-entry.

"Jaysica, Kara, what's going on?" a male voice asked from near the corridor leading to the crew cabins.

"What do you think Tharun?" Kara said, risking letting go of the table just long enough to secure a safety belt around her waist, "Mace screwed up the re-entry to this hell hole."

"Easy there little lady." Tharun said as he walked across the lounge, spreading his arms out to help keep his balance, "That stuff looks sharp." He reached down and helped Jaysica back up then the pair of them joined Kara at the table and strapped themselves in.

"Get ready everyone," a voice said over the *Silver Hawk's* intercom, "we're heading for some nasty chop up ahead."

"Ahead?" Kara exclaimed, "What does he call this?"

The ship rocked again and despite the artificial gravity the trio felt the ship's attitude shift briefly. There was another sudden lurch followed by a high-pitched squealing. Then, from the corridor that led to the cockpit a red and white astromech droid rolled backwards uncontrollably until it struck the kitchen unit opposite the table.

"Hey Harvey!" Tharun yelled at the droid, "You alright little buddy?"

Harvey let out a forlorn sounding bleep and toppled over.

"I'll take that as a no." Tharun said, then he looked at Jaysica, "Hey little lady, what about you? You're a bit-" That was when Jaysica threw up on him.

"I'm out of here." Kara said as Tharun just stared at Jaysica while she wiped her mouth, "Before the Klutz spews on me too."

Releasing her seat belt, Kara got up carefully and steadied herself on the wall as she made her way towards the cockpit.

"Yo Mace!" she shouted as she approached the cockpit door, "Congratulations!"

"What's that?" Mace Grayle, captain of the *Silver Hawk* replied.

"Well despite air pockets being invisible to the human eye you've managed to find every one in our flight path."

"Oh mistress Bilstran," a high pitched reply came from one of the rear seats in the cockpit that was occupied by a golden coloured protocol droid, "I don't think that Captain Grayle was deliberately trying to-"

"Can it Jeeves." Kara replied then she reached out and deactivated the droid.

"Thanks." The man sat in the co-pilot's seat said, "I'd have done that myself five minutes ago if I could have reached him." This was Major Vorn Larcus III, he commanded the rebel unit assigned to Mace's ship.

"You're welcome boss." Kara replied. There was a single vacant seat in the cockpit, located behind Mace's seat and Kara sat down and strapped herself in, "So captain, are you planning to land us or just bounce?"

"Depends if Tobis can bring the sensors back on line." Mace replied.

"We've no sensors?" Kara replied loudly, her eyes open wide and she leant forwards to look at the *Silver Hawk's* flight systems, "Oh my god we're flying blind in a dust storm!" she added.

"Perhaps you'd prefer it back in the lounge." Vorn suggested to Kara.

"No chance boss. Tharun's already covered in puke."

"Tharun was sick?" Vorn asked.

"No. Jaysica." Kara replied and both Mace and Vorn winced.

A display located centrally in the *Silver Hawk's* control panel suddenly came to life and almost at the same time the voice of Tobis, the ship's engineer was heard over the intercom.

"How's that?" he asked.

"You've got it!" Mace replied excitedly.

"And not a moment too soon." Kara added as Mace lifted the *Silver Hawk's* nose to avoid a large rocky spire.

Jacen held the brim of his hat down as the *Silver Hawk* touched down and kicked up a cloud of dirt. The shadow port offered little in the way of starport services at most of its docking pads, those with a need for anything more than basic refuelling and mynock removal were expected to instead go to one of the businesses offering these services.

After the *Silver Hawk's* engines were shut off the vessel's boarding ramp lowered. Jacen waited as the group that emerged was greeted by several of Onell the Hutt's enforcers who collected the docking fee before walking past Jacen on their way out of the bay. One or two of the enforcers glared at him as they went by, but most paid him no attention at all. Their business here was done.

"Major." Jacen said he and the occupants of the *Silver Hawk* approached one another and he held out his hand.

"Mister Karn." Vorn replied as he shook Jacen's hand, "good to see you again. Sorry it's under such circumstances, Shyla said you were having trouble."

"Yes," Mace said as Jacen shook his hand also, "Shyla told him." Putting the emphasis on 'Shyla'. The Shyla in question was Shyla Nerin, head of Alliance Support Services in the sector. As an equipment procurer, Jacen reported to her.

"Wouldn't want to disappoint Shyla would we?" Tharun added with a smile, also emphasising 'Shyla'.

"Anyway," Vorn said, frowning at his companions, "we were told you were having trouble. How can we help?"

"Follow me," Jacen said, "and keep an eye out."

Jacen led the other rebels through the streets of the shadow port where they were constantly harangued by beings offering a variety of goods and services, many of which were considered illegal everywhere within the Empire. When the group reached Jacen's store he unlocked it and led them inside.

"So what's the problem then?" Mace asked as Jacen shut the door behind them.

"Yeah," Tharun added, "I didn't notice anything odd on the way back here. Of course you never said what I should have been looking for."

"I keep being followed." Jacen said, "Recently someone has been taking an interest in me and around here that's rarely a good thing."

Tharun went to the front of the store and peered out through one of the windows.

"See anyone?" Vorn asked.

"No one that looks like they're looking back at us major."

"I've not seen them around here yet." Jacen said, "I've been noticing them when I've been out at the docking bays mainly, doing trades. But I've been followed from the bar once or twice too. So far I've been able to shake them before I got back here though."

"How many?" Vorn asked.

"I'm not certain." Jacen answered, "They've done their best to stay out of my direct view, but a couple of nights ago I caught of a wroonian. That was when I put in the call to sector HQ. Nothing since then though."

2.

"I'm afraid that this is the best image I have of the being in question." Sliet said to the man sat beside him at the bar, "My companion saw him from a distance and was able to record this using his prosthetic eye, but by the time we reached his location he had moved on."

Jek Deray lowered the glass from his lips and glanced at the image on the datapad that the sullustan was holding out in front him.

"So why are you coming to me about this?" he asked before raising his glass again.

"Because we hear that you have dealt with him before. To me your species are difficult to tell apart. We were hoping you could put us in touch with him."

"Look," Jek said, putting down his drink, "if you want to buy something from this guy then tell me what it is. Maybe I've got what you want as well. If I don't I can probably get hold of it."

Sliet put his datapad away.

"I doubt you would want to be a part of this Mister Deray." He said, "Your stance on the dealing in living organisms is well known. You would not be willing to sell us what we want."

"Slaves?" Jek said with a snarl, "Well he won't help you either. He buys slaves sure, but he ships them off world straight away. He's got some exclusive contract he says. So he'll tell you what I'm about to tell you. Kriff off." And with that Jek picked up his glass and began to finish his drink.

Sliet sighed, then got up and walked away.

"He knows the man." He said to Derl, "I got that much from him. We would do well to keep an eye on this man."

Back at the bar a wookiee approached Jek just as he was draining the last dregs of his drink. The massive being growled, adjusted the seat vacated by Sliet and sat down. Then he looked at Jek and growled again.

"What about the image?" Jek asked, "It looked fine to me Travakka."

The wookiee growled and grunted again as he explained.

"So not taken using a bionic eye then?"

Another growl.

"Lying?" Jek said, "I figured that out even without knowing about the image. Whatever they're interested in it isn't slaves."

Sat on a workbench in Jacen's store and flanked by a squad of his troops Lae Chen, chief enforcer for Onell the Hutt counted the money.

"Its all there." Vorn said to him, "Two hundred credits. A mix of Imperial and Corporate Sector scrip, but its all there."

Lae Chen looked up.

"I remember you." He said as he glanced around the group of rebels, "The last time you were here you engaged in an act of theft."

"Not theft," Jacen said, "recovery. Besides, I paid you Onell's cut."

"But we never saw the merchandise." Lae Chen said, "I had only your word that the carbonite block was the same as the others."

Tobis glanced briefly at Jaysica who winced at the mention of the block of carbonite they had been frozen in together.

"Well perhaps if your boss has a problem," Mace said, "we can go see him about it."

Lae Chen tucked the cash in his pocket.

"I'm not wasting his time over that. But mark my words, any more trouble from you and I'll see to it that you never set foot here again unless it's in chains at an auction. Am I clear?"

"Perfectly." Vorn said and both Jacen and Mace nodded in agreement, "Now can you help us?"

"I want to be clear." Lae Chen answered and he looked at Jacen, "I don't care. If you're having trouble then by all means bring in your own security. But if they disrupt the smooth running of this place then you will be held to account."

"I know that." Jacen said, "But like my friend said, can you help us? Your people got a look at the wroonian. Do they know him?"

"I can take you to him." Lae Chen replied, "Follow me. Just two of you though. You and you." And he pointed at Jacen and Vorn.

"What about the rest of us?" Kara asked.

"Mind the store." Jacen said, "Don't buy or sell anything," Then he looked at Jaysica, "and don't break anything either. I've been warned about you." He added, prompting her to fold her arms and frown.

It was just a short speeder ride to the palace of Onell the Hutt, a low building set into the side of one of the many ravines on the planet. Like many such structures it was deceptively large, with a large portion of it having been carved out of the rock walls. Lae Chen took Jacen and Vorn to a garage located away from the entrance used by those seeking an audience with the shadow port's ruler.

"You have him in custody?" Vorn asked as they got out of the speeder and followed Lae Chen towards the security barracks.

"In a manner of speaking." Was all the enforcer would say as he led the two rebel agents down a flight of stairs.

The air temperature dropped significantly as they descended and by the time they reached the chamber below they could see their breath in the air as they exhaled.

"I've got a really bad feeling about this." Vorn said when he saw the rows of metal drawers set into the walls of the room."

"Yeah," Jacen agreed, "I've seen places like this before. They're typically-"

Before Jacen could finish, Lae Chen stopped besides one of the drawers and pulled it open. Inside lay the body of Alledran."

"-morgues." Jacen finished.

"Is this the being you say was following you?" Lae Chen asked.

"Looks like him." Jacen said, "The build's right and I've not seen many of his species around here."

"There are less than a dozen I believe." Lae Chen replied as he slid the door shut again.

"What happened to him?" Vorn asked.

"He got in an argument and lost." Lae Chen said, "Last night."

"Do you have any suspects?" Vorn asked.

"Suspects?" Lae Chen said in surprise, "I'm not investigating this. No crime has been committed here.

Someone got angry with him and killed him. But they did it in such a way that things are still running smoothly. No. If you want to know who killed him you can find that out yourself. Unless you want to hire some of my men of course."

"No." Jacen said, "We'll handle everything from here."

"But we'll need the body." Vorn said and Jacen looked at him in surprise, "I want Kara to take a look at it for us." He added.

"Six hundred credits." Lae Chen.

"Six hundred?" Vorn exclaimed, "I want his body turned over to us, I don't want him reincarnated."

"Eight hundred." Lae Chen said.

"That will be fine." Jacen said as he noticed Vorn drawing in breath to speak again and he reached into his jacket and produced a bag of coins that jingled as he shook it, "Will silver do?" he asked and Lae Chen smiled.

Though Lae Chen had given them a ride to Onell's palace he did not provide transport for Jacen and Vorn to returned to the store. Additionally, with what was obviously a corpse in a body bag with them, none of the vehicles they tried to flag down to hire were willing to stop for them. As a result the pair ended up having to walk back to the store, carrying the body bag between them.

"Just once," Vorn said as he tried to catch his breath, "I'd like to come here and not wind up manhandling some sort of inanimate body."

Tobis held the door open as Jacen and Vorn carried the body into the store.

"Kara!" Vorn called out, "I've got you a present." And then he and Jacen hefted the body bag and its contents onto a free workbench.

"How come she gets a present?" Jaysica said as she entered the room just behind Kara, "Why not me too? Oh." And she stopped when she saw Kara unzip the body bag.

"Gee boss, just what I always wanted." Kara said as she prodded the body, "Of course diamonds would be nice too."

"That better not be dinner." Mace said.

"How did he die?" Vorn asked Kara.

"Well, this is just an initial assessment from a mere field medic mind you boss," Kara began, "I think that there's the very slight possibility that it has something to do with the fact that someone decided to make his neck much, much thinner."

"Oh yeah." Tharun said as he looked over Kara's shoulder, "I almost missed that. Good call."

"Thanks." Kara replied then she looked at Vorn again, "Now is there anything you want from me aside from the bleeding obvious?"

"How was it done?" he asked, "I mean what can do that sort of damage?"

Kara turned her attention back towards the corpse. She lifted both of its arms and inspected them.

"You don't think he hit himself in the neck hard enough to kill him do you?" Jaysica asked, "I thought that was impossible."

"Cuts on his fingers." Kara said, ignoring Jaysica, "He fought against an attacker. I think he was banging his fists against something hard."

"Armour?" Tharun suggested.

"Maybe." Kara said, "But it could have been whatever weapon was used to do this. Wait no."

"What?" Vorn asked.

"Hey Tobis." Kara said, "Come take a look at this would you?"

Tobis stepped forwards and looked at the injury around Alledran's neck.

"It's not equal." He said, "The wound's thin at one side and much wider on the other."

"Is that important?" Jaysica asked.

"More interesting than anything else." Kara said, "It just tells us what the weapon was."

"What?" Jaysica asked.

"A hand." Tharun said from behind her then he looked towards Kara, "A bionic hand right?"

"I think so." Kara said, "What do you think Tobis?"

"Er, well it looks that way." Tobis responded.

"So was it just a regular bionic arm? Or did it have any enhancements?" Vorn asked.

"You mean like a shock hand?" Kara asked.

"Yes. Or maybe a repulse hand."

"Oh great." Mace said at the mention of a repulse hand, "Anyone with one of those needs shooting on sight."

"Well I don't think we need to worry about that." Kara said, "There's no scorching around the wound. This is a crush injury pure and simple."

"Well that's something I suppose." Vorn said.

"Yeah." Tharun added, "All we need to worry about is someone that can snap your neck with their bare hands."

"Any idea of the species?" Jacen asked before looking at Vorn and added, "It may be useful to know who we're looking for."

"Pass me that light." Kara said and held out her hand.

Jaysica reached for a worklight on the bench near to her and promptly knocked a bundle of non-descript tubes that were lent up against it. She withdrew her hands and placed them over her mouth as the strap securing the bundle gave way and the tubes clattered to the floor.

"I'm so sor-" she began.

"I've got it." Jacen said as he picked up the worklight and passed it to Kara, "Like I said, I was warned about you. But you can at least give me a hand here." And he crouched down to pick up the tubes. Jaysica also crouched down and in doing so banged against the workbench itself and sent a can of tiny electronic components toppling over the edge.

"On second thoughts I'll be fine on my own." Jacen said.

"Well," Kara interrupted, "whoever killed this guy had four fingers plus a single opposable thumb and a grip not much bigger than mine." And she placed her hand over the wound to demonstrate.

"So human then." Vorn said, "Or near human."

"Probably boss. The hand at least. But there's no guarantee that the killer was using a hand meant for their own species."

"She's right." Jacen said as he stood up and tied the tubes together again, "Around here people use what they can get hold of until something better comes along. I've not seen many cyborgs while I've been here, but those I have were happy to use prosthetics meant for any species if the option was going without a limb."

"You sell anyone a fake right hand then?" Tharun asked.

"You thinking a disgruntled customer?" Mace asked.

"Possibly." Tharun replied.

"But why bother with all this having people following me around when I'm out?" Jacen asked, "If they'd dealt with me before then they'd know where I am."

"First thing is to find out where he died." Vorn said, "That way we can ask if anyone saw who did this."

"What about him?" Jaysica asked, pointing at the body.

"Is there a set way of disposing of bodies around here?" Mace asked Jacen.

"Not really." Jacen told him, "But I wouldn't recommend just dumping him in the street. Lae Chen knows we had him."

"Then we burn him." Vorn said, "Mace, is it alright if Tobis helps Kara see to that?"

"Sure thing major." Mace replied.

"I've got plenty of flammable liquids." Jacen added.

At that moment there was a knock at the front door and everyone reached for their blasters.

"Stay back." Tharun said as he brought up his rifle and advanced towards the door. As he reached it there was a shout from outside.

"Hey Jacen! Open up! Its me!" Jek Deray shouted out.

Tharun opened the door.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Well how about before you invite me in you get that blaster out of my face?" Jek said, frowning.

Tharun glanced over his shoulder.

"Its just him major." He said.

"Let him in." Jacen said, approaching the door, "Sorry Jek. I've been having a few security problems."

"So I see." Jek replied then looking back at Tharun he asked, "How's that blaster working out for you?" When Tharun had bought the rifle from Jacen it had been non-functioning and Jek had supplied him with spares he needed to effect repairs.

Tharun shut the door behind Jek before he answered.

"Actually I've only fired it on the range so far. Seems to work fine, but every time I've pointed it at a living being they've given up."

"Yeah," Jek said, "well a Blastech A280 will have that effect. Anyway Jacen, what are these security problems you've been having?" then he saw the body, "Looks like you've taken care of one already."

"This wasn't us." Jaysica said defensively, "Just ask Onell's men."

"Hey." Jek said, raising his hands, "I wasn't looking to lay blame."

"Ignore her. I try to." Kara said and Jaysica frowned, "Our inanimate friend here was following Jacen around until last night when he developed a severe sore throat thanks to a cyborg that gave him a helping hand."

"I don't believe you just said that." Vorn said.

"I do." Mace added.

"Said what? Oh." Kara said as she got what she'd just said.

"Well I never saw the cyborg myself," Jek said, "but I was approached this morning by a sullustan who suggested that he was working with one. Said his companion had a bionic eye that he used to get a picture of you Jacen. Travakka told me he was talking mynock crap though. The resolution was too good for an eye shot, so there may not be a cyborg at all."

Then both Jacen and Jek noticed the other rebels glaring at each other.

"What is it?" Jacen asked.

"A sullustan and a cyborg?" Kara said to Vorn, "It can't be them can it?"

"Oh I've got a really bad feeling about this." Mace said and he lowered his head and placed it in the palm of his hand.

"Who?" Jek asked.

"Two rather unsavoury characters we encountered on Estran." Vorn explained, "A sullustan and a borneck cyborg."

"Yeah," Tharun said, "they were trying to get hold of a kid then."

"But who are they?" Jacen asked, "And why are they interested in me?"

"Sliet Sall and Derl Corack." Vorn said, "We got their names from a former associate of theirs who was rather keen for us to help him get away from them."

"Why did he want to get away from them?" Jek asked.

"Because they work for Black Sun." Mace said.

"Oh no." Was all Jacen could say.

3.

"I bring you here. Pay me." The alien said to Sliet. The sullustan had no idea what his species was, or even if 'he' really was a he at all. But the creature had shown the Black Sun agent where Jek Deray had gone just as he had been hired to do.

"Take it." Sliet replied, tossing a vial of liquid onto the ground. The fluid was meaningless to the sullustan, coolant from his starship. But the alien seemed to value it highly and Sliet guessed that he would probably end up injecting it into himself.

Without a word, the alien scooped up the vial and rushed away, cradling it next to his chest.

"Well?" Sliet said, turning to Derl, "What do you see?"

Derl looked towards the store. Like most of the establishments in the shadow port, Jacen's store did not have the large windows that commercial premises on most civilised worlds had. Instead there were narrow, slit like windows set into a metal wall. But with the optics built into his bionic eye, they were enough for Derl to see inside even from the far side of the street.

"I see the fence you had followed." Derl said.

"That's hardly surprising." Sliet replied, "What about the human we're looking for?"

"He's there as well." Derl answered, "I can see him towards the back of the room. Wait."

"What?"

"They're not alone. There are more humans with them."

"How many?"

"Five. No six." Then Derl's jaw dropped.

"What is it? Do you know who they are? Derl, answer me."

"I do. They attacked us on Estran." Derl replied after a brief pause.

Sliet snarled.

"So," he said, "this human does work as part of a larger organisation. These beings must be fighters for whatever group they are part of. That's why they attacked us on Estran, our people there must have stumbled onto one of their operations."

"Do we continue?" Derl asked.

"Of course we do." Sliet replied, his snarl now a smirk, "When we identify their organisation we will be able to wipe our record clear of our failure on Estran as well as undermining Onell the Hutt's power here. Treego will reward me greatly."

"Black Sun?" Jek exclaimed, "Jacen, what the kriff have you gotten me into here?"

"We can't be certain it's them." Vorn said.

"Oh yeah, because I'm sure there are so many sullustans going around with cyborgs that can crush a man's throat with their bare hands."

"Do either of you know if Black Sun has a presence here?" Mace asked, looking from Jacen to Jek and back again and the two men looked at one another.

"I've not heard anything." Jacen said.

"Me neither." Jek agreed.

"I can't see Onell being too happy if they did." Jacen said, "They'd try to take this place over."

"Then he's our next port of call." Vorn said.

"What?" Kara exclaimed, "Boss are you seriously suggesting we go walking up to a hutt crime lord and start interrogating him?"

"We've done it with Odras Balve." Mace said, reminding Kara of the human crime lord who he had frequent dealings with because of the money that the smuggler owed him.

"Actually," Vorn said, "I was thinking that we offer to help him out with his problem."

"What problem?" Jaysica asked.

"Onell isn't going to be happy about Black Sun agents being here." Jacen told her, "He'll want them gone. Permanently."

"I wouldn't advise taking your lady friends though." Jek said, "You may be offering to do Onell a favour, but he's still a Hutt. He has a Hutt's, er well - appetites."

"He'll eat us?" Jaysica exclaimed, then she realised what he meant and added, "Oh. Do I have to go?"

"That's okay." Vorn said to her, "You and Kara can get rid of the body. We'll go and see what information we can get from Onell."

"She's supposed to help me?" Kara said, "I think I'd rather take my chances with the slug."

"Well I'm done." Jek said, "I'm having nothing to do with Black Sun. Be sure to call me if you need anything and are alive to pay for it." And with that Jek got up and left the store.

"Leave him." Sliet said when they saw Jek emerge. The fence lifted his collar to protect him from the dust in the wind and set off in the direction of his own place of business, "We'll wait here and see what the rest do." It was not long before the rebels emerged and Jacen locked the door behind them. The Black Sun agents watched as the rebels stood outside the store talking before they split up. The larger party, made up of the males in the group began to walk away from the two females, leaving them with a long sealed bag. With one of them at each end, the two females then lifted the bag and began to carry it in the opposite direction. From its size and the way the bag sagged in the middle it was obvious to both the Black Sun agents what it contained.

"They're getting rid of a body." Derl said.

"I can see that. We'll follow them."

"Why? Wouldn't following the others give us a better idea of who they are?"

"Not necessarily. But the smaller group is definitely more vulnerable. They may not lead us to anywhere important, but we may be able to see to it that they don't return to the others on schedule."

This time the rebels approached the primary entrance to Onell's palace and as they climbed the steps a group of armed guards emerged from the door. None of them were human and when the challenged the rebels they spoke in hutttese.

Vorn looked around, "Jeeves." he said.

"I am here master Larcus." The protocol droid replied and it moved towards the head of the group, "They are asking who we are and why we are here."

"Well tell them." Vorn said.

"Of course master Larcus." Jeeves said before looking at the guards and speaking in hutttese to them. The guards relaxed slightly, though they continued to eye up the rebels' weapons.

"What did he just say?" Tharun asked.

"I told them that we are here for an audience with the mighty Onell the Hutt to discuss a matter of mutual importance." Jeeves said.

One of the guards reached into his pocket and produced a comlink before speaking into it.

"It seems that they are summoning someone more senior for us to talk to." Jeeves said.

"Let me guess." Tharun said, "Lae Chen."

Right on queue, Lae Chen emerged from the palace.

"You again." He said when he saw the rebels, "Did you not get all you wanted from your body?"

"We did." Vorn replied, "Now we would like to discuss what we found with Onell himself."

"The mighty Onell's time is valuable." Lae Chen said, "Why should I admit you?"

"Its about Black Sun." Jacen snapped and he pointed at Lae Chen, "You want the worm to think you're not taking the threat they pose seriously?"

Lae Chen stared at Jacen.

"Hand your weapons to my guards," He said sternly, "and follow me."

The guards collected the rebels' weapons as they walked past. Tharun frowned as he handed over his, the former mercenary disliked the idea of disarming themselves before entering a place known to be full of unsavoury characters, but with a nod from Vorn he surrendered his rifle anyway and along with the others he followed Lae Chen into the palace. A pair of enforcers fell in behind the rebels to ensure that they caused no trouble for their leader.

Inside the palace was lit only dimly. The corridor that Lae Chen led them down was wide and tall, clearly designed to be able to take the bulk of an adult hutt mounted on a replusorlift sled. As they went deeper into the building the sound of music began to be heard.

"Sounds like a party." Mace said softly.

"The great Onell keeps his guests entertained." Lae Chen responded, overhearing the remark.

After the sound of music there was an increase in the light level of the corridor as the group approached the chamber where Onell the Hutt held court as light from it seeped out

Lae Chen said nothing as he stepped into the audience chamber ahead of the rebels. The room was a vast space with a high ceiling. There were tables scattered all around the room at many of which members of Onell's staff offered games of chance. At others scantily clad females danced for the entertainment of those sat around below them. The dancers were predominantly human or near human, but some were of other species the huts were known to find attractive such as twi'leks.

"I don't think Jaysica would be impressed to see you staring." Tharun whispered to Tobis.

"What? Oh. Err, I wasn't." Tobis replied.

A deep voice suddenly boomed out from the centre of the chamber where the massive green slug-like form of Onell the Hutt sat waiting.

"The mighty Onell the Hutt wishes to know who his loyal servant is bringing before him." A protocol droid standing beside Onell spoke. Vorn looked at Jeeves.

"Let me know if the droid says anything different to what the hutt does." He whispered.

"Of course master Larcus." Jeeves responded.

"These beings desire an audience with your greatness." Lae Chen replied confidently and Vorn noticed that unlike most others in the chamber he dared to look directly at the hutt.

"Let them approach." The protocol droid translated from Onell's reply and Lae Chen turned to face the rebels.

"You may approach." He said, "But mind your manners."

"It'll be foremost on my mind." Tharun said softly. He stopped talking when Mace glared at him.

"You know this place." Vorn said to Jacen, "Perhaps you should do the talking."

As Vorn spoke to Jacen, Onell's protocol droid translated what he was saying.

"You will address the mighty Onell." The droid said.

Vorn looked at Jeeves.

"That is what he said master Larcus." Vorn's droid said.

"Very well." Vorn said and he took another step towards the hutt who was busy scooping food into his mouth, "Mighty Onell," he began, "we wish to speak to you regarding a matter of urgency to us both here on this planet."

"What could possibly concern the great Onell the Hutt on his own world?"

"The organisation known as Black Sun." Vorn answered.

Onell looked up from his food bowl and roared in reply.

"What do you know of Black Sun?" the protocol droid asked.

"Master Larcus," Jeeves said, "Onell did not ask you that question. His response was a meaningless cry. I believe it entailed a mixture of both anger and frustration."

"Thank you." Vorn whispered back to Jeeves before looking back at Onell, "We believe that Black Sun has sent at least two of its agents here. They have been trailing my friend here." And Vorn indicated Jacen.

Onell paused and looked at Jacen.

"The great Onell the Hutt knows who your friend is." The protocol droid translated, "He also knows who you work for."

The rebels glanced at one another nervously. Tharun instinctively moved his hand to his hip where his sidearm would normally be.

"Missing something rebel?" Lae Chen whispered into his ear.

"The mighty Onell does not care for your cause." The droid went on, "But he will tolerate your presence only so long as you do not bring your conflicts here."

"Tell that slimy piece of-" Mace began before the droid continued.

"But if Black Sun is here then on this occasion you do have common cause with the mighty Onell and he is prepared to offer you assistance in dealing with them."

Vorn breathed a sigh of relief.

"We believe we can identify the Black Sun agents we seek and their vessel also." Vorn said, "Is Onell willing to give us access to his computer network so that we may try and find them?"

There was a pause as Onell considered Vorn's request.

"The mighty Onell will allow you to access his computer." The protocol droid said when the hutt crime lord finally answered, "But only two of you and you will not be allowed to have access to them without his own personnel watching you."

"That is agreeable." Vorn replied then he looked at Mace, "I need to do this. I'll need Tobis's help too."

Mace nodded and turned to his engineer.

"Tobis, go with him."

"Right. Okay." Tobis answered nervously, "What will you be doing?"

"We'll be right here looking at the pretty ladies." Tharun replied with a smirk.

"Someone's got to." Jacen added.

4.

Kara was in the cargo hold of the *Silver Hawk* when Harvey came rolling in chirping.

"What is it?" she said as she fastened the latches of the crate she was knelt besides, even though she did not expect the astromech droid to answer in a way she could understand.

Harvey reacted by chirping again and rolling back out of the cargo hold. Kara got up and followed the droid as it rolled back to the cockpit where she had left it monitoring the ship's systems. Before she reached the cockpit door she heard what Harvey had come to alert her to. An alert was sounding to indicate an incoming transmission. Kara dashed past Harvey and sat in the pilot's seat before activating the system.

"Hello?" she said.

"Kara it's me." Vorn replied.

"Oh hi boss. How's everything going with the slug? Need some salt?"

"No, we're fine. Onell's giving us access to his computer network. Hopefully Tobis will be able to locate the Black Sun agents with it. How are things at your end?"

"Well I've showered and changed after we burnt that corpse. I had blood and guts all over me thanks to the Klutz dropping her end. But everything's fine now, she's not causing me any more trouble at all."

"Good." Vorn said. Then the tone of his voice suddenly changed, "Hang on. You say Jaysica's not causing you any trouble?" he asked.

"None."

"What have you done to her?"

"Boss I am shocked and offended--"

"Never mind." Vorn interrupted, "Just make sure she's okay by the time we get back." And then Vorn shut off his comlink.

Kara lent back in her chair and closed her eyes.

"Ah. Peace and quiet at last." She said. Then she took her blaster from the holster at her hip and switched the selector from 'Stun' to 'Safe'.

"We're all fine here." Mace said when Vorn checked in on the rest of the rebels, "How are you?"

"Tobis is going through the security recordings now. They're pretty patchy, but the docking bays are fairly well covered. I've checked in with Kara too. She says they've got rid of the body and everything's fine on the ship."

"Well that's good to hear. Wait. Her and Jaysica are alone on the ship and she says everything's fine? What's she done to Jaysica?"

"Captain, if Kara could hear you now I am sure she'd be shocked and offended at the suggestion."

"I've met Kara. Remember?"

"I just told her to make sure she was fine by the time we got back." Vorn said.

Derl peered into the docking bay where the *Silver Hawk* was berthed but took care to remain in the darkness by the entrance.

"The ship looks to be sealed." He said to Sliet. The sullustan was stood behind him, keeping watch in the street. Though there were many beings coming and going from the adjacent docking bays none of them looked to be paying any attention to the pair. This was not the sort of place where idle curiosity was a trait compatible with long-term survival.

"Is there any sign of the crew?" Sliet asked.

"No. I saw movement in the cockpit a moment ago, but I think it was one of the pair we followed here. If the others are about then they're keeping out of sight."

"We only need one." Sliet said, "That's why we followed the smaller group in the first place. Now let's find a way into that ship."

Taking one last look around first, Derl sprinted towards the *Silver Hawk*, followed closely by Sliet. When they reached the *Silver Hawk* Derl reached up to the control that would lower the access ramp. But instead of opening the way for them to enter the ship, all that happened when he attempted to activate the control was that the panel bleeped and lit up red.

"It's sealed from the inside." Derl said.

"Let me see." Sliet said and he stepped forwards and looked up at the panel, "This will take some time to bypass." He said, "We better look for another way."

"The cargo hatch should be back here." Derl suggested, pointing towards the rear of the ship. Sliet nodded and the pair crept beneath the ship's hull to the square cargo hatch that was also shut.

"This one's sealed too." Derl said as he tried to open the hatch.

"That may be," Sliet said as he looked up, "but I can reach this more easily than the other lock. Plus we're more hidden from view back here. Now let me work."

Sharing a vessel the size of the *Silver Hawk* with five other people meant that Kara rarely had moments like this where she was completely alone and sharing a cabin that was barely big enough to contain the triple layer bunk and allow enough room to get in and out of it with the accident prone Jaysica only made things worse. To make the most of it she had even shut down the droids still on the ship. She had had to shut down Penny, Jaysica's mouse droid of course. Otherwise she couldn't have gotten this time to herself to begin with, but Harvey had been shut off purely for some peace.

She lay on her bunk leafing through a magazine that was barely a month old. One of the benefits of field assignments was that she got regular access to up to date periodical publications. The content of the magazine was total nonsense; far-fetched stories about the private lives of so-called celebrities who were more often known for these stories than their actual careers. But Kara made the most of it anyway. Then she heard a 'clump'. Believing herself to be alone on the ship, she had left her cabin door open and the noise sounded like it had come from the cargo hold. Kara sighed and climbed down from the bunk.

"So much for my me time." She said to herself as she headed for the hold, "Jaysica," she called out, "I don't mind letting you-" then she stopped when she realised that it was not Jaysica that had made the noise, "Stang!" she exclaimed and she spun around, remembering that her blaster was hung up beside her bunk. She was able to take two paces before something grabbed her hair and pulled her back. She cried out in alarm as her head was pulled back far enough that she found herself looking into the face of a yellow-skinned borneck cyborg.

"Shut up!" he snapped.

Kara reached her arms over her head and grasped the arm Derl was using to hold onto her. It was the arm that was still flesh and blood and when Kara dug her fingernails into it he winced and released his grip on her. Stumbling briefly, Kara ran towards her cabin and the blaster it contained. But she found her way blocked by Sliet.

"Stay right-" the sullustan began before Kara delivered a well-aimed blow to his already rather flat nose and he staggered back, "Get her!" he snapped at Derl as he clamped his hands over his face to stem the flow of blood.

Derl rushed after Kara and dived at her as she neared the doorway that led to the crew cabins. He caught her at knee level and as she fell she heard a 'pop' and felt a sudden rush of pain from her leg. She screamed in pain as she struck the floor, and then stopped as her head banged against one of the deck plates and dazed her.

Grasping at her jacket, Derl dragged Kara back towards him then seized one of her wrists using his bionic hand. Kara squealed as he tightened his grip. Even as she struggled to pull her arm free Derl wrapped a loop of plastic around her wrist and pulled it tight. Then he grabbed her other arm and slipped her free hand through the other half of the plastic tie and tightened it too. Despite having her arms bound and the intense pain in her leg, Kara still struggled as Derl lifted her up off the floor.

"If you fight you'll just make it worse." He said flatly as he wrapped his bionic arm around her neck and tightened his grip steadily. Kara struggled desperately for breath as Derl kept his grip on her throat. Then her head suddenly slumped forwards and she went limp. Derl let go immediately and let her fall to floor before placing one of his organic fingers on her neck to check for a pulse.

"Did she survive?" Sliet asked, sniffing to clear the blood from his nostrils.

"She's alive." Derl replied.

"Good. Bring her. Quickly, the other one may be around as well."

5.

"So that's the only one then?" Vorn said to Tobis. In front of them was a large screen showing an image of a Corellian Engineering Corporation YT-2400 freighter, a more modern version of the YT-1300 class like the *Silver Hawk*.

"Yes." Tobis replied, "There are no other ships of this class in any of the docking bays right now."

"Hmmm. I just wished I'd taken a closer look when we saw their vessel on Estran." Vorn said, "What about our two Black Sun agents themselves?"

"Onell's system doesn't have any facial recognition software built into it." Tobis said, "So we'll have to search manually for them. I suggest taking a look at the recordings from the camera outside the docking bay and seeing if we can figure out their location by following where they went when they last left their ship."

"What about the camera in the bay?" Vorn asked.

"It's been covered." Tobis replied, "The feed went blank just after this image was taken which was not long after they landed."

"Sounds good to me." Vorn said, then he looked around at the three members of Onell the Hutt's technical staff who were watching the rebel's every move, "What about you?" he said to them. None of the trio replied, instead they just glared at Vorn as if they resented his presence, "I'll take that as agreement." Vorn said as he turned back around.

"Wake up!"

Kara awoke at the yell, just as a container of stagnant water was thrown over her. Sitting on a simple wooden chair, Kara's wrists were still bound and there was still significant pain in her knee. She gasped and spat out what of the foul tasting liquid had entered her mouth before taking a look at her surroundings. She was in another of the shadow port's docking bays which, like the handful of others she had seen was fully walled to prevent beings anyone prying on what was going on there.

The inside of the bay was dominated by a YT-2400 freighter that, as far as Kara could tell, was the same one that Sliet and Derl had been using when the rebels encountered them on Estran. A moment later both of the Black Sun agents stepped around from behind her into her line of sight.

"Sliet. Derl." She said, looking at each as she said their names.

"So you know our names." Sliet said as Derl glanced at him, "Then it's only fair that you tell us yours."

"I don't think so." Kara replied, "If I were you I'd untie me, get in my little spaceship and fly as far away from here as I could. Because when my friends get here-

"Your friends aren't coming." Sliet interrupted, "They'll never find out you are here. Even if they did they would only be dooming themselves."

"We handled you pretty well on Estran." Kara replied, "And we weren't even using our blasters then. What do you think an A280 is going to do to your little tin puppet there?" and she nodded towards Derl.

"Your threats are worthless. If we were to die our associates-" Sliet began before Kara interrupted him.

"What? Black Sun? You're just a bunch of petty thugs compared to the people we've taken down." She snapped.

This caught Sliet off balance. By its nature, Black Sun did not openly advertise its existence or the identities of its operatives. For Kara to know of Sliet and Derl's membership of it was serious indeed. Whatever organisation she was working for needed to be dealt with and quickly.

"Get her up." Sliet commanded and Derl reached out with his bionic arm and dragged Kara from the chair.

She squealed briefly as she tried to put weight on her injured leg. Fortunately for her Sliet only wanted her standing up and she was not forced to walk. Instead she stood in front of the chair somewhat unsteadily balancing on her one uninjured leg, "Now the chain." Sliet said and Derl disappeared behind Kara. There was a jangling sound and Kara tried to look around, but Derl reached out and forced her to look forwards. Then she felt the coldness of metal being wrapped around her wrists.

"I've taken some time to study human physiology," Sliet said, "and I discovered something very interesting about your species' shoulder joints. Though they allow a full circle of rotation for the arm they cease to do so if the arm is positioned behind the back. Like yours are right now. The result is that if we lift your arms behind you, you will first experience discomfort, then pain and finally the joints will dislocate entirely." Then he tilted his head to look at Derl, "Derl would you be so good as to demonstrate for the young lady?"

"Of course." Derl replied and he pulled on the chain that he had just attached to Kara's wrists.

Kara gasped as her arms were wrenched upwards suddenly.

"A little more please." Sliet said and Derl lifted Kara's arms some more, forcing her to bend forwards to try and release the pressure, "That will do. Lock it there."

There was more jangling as Derl used a simple lock to hold the chain in position before he returned to Sliet's side.

"Now how about your name?" Sliet asked.

"How about you kriff off?" Kara replied.

"Oh dear." Sliet said, "I was so hoping we could all be civilised." Then he kicked Kara's good leg out from under her.

Vorn yawned. Following the path taken by the two Black Sun agents after they left the docking bay was proving to be difficult. Footage from cameras had to be compared to a map of the shadow port so that the rebels could determine which cameras were likely to show them next. Making matters worse, some of the residents of the shadow port had excavated tunnels between ravines to create new routes between them. Not all of these showed up on the maps that Onell possessed and on occasion it required some educated guesswork to determine where the Black Sun agents would have gone.

But slowly Tobis and Vorn were beginning to put together a picture of their movements. It seemed that Jek's meeting with the pair in a cantina was not unusual. They had visited several such establishments, presumably trying to locate either Jacen himself or someone that knew him.

"Oh." Tobis said suddenly.

"What is it?" Vorn asked, feigning the alertness that had left him long ago.

"Well I think I've got them both in this image." Tobis told Vorn, pointing at the image currently on the monitor. Though blurred, the image definitely showed two humanoid figures and though their facial features could be positively identified it was possible to determine their species as a borneck and a sullustan. Vorn knew that the chances of their being another such paring on the planet were slim so this was good enough for him.

"What's wrong with it?" he asked, "I think you're right about it being them."

"Oh. Err. Yes, of course. Look at where the camera is." Tobis replied holding up the map and pointing to where the camera that had recorded the image was located.

Vorn frowned.

"That's right opposite Jacen's store." He said as he took the map and looked at it more closely, "They had us. So where are they now?"

"I don't know." Tobis replied, "Sorry."

"It's not your fault." Vorn said, "Run the camera footage, let's see where they went after this was shot."

Tobis ran the footage at an accelerated speed. After a few seconds he stopped it.

"There's Jek." He said and Vorn saw that the frozen image did indeed show the fence leaving the store. The only reaction of the Black Sun agents to this was that they repositioned themselves slightly so that while they could still see the entrance to the store, they would be better concealed from anyone in the store looking back at them.

"Keep going, more slowly this time." Vorn said, suddenly aware that it now seemed likely that the Black Sun agents had been watching when the rebels had left the store. Sure enough there were still watching from their concealed location. With the footage now running at normal speed, Tobis and Vorn watched as it showed their group leaving.

"It doesn't look like they followed us." Tobis said.

"No it doesn't." Vorn said, "But they didn't stay at the store either. Look." And both he and Tobis watched as Derl and Sliet waited for Jaysica and Kara to begin dragging the body bag away before emerging from their hiding place and following them.

"Oh stang." Vorn exclaimed and he frantically rummaged through his pocket looking for his comlink. When he found the device he activated it immediately.

"*Silver Hawk, Silver Hawk.* Can you hear me? Kara are you there?"

"Err major." Tobis said quietly, but Vorn failed to notice.

"Kara, this is Vorn. Respond immediately."

"Major!" Tobis snapped and he gave Vorn a push. Vorn glared at him, "Sorry." Tobis said, looking away, "But you should see this." And he pointed at the display that showed nothing but static.

"Where's that?" Vorn asked.

"It's the bay where the *Silver Hawk* is docked." Tobis said, "It's a current image. Someone's sabotaged the camera."

"Oh stang! Go tell the others!" Vorn said and he got up and barged past Onell's men as he ran from the room.

When he and Tobis had been escorted to the computer room Vorn had taken note of the route they took. Mainly this involved counting doors and noting left and right turns. But there had been a handful of open doors where Vorn had been able to discern the purpose of the room beyond. One of these had been a vehicle hangar that contained an assortment of repulsorlift vehicles. It was this room that he now sought out. Bursting into the hangar, Vorn saw a speeder bike parked right beside the doorway and he leapt onto it.

“Hey! What the hell do you think you’re doing?” a figure wearing a full-face respirator said as it rushed towards him. But as the figure reached out to grab hold of Vorn he pushed it away and started up the speeder bike’s engine. With a ‘whoosh’ the vehicle lifted up off the ground and shot out of the hangar.

6.

Tobis's exit from the computer room was less hurried and one of Onell's men accompanied him back to the main audience chamber where he found Jacen and Mace playing sabaac.

"We need to go." Tobis said.

"Where's the major?" Mace asked.

"He's already gone." Tobis told him, "It looks like the Black Sun agents know about the *Silver Hawk*."

"My ship?" Mace exclaimed as he got up quickly, "No way are they getting their hands on my ship."

Tobis suddenly realised that Tharun was not with them.

"Where's Tharun?" he asked.

"Over there." Mace replied, "Where else?"

Tobis looked in the direction that Mace indicated and he saw Tharun sat beside a platform one which a bleary eyed human woman was dancing. He had his feet up on the edge of the platform and a bottle in his hand.

Jacen put down his cards and got up.

"You go get him." He said, "I'll see about some transport."

Tobis followed Mace to where Tharun sat.

"Take a seat." Tharun said as they approached, "She's good."

"She's wasted." Mace said as he looked into the woman's face, "Now get up, the major needs us. There's trouble at the ship."

"Damn it." Tharun said as he stood up, "Well get me my guns back and let's get out of here."

Pushing the speeder bike to its limits, Vorn rode it at an altitude that allowed him to move above the busy streets while remaining within the shelter of the ravines. He briefly considered taking the bike up to the surface so he could move in a straight line. But he had no protection against the storms he was likely to encounter and had no idea whether or not his borrowed vehicle had been adapted to tolerate the conditions there.

The journey to the docking bay that held the *Silver Hawk* still took only a few minutes, but to Vorn it seemed like an eternity. So when he brought the speeder bike to a halt outside, he did not bother to secure the vehicle before dismounting and rushing inside. What he found there unnerved him. The access ramp to the *Silver Hawk* had been left in its open position, allowing free access to the ship. Without pause, Vorn ran up the ramp.

"Kara! Kara are you here?" he called out and then he stopped to listen.

From the cargo hold he heard a muffled banging sound and he ran towards its source. Inside the hold the banging was louder and Vorn realised that it was coming from one of the crates. Vorn released the latches of the crate and lifted the lid.

"Oh thank god!" Jaysica exclaimed, "I thought I was going to be stuck in there for ages."

"What happened?" Vorn asked as he helped Jaysica out of the crate.

"I don't know." Jaysica said, "Kara was blaming me for getting her dirty and then I woke up in there. Where's Kara?"

"I think the Black Sun agents broke in and took her."

"So they stuck me in there?" Jaysica said, but instead of answering her Vorn ran from the cargo hold,

"Major? What are you doing?" she called out after him and she followed as he ran through the *Silver Hawk*'s lounge and into his own cabin. Jaysica got to the cabin door just as Vorn pulled open a locked door on the far wall where he knew he could find what he was looking for.

Prior to obtaining his Blastech A-280 heavy blaster rifle Tharun had used a lighter and more compact E-11 identical to the rifles used by many Imperial troops. Now that he had a better weapon his older one had been put away just in case it was ever needed again. Like now.

Vorn pulled the rifle from the locker and then pulled out a power cell and loaded the weapon.

"Major?" Jaysica asked, "What are you doing?"

"Going after Kara."

"Do you know where she is?"

"Black Sun has her." Vorn said, "I know where they are." And then he barged past Jaysica and ran from the ship.

"Major wait!" Jaysica called after him, "Shouldn't we wait for the others? And shouldn't I get my blaster too?"

Vorn paid no attention to what Jaysica was calling out after him, instead returning to the speeder bike. He slung the rifle over his shoulder and jumped back onto the vehicle before firing up the engine and riding

away.

"Major! Wait! Come back!"

Vorn knew where the docking bay was where the Black Sun agents had landed their ship and by riding the speeder bike above other street users he was once again able to get there quickly. No one paid him any attention as he parked the bike and unslung the rifle from his back. But quite a number looked around as he fired a burst into the lock sealing the docking bay door shut and then opened it with a good hard kick. He held the rifle at his shoulder as he rushed inside the docking bay and looked around.

The YT-2400 was no longer in the docking bay. In fact there was no ship docked here at all. For a moment Vorn despaired that he was too late and the Black Sun agents had taken Kara off world. But then he noticed something on the ground at the far side of the docking bay.

"Kara no!" he cried out and he ran towards where she lay motionless. He dropped the rifle and dropped to his knees beside Kara. Vorn could see that her arms lay at an unnatural angle, "Kara can you hear me?" he asked as he took hold of her.

Suddenly Kara's eyes opened and she screamed in pain.

"My arms!" she cried out as she wept, "Boss, my arms!"

Vorn released her as he realised both of her shoulders were dislocated. Reaching into his pocket he pulled out his comlink.

"This is Vorn, I'm in the docking bay the Black Sun agents used. Kara's hurt bad. Tobis, I need you're here now!" without waiting for a reply Vorn dropped the comlink and stroked Kara's hair away from her face, "It's alright Kara," he said, "Tobis will be here soon. We'll take good care of you I promise."

"Boss I told them. I'm so sorry."

"What? What did you tell them?"

"Who we are. That's what they wanted to know. I tried to – I tried-"

"Shush. Don't talk. It doesn't matter." Vorn said to reassure her, "Don't worry, you're safe now."

Kara lay on a stretcher in the Silver Hawk's lounge as the ship docked at the Alliance's sector headquarters. Her arms had been forced back into place and bandages had been used to hold her arms still as well as to hold a splint between her legs until she could receive proper medical attention. For now though, she was unable to move.

"There's a medical team on their way." Vorn said to her, "They'll take you to the medical ward."

"Yeah," Tharun added, "a couple of days floating in bacta and you should be back to fighting form."

Kara noticed that Vorn was fastening his jacket as she looked up at him.

"Aren't you coming with me boss?" she asked.

"No." Vorn replied, "I'm sorry but Mace and I need to check in with high command. They need to know about what happened."

"And I'm off for a drink." Tharun said, "My last one was rudely interrupted. Tobis, are you ready?"

"Err. Yes, I'm ready."

"He's going too?" Kara said, looking around as her companions prepared to leave, "You're just leaving me here alone?"

"Of course not." Vorn said, "Jaysica said she'll wait with you for the medics."

"Jaysica?" Kara repeated, her eyes wide.

"Well I do owe you." Jaysica said, "After all if you hadn't shot me and stuffed me a crate, then those Black Sun guys could have kidnapped me instead."

"Come on," Vorn said, "let's leave the girls to whatever they do when we're not around."

"Boss." Kara called out as Vorn led the other three from the lounge, "Hey boss, you can't do this. Boss, are you there? Can you hear me?"

"Rebels?" Treego said, repeating what Sliet had just told him.

"That is what she said." Sliet replied, "That was why we left her. I don't want a rebel strike team coming after me until I know what support I can expect."

"You really think they won't be coming after you anyway? You tortured one of them. The Alliance frowns on such things." Treego said, "You should watch your back. And I'd keep that cyborg close if I were you. But I am disappointed that you were unable to bring back any information about rebel activities in the sector. Knowing their movements would be of great benefit to us."

Sliet smiled and he slid a datapad across Treego's desk toward the rodian.

"What is this?" Treego asked, picking up the datapad.

"Derl and I had access to their ship. We adjusted the engines to emit a recognisable trail of high-energy particles. Until they do something about it, which is unlikely to happen quickly, we can track them whenever they enter a settled system."

Treego looked Sliet directly in the eyes and a smile spread across his face.