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Shadow of the Hunter

by [Martha Wilson](#)

The Sith Lord brooded in silent, bitter anger as he paced beneath the transparisteel dome of the Planetary Governor's private office. Outside the sun was setting over the capital city of Commenor in a sustained, red wave. He had seen further into the darkness than this, but now his vision was clouded and dim. Even the pulse of life in the city below was almost beyond his senses. Frustrated, he gestured sharply, and the metal shutters rose up the curve of the dome to close out the once familiar night.

"My lord."

He paused, his back to the speaker. "Barris?"

Standing in the deeper shadow at the back of the room, the Sith Lord's aide said with utmost care, "My lord, if this operation... fails... "

Lord of the Sith Lan Adarin flinched.

Barris took a deep breath. Adarin's anger had filled the room like oil poured into a bowl, detectable even to a minor force-sensitive. The aide forged on, "You would lose the only deep cover operative anyone has ever been able to place in the Rebellion." My operative, Barris thought. My work.

Adarin turned slowly. Even in the dim room, his eyes burned. "I will have Arandu's agent. Nothing is more important than this." My old friend Emil Arandu, the Dark Lord's favorite, the Sith Lord thought. "Let Vader deal With the Rebellion."

"This rebel's connection to Lord Arandu could be nothing more than an accident," Barris persisted.

"There are no accidents." Adarin turned away. "I don't care if you expose all my operatives. Bring me this Corellian pirate Solo. Alive."

"Yes, my Lord." As Barris turned to leave, burning pain pierced his skull like an energy bolt. He screamed and went to his knees.

"Live and learn, Barris. Live and learn." Adarin resumed pacing, ignoring his aide's efforts to stand. Weakness was not to be shown, or acknowledged.

The Dark Side gave, but then, if one was weak, it took, and took, and took...

Han Solo leaned in the doorway of the downport Commenor bar, one hand casually resting on his holstered blaster. His hazel eyes were hooded and dangerous as he narrowly surveyed the room, and he was thinking, trust the Alliance to send me someplace a Jawa wouldn't use as a toilet.

The floor was hard-packed dirt, and grease and blast scars obscured the faded wall painting, which Han believed was either a portrait of one very large tentacled being or a group of snakes having an orgy. A rusty music synthesizer with flashing LED and holo displays cranked out a dissonant tune over the muted conversation. The serving counter stretched across the back wall, meeting the stairs to the upper level in the right hand corner. No other ground floor exits. Not nice. The floating lumas were just bright enough for him to check out the two dozen or so people at the tables, who were the typical mainbreed human Commenor downport lowlife, plus a few disreputable non-humans.

The only patron who stood out in the crowd was an offworlder at a corner table wearing a full blast helmet and a dark, multilayered outfit concealing both its species and sex. Its one visible weapon was a short blastrifle laying ready on the table. Han glanced with careful disinterest in the offworlder's direction, and the opaque helmet turned slowly to follow the Corellian as he strolled up to the bar.

Han hitched up a stool, noticed the rust on the dispensers and ordered something he had no intention of drinking. As the locals finished casing the pilot and went back to their own problems, a scruffy downporter sat next to him and said, "Clear skies."

The Corellian ignored him. The local shifted nervously and said, "You don't see too many spacers in this place anymore. Not unless they're down on their luck." He was a young man under the dirt, with a narrow face and long, stringy blond hair tied loosely in back.

With an approach that smooth, he's either the rebel courier making contact or some guy trying to pick me up, Han thought. Since the downporter had given him the first part of the Alliance identity code, "luck", Han decided it was the former. He shrugged. "I'm looking for business. Heard somebody needed a transport." That was the answer -- "business' and "transport". Delivery was part of the identification: the courier gave one word, Han gave two, then the courier's last two and Han's last one. To the Corellian, the code seemed as clumsy and obvious as a dewback in heat, but apparently it did the trick.

"Spacing's hard for honest men these times, I hear," the downporter said, trying to look as if he knew what he was talking about. "Especially in the Tion Drift."

Those were the last two words, "honest" and "Tion Drift." Hell with it, Han thought. He looked at the downporter and said, "Alderaan." Try to casually work that one into a conversation nowadays.

The man relaxed, wiped at his forehead. "Thank Gods."

The Corellian shifted his drink around, watching little flakes of something settle to the bottom, and said, "You've got it with you?"

"No," the Contact shook his head. "I think. . . I think they know about me. My dwelling is being watched."

Han's eyes narrowed. "They're on to you and you still kept the meeting?"

"I had to. I need help. A way off Commenor."

"Sorry," Han shook his head, starting to stand. "No free rides." Especially not back to the rebel fleet, with no more proof of identity than that damn code. He glanced over his shoulder, noticing the blast-shielded offworlder was up and moving toward the front of the room.

"Please." The man gestured pleadingly, grabbing Han's right arm as the Corellian stepped back.

Truthfully, Han didn't see the hypodart the courier was holding until after he hit the man, but it was the thought that counted. Before he could turn around someone landed on him from behind, getting a forearm around his windpipe and shoving him into the bar. Han shoved back, managed to get an arm under his attacker's and flipped him over the bar and into the drink dispenser.

Han turned and saw four more downporters heading toward him and looking like they wanted to make an occasion of it. The synthesizer clanked to a rusty halt and the sudden silence was broken only by the sound of the other patrons rapidly vacating the bar and the 'tender locking the door on his way out.

One of the downporters made a disrupter appear and Han dived aside, overturning a table and taking cover behind it just as the whole chunk of bar he'd been standing in front of exploded. One of the others yelled, "No, no, we want him alive."

Since he seemed to be the brains, Han shot him first, but the others moved in without hesitation. The Corellian wounded another as the Philanthropist's League representative with the disrupter shot his cover to pieces. Han rolled away, snapping off covering shots. He almost regretted blowing away the man's more kindly disposed friend.

Then an energy bolt from a high angle caught the disrupter-wielder in the shoulder and spun him around. Han dropped the last downporter as the man was frantically looking for the new source of fire.

The Corellian got to his feet and saw the blast-shielded offworlder standing halfway up the staircase cradling an energy rifle. "Nice going, your holiness," Han said. "What were you waiting for?"

The offworlder removed her helmet and tossed it aside in disgust. "I couldn't see out of that damned thing," Princess Leia Organa said. "Come on, I think there's a way out up here."

Han hesitated, looking at his attackers sprawled around on the floor, trying to decide if it was worth taking a prisoner, if he could find one still alive. Then the front door exploded, convincing him of the current unhealthiness of the situation, and he took the stairs three at a time.

They reached the upper level just as the all too familiar figures in white blast armor swarmed into the downstairs. There was some shooting -- what at, Han wondered, each other? There's nobody else down there -- and the two rebels pounded down the short, dingy corridor. The Princess hit the release on the door at the end and suddenly they were outside on a short wooden balcony. The Commenor night was warm and damp, and the hall light reflected off the stone and permex walls of the downport tenements that loomed above the little bar. There was an oily black surface below and the smell on the evening breeze told them both what it was.

"Oh, no," Leia said. "That's an open sewer."

"Wonderful," Han muttered, holstering his blaster and securing the tiedown. No balconies or windows on the other buildings were close enough to jump to. "Can you swim?"

An energy bolt blasted between them, rendering the matter academic, and the Princess and the smuggler went over the railing.

They drifted down the dark river while spotlumas and blaster fire lit up the water behind them. The canal was filled with floating garbage and made dangerous by the occasional rusting droid carcass or wrecked speeder, and the buildings rising high on either bank were aging and mostly unlit. The smell was horrific.

I've been in worse places, Han told himself, trying to breathe as little as possible. I've been in worse places. A sharp subsurface current pulled at him abruptly with surprising strength, and he caught hold of a jutting metal girder. "Leia..."

"I'm fine," she gasped, then abruptly disappeared under the black surface.

Han swore and dived after her, fighting the terrible drag of the current. He hauled her to surface and managed to pull her up onto the fusion-formed stone bank. "Leia?" He knelt over her anxiously.

She choked, gasped, and sat up. "I'm fine."

"Yeah, that's what you said before you tried to breathe water." Han looked around, seeing dark, rundown warehouses and tenements, all only a few levels high. Good cover and good opportunity for escape.

The Princess brushed her dripping braids out of her face in disgust. Both rebels were drenched to the skin with the slimy water. She said, "We were lucky. Something's wrong, Han. They knew everything."

"No kidding," Han agreed, still scanning the area. "Wasn't a bad idea, you going in ahead like that."

"Not a bad idea? I saved your..." A fresh waft of sewer stink started her coughing. "Oh," she gasped. "What a... A terrible smell you discovered."

"An incredible smell," Han corrected with a grin. "And you're the one with the affinity for garbage dumps." He started to stand. "We'd better get moving before..."

There was a quiet step on the pavement and Han pushed Leia down, drawing his blaster. He took aim at the figure moving down the bank toward them.

The man stopped, showing empty hands. "Don't shoot."

"Why not?"

"I've got my hands up." The man moved forward into a patch of moonlight. He had short, dark hair and an earnest face, and was dressed in dark-colored civilian clothes.

"So?" Han asked. The man appeared to be alone, but he didn't find that fact particularly reassuring.

"Kantrell?" The Princess struggled to sit up, despite the Corellian's restraining hand. "Kiavay E tiskasez-su?"

Han recognized the language as High Court Alderaanian. He helped Leia to her feet, still not taking his eyes off the man.

"Kai, su anna lin Princess don Organa. Princess Leia?"

"Who is he?" Han demanded.

"The Alliance liaison to the Commenor resistance movement," Leia explained. "He was trained on Alderaan by my father." She lowered her voice. "I knew he was stationed in this city, but I didn't expect to see him."

"Great," Han looked up and down the bank again. "Can we have old home week later?"

"This way, " Kantrell said, stepping forward. "I have a speeder waiting."

"No offense," the Corellian told him, "But after you, and keep your hands in sight."

"Of course."

"We have a few people in the local guard -- they're useful. The merchant guard operates closely with the Imperial Port Authority, but they heard nothing about the operation tonight until the troopers were called out." Kantrell was seated at the game table in the Millennium Falcon's lounge. Han still had his suspicions about the young rebel, even to the point of making sure his Wookiee co-pilot Chewbacca kept an eye on Kantrell while Han and the Princess got rid of the sewer stink in the Falcon's sonic showers. The rebel's story was that as soon as he had gotten word of a raid on suspected Alliance agents, he and a few other resistance members had gone there to try to help. A couple of the local rebels were now keeping watch outside the ship, but Kantrell was the only one Han had been willing to allow inside. "When did you realize he wasn't really a courier?" Kantrell now asked Han.

"Couriers don't make contact unless they're clear. He said he thought the Imps were watching him." Han pulled a clean shirt over his head. "Better?" he sarcastically asked Chewbacca, who had protested exaggeratedly about the two humans' odor. The Wookiee waved a furry paw under his nose and barked an emphatic yes.

"I knew someone would be drawn into the trap sooner or later, but I had no way to warn you. We watched the port, but..." Kantrell shrugged helplessly.

"It couldn't have been helped," Princess Leia said. She came into the lounge, putting the last pin into her coronet of braids. She had changed into a more conventional tan spacer's outfit. "Han made sure the ship wouldn't be easily recognized."

The Corellian freighter was docked at Commonport under the name Victory Ring, and Han wouldn't have recognized her himself from the forged registrations the Port Authority had on file.

The Corellian settled into an acceleration chair and propped his feet on the tech station, his co-pilot leaning against the wall behind him. Time to find out what the hell's going on, Han thought. "So what exactly do you know about all this, Kantrell?"

The rebel glanced at the Princess, who had put on her stone face and didn't look inclined to be helpful. He steepled his hands on the table and said carefully, "This is what I'm sure of -- there's a Sith Lord on Commenor, working through the Planetary Governor's office."

Leia said, "Vader." She looked away from both men. The very mention of the Dark Lord was enough to shake even her calm. It brought back memories better forgotten, or pushed aside. Images evoked by words like Death Star or Tarkin, and most painfully of all, Alderaan.

Han watched her worriedly. That Leia could live with the destruction of her home world, something that must make every Alliance victory seem hollow to her, continually amazed him. It was the one thing that made the cynical Corellian think of the Alliance as something besides just another lost cause. Leia Organa put every ounce of strength she had into that cause, and she wouldn't know how to give up if she tried. Which is a good way to win a revolution, but a damn poor way to live a life, Han reflected.

"No," Kantrell said, surprising them both. "Not the Dark Lord. Another one, called Lord Lan Adarin."

The Princess stared at him. "Adarin?" She shook her head, puzzled. "I know the name. He was removed from command of the Seventh Fleet's task force not too

long ago. He's supposed to be some kind of a psychopath, even for a Sith Lord. What is he doing on Commenor?"

"I don't know," Kantrell said. "But he has information about Alliance operations in this sector. Detailed, damaging information. I... Chose not to attempt to warn the rebel outpost."

"Well," Han asked in what he considered a perfectly reasonable tone, "Why the hell not?"

"What do you mean, 'detailed, damaging information'?" Leia asked, her voice taking on a razor edge. The Commenor sector outpost was located on a small planetoid at the outermost edge of the Commenor system, barely within the sun's influence. She had meant to make a stop there on the way back, knowing an important courier ship was scheduled to arrive.

Kantrell shifted uneasily. "From what I've been able to find out," he answered, ignoring Han, "There is at least one Imperial agent at the sector outpost. Adarin was trying to locate someone specific, and he was confident that that person would be sent to pick up his courier."

Great, Han thought grimly. To Leia he said, "Who knew you were coming here?"

Before she could answer, Kantrell interrupted, "Princess, I don't know if... Should I speak in front of..."

"The hired help," Han finished for him, talking over his shoulder to Chewbacca. "Maybe we should ask for a raise."

The Wookiee eyed the Commenor rebel and snarled.

"Go on, Kantrell," Leia said evenly. Han hadn't asked for anything from the Alliance except for parts and repairs for the Falcon since the Death Star was destroyed, and she didn't need anyone to send the touchy Corellian into a snit. Funny, I don't remember Kantrell being so stiff-necked, the Princess thought.

Kantrell hesitated a moment, then said quietly, "Lord Adarin wanted to capture you, Captain Solo."

"What?" Han looked at him blankly.

"Adarin believes you're an Imperial partisan, an agent in the Rebellion."

Chewbacca howled. Leia stared at Kantrell in amazement.

"He thinks I'm a what?" Han asked.

"He thinks you're working for an Imperial official named Arandu. This Arandu is some kind of rival of Adarin's, and he apparently has a private vendetta against him. I don't know who Arandu is, but..."

The Corellian said slowly, "He's another Sith Lord."

Kantrell looked at Han with a mixture of well-bred disgust and suspicion. "Then you do know him."

Han got to his feet, paced restlessly. "We met once."

"It doesn't make sense," Leia said. "Arandu must have named you as one of his agents." At least now she understood Kantrell's attitude; it was obvious he believed Adarin was at least partially correct. She had been afraid Han's experience with Arandu would lead to more trouble for the Corellian. She shook her head. "Imperial in-fighting, and we're caught in the middle."

Maybe, Han thought. But the princess didn't have all the facts. There was no reason for Arandu to name Han as an Imperial agent. If Arandu had wanted me dead, he had plenty of opportunity to take care of it himself. Han's natural reticence and his automatic distrust of any authority had kept him from telling the Alliance everything that had happened when he had been stranded aboard Slave I with Lord Arandu. Oh, he'd told them everything that had to do with the Rebellion, but he'd trivialized his meeting with the Sith Lord to quite an extent. Han had been on a fairly routine mission to Ord Mantell, and he had walked into a trap set by the bounty hunter Boba Fett. Han had awakened out of a heavy stun already aboard Fett's ship Slave I. As he was making an escape attempt, Lord Arandu had attacked the bounty hunter's craft for reasons of his own, and Fett had ended up being the one to escape. That was it as far as the Alliance was concerned. There was simply no way Han was going to tell anyone that he had saved Arandu's life, or that the Sith Lord had repayed the favor -- or how he had repayed it. "You're lucky to be alive," Luke Skywalker had told him when Han had returned to the base. "Well, yeah," Han had replied. "You could say that."

Then he realized what the Princess had said. "What do you mean 'we're caught in the middle'? It's my problem, your royalness, and I'll take care of it." And I'm sure as hell not letting you put your life on the line for my stupidity.

Leia glared at him, opened her mouth, closed it, and finally said, "How?"

"I haven't gotten that far yet." He rounded on Kantrell. "How do you know all this?"

"An agent...not an agent, really. An informer in the Admin Complex, a minor bureaucrat close to the Governor's staff, stumbled on it. Apparently someone on Adarin's staff talked and it filtered down through the ranks. He gave us what

information he had, then went back in to get the name of the Imperial in the sector outpost by opening a restricted data file he had discovered." Kantrell's expression turned bitter. "The next day he was simply gone. His family has no idea where he is, and there is no mention in the public access personnel files of him ever having worked in the complex."

An informer, Han thought. A little bureaucrat with delusions of grandeur. And this Adarin cut him into pieces small enough to hide. "What was his job?" he asked.

"Data manager. He used to leave the information for us tied to a terminal in the Public Library and Navigation Center under the code Tantavie IV." The rebel hesitated. "It's possible he did discover the name of the Imperial agent. He was told that if he could not get to the Library for any reason, he was to leave the information tied to his personal terminal in his office. That's a minimum security area, and the data could be collected by any Resistance personnel in the complex with that security rating."

"So why don't you have it?" the Princess asked, frowning.

"All the upper floors of the Admin Complex, from the Governor's palace to the Stormtroopers' barracks, everything except the Judiciary and Port Authority on the first three levels has been made maximum security for the duration of Adarin's stay. I almost believe it was done more to protect the citizens. Adarin apparently has a habit of wandering the corridors late at night, and it is very dangerous to meet him."

"And you don't want to send someone up there and chance blowing your Resistance operation, since Alliance communications here and probably throughout most of the sector are down the tubes," Han commented thoughtfully.

The princess paced a few steps, agitated. "There's a courier ship from the fleet that's supposed to arrive at that outpost soon. If it's captured... We have to get the name of the spy. Now. Tonight."

"So I get into the Complex and check the terminal. This is the best time; they won't be expecting it so soon after their operation, and the officers will be offshift." Han looked at Chewbacca, eyebrows raised inquiringly. "You in, pal?" The Wookiee growled an affirmative and Han nodded. "That settles it."

Leia faced him, hands on hips. "You don't seem to realize something."

Looking down at her, Han put on his paying attention expression.

"Adarin thinks you're the agent of another Sith Lord."

Han took off his paying attention expression and put on his not paying attention expression.

"You don't know what he wants, and I don't think he's going to listen to you when you tell him he's got the wrong man."

"Does he?" Kantrell interrupted quietly.

While Chewbacca howled his outrage, Han crossed the cabin in long strides to lean on the table and look the younger man in the eyes, long and hard. He said slowly, "When I start working for a Sith Lord, I'll make sure you're the first to know."

Into the tense silence, the Princess said, "Captain Solo isn't an official member of the Alliance, Kantrell." She looked at Han deliberately. "But his personal integrity is without question."

"I understand, Princess," Kantrell said softly.

I wish she wouldn't do that, Han thought. Uncomfortable, he started to pace again. "I can get in through the Judiciary with one of his ringer guardsmen. If they haven't changed things since the last time I was there, civil petitioners aren't ID-scanned at the entrance like prisoners."

Leia shook her head. "Not alone."

"Chewie will be with me."

"Han, they are looking for you," Leia said. "There may be hundreds of Corellians in this port, but what are the odds against there being another Corellian who matches your description and travels with a Wookiee? Besides," her voice softened. "The outpost is in danger; that makes it my problem. Too many lives are riding on this."

Han and Chewbacca exchanged a look. The Wookiee grumbled an old saying of his tribe, which translated indirectly as, "Don't you hate it when the women are right."

Han ran a hand through his hair. "All right, all right. You'll go in with me. Chewie'll stay here with the engines hot. Hell, if we don't make any stupid mistakes we won't have any trouble at all."

The Commonport City Admin Complex was a huge, pyramidal monolith, many levels high, surrounded by hotels, tourist palaces, and inurb towers housing

wealthy residents. Area illumination banks threw light onto repulsar balconies supporting 'hopper pads and restricted docking bays. It was a personification of Imperial authority and, climbing the ramp to the third level entrance to the Judiciary, Han Solo found his palms were sweating. They had put their plan into action as soon as Kantrell had contacted one of his agent guardsmen, Danion Kev, who now led Han and the princess into the Judiciary. It was almost the middle of the warm Commenor night, and the upper levels of the Complex would be for the most part deserted.

The wide doors embossed with the Imperial Circle slid open for them, releasing a blast of cool conditioned air, and young Kev blithely led them through the guardsmen's entrance, bypassing the retina check station and the weapons scanner. The Corellian was wearing his blaster in a shoulder holster under his jacket, and the princess carried a small pistol in her belt pouch; explanations would be extremely difficult. Remembering how much he disliked police stations, Han was not looking forward to this.

Reaching the booking area, an immense circular room with dozens of branching corridors, they could see it wasn't a very good night for the Port Precinct Guard. It was crowded with the crews of at least three Corellian Line freighters being held for public intoxication, indecency, and rioting, and not one of them was in any condition even remotely approaching sobriety. That there was any semblance of order at all was due solely to the sergeant in charge of the area, who was an old hand at port brawls and had managed to keep the crews separate, calm, and even fairly quiet -- except for the group off to one side singing something incomprehensible in the keys of loud and enthusiastic.

The sergeant spotted Kev making his way through the crowd with Han and Leia and came toward them, shaking his head. "Oh no, son. No more of 'em. I don't care what they do."

"I can take care of it, sir," Kev assured him. "It's just a domestic incident."

"Fine." Spotting another problem, the distracted sergeant waved them on.

We couldn't have picked a better night for this, Han thought as Kev led them across the huge room toward one of the corridors. They won't give a damn whether they have an accurate prisoner count or not.

"Hold up there."

Startled, Kev hesitated. Han muttered, "Keep going."

"You, guardsman! Stop!"

No help for it, Han thought. They turned to see an Imperial Lieutenant, the officer in nominal charge of the area, motioning them over.

"Come here." The man had the thin-lipped arrogant sneer down so pat that the Academy probably had booktapes with his personality imprint for the officer candidates to study. His uniform was immaculate despite the overworked air circulators in the booking area.

"Sir?" Kev was looking at the officer with such boldfaced I'm-only-doing-my-job innocence that Han had high hopes for a future career for the kid in petty larceny -- if only he didn't get shot now for overdoing it.

"What's this?" The officer was looking over the Corellian and the rebel princess with some interest. Correction: he was looking at Leia with some interest.

"A domestic quarrel, sir," Kev said, sticking to his original story since the worried sergeant was coming through the crowd to see what the trouble was.

"A domestic quarrel?" the Lieutenant said. One eyebrow went up in frank speculation.

Leia met the man's gaze, her expression unconsciously cold, desperately trying to think how a woman spacer would handle this. Should she curse him, ignore him, seem frightened... A wrong response might get them killed. The sergeant had almost reached them.

The Lieutenant glanced over at Han with some contempt, then said to Leia, "Slumming, honey?"

The sergeant threw his hands in the air and walked away.

Han felt the elation that usually accompanied an opponent blundering directly into his gun sights and he shouted, "What did you say to my woman?"

That was all the inebriated Corellian spacers in the booking area needed. None of them had been paying attention to the altercation, and each of them assumed someone from a rival crew had made the insulting comment to someone from their own crew, if not to a relative or close friend. The large chamber exploded.

Han, the princess, and Kev managed to push their way through the milling crowd into an empty corridor, losing the Imperial officer easily in the confusion. Leia, thankful the dimmer lighting here hid her blush, murmured to Han, "Not bad, flyboy."

They passed rows of heavy cell doors and stopped at a maintenance hatchway. Kev explained, "This goes right up into the upper levels and lets you bypass the

security seals. It was a minimum security area, so there won't be surveillance cameras or security droids." He tapped a code into the keypad and the door slid open to reveal a dingy, low-ceilinged maintenance corridor. He added, "You won't see anybody. No one wants to go up there after shift and chance running into Him or His people."

"Good," Han said, stepping through the hatch. "Can they trace this back to you?"

"No, I'll log you both in and out through the public door. They won't be able to tell who did it."

"Thank you," Leia told him as she followed the Corellian.

Kev coded the door closed, whispering, "Good luck."

Making their way up through the bureaucratic levels wasn't as difficult as Han had anticipated. So far they had had to avoid only one patrolling stormtrooper and they hadn't seen a sign of anyone else. The corridors were on half-lighting for the off shift, and the cold stone building was as quiet as a mausoleum.

Maybe this will be easy for once, the Corellian thought. He checked the plaque over an archway. Their biggest problem yet was the offices' confusing numbering system. "Forty-second block. This is it."

The archway opened into a high, pillared hall, one side decorated with a long mural of Commonport City that had probably been appropriated from a local museum. Pausing in the shelter of one of the columns, Han glanced around at the branching corridors. "Down here somewhere."

The Princess nodded, brushing a loose wisp of hair out of her eyes. "You never did say why you thought Arandu claimed you were working for him."

"Huh?" Han faced her. "No, I didn't say, did I? What does that mean?"

Leia glared at him. She had tried to bring this up before, and he had rather neatly distracted her, but if he thought she was going to back down just because he got belligerent, he was in for a surprise. "I didn't mean anything. I know you're keeping things to yourself, and I trust you enough to believe that you've told me everything the Alliance needs to know. We have our differences, but I would like to believe that after all we've been through together, you might trust me a little and you might even consider me your friend." She stopped abruptly, color coming into her cheeks. Of all the things she could have said, she hadn't meant to say that. Especially since it was true. Leia cursed the Corellian's ability to make her embarrass herself.

Han looked down at her, a storm of emotions conflicting inside him. Trust you? He wanted to say. I'm Han Solo, lady, I don't trust anybody except one mangy Wookiee and on my bad days I'm not so sure about him. In that moment Han realized he had to decide what he was doing with the Alliance. He wasn't getting paid, and he wasn't getting any younger. And rebellion was a dangerous hobby. He said, "Okay, okay, well talk about it. But can we just get this over with? There's a Sith Lord around here who wants to ask me questions that I don't have the answers to."

"Oh course," Leia hid her confusion. "I'll check down this way." But as the princess moved toward the nearest corridor, Han found himself watching her.

The portal at the end of the hall slid open suddenly and Han, caught away from a door, stepped up against a pillar while the princess ducked down the corridor.

The Corellian froze as six stormtroopers entered and stationed themselves in guard positions around the far end of the hall. Two of the most unpleasant men Han had ever seen followed the troopers.

The first man's identity was unmistakable; he wasn't any taller, or more powerfully built than the other man, but something in his bearing conveyed a dangerous physical power. He wore the dark dress uniform of an Imperial High Admiral, with the extra insignia marking him a member of the nobility, and a lightsabre swung from his belt. He had dark hair and stark blue eyes. Lord Lan Adarin snapped, "Your men moved too quickly. You lost the rebel." He couldn't seem to stop moving. If he stood still at all, he twitched.

Most high Imperial officials were a little bent, one way or another. It seemed to go with the territory. But there was something about Adarin that made Han want to get the hell out of there. The rumors Leia heard were right, he thought. This guy is a nut, even for a Sith Lord.

"My Lord, the agents inside the establishment had failed, and the officer believed the only way to complete the mission successfully was to move his squad in." The man was as slimy and unctuous as the lowest bureaucrat in the building, and the straight lines of the Imperial governor's uniform were stretched to cover a bulging paunch. His face was pale and fleshy, and his tense smile didn't come near to reaching his eyes. "He's been executed, of course, but he was acting on his own authority." He laughed nervously. "You couldn't possibly hold me responsible."

Adarin rounded on him so quickly the man flinched. "No excuses, Governor Tagge. I thought your dear brother, the general, explained the matter."

"He did my lord, but..."

"But nothing." Adarin stepped away from the governor as if he couldn't stand the man's proximity, or as if he was so hypersensitive to his surroundings that anyone's presence was a trial. "This smuggler knows where to find Arandu. Don't you understand what that means? There's been no word of my old friend Emil for two years, since he left the capital world. I don't know what he's planning, what he's done."

Oh wonderful, the smuggler in question thought. Seems I found the man and I didn't even know he was lost... Hold it, how did Adarin know that? Only a few people in the Alliance Command knew about Han's meeting with Arandu, and the story couldn't have gotten to the sector outpost, where Adarin's spy could have heard it. And Adarin had just said he hadn't communicated with Arandu. That left only one possibility -- Boba Fett.

On Slave I, Han Solo and the Lord Emil Arandu had had a long conversation; long enough for Han to learn the reason behind a Sith Lord's attack on a common bounty hunter. Fett had been hired by another Imperial to lead an attack on the base where Arandu's family was quartered. Arandu hadn't known who had hired Fett, and he'd been searching for a connection between the bounty hunter and someone highly placed in the Empire.

Han had found that someone.

All the pieces fit together. Adarin knew things only Fett could have told him. And Arandu had told Han that the information that had allowed Fett to trap Han and kill another rebel agent on Ord Mantell had been given to the hunter by an unknown Imperial. Adarin could have obtained that information through his spy in the outpost.

It was tenuous. One statement from a crazy Sith Lord to a knock-kneed governor, but it fit. Now what do I do with it? Han thought.

"But that still isn't my responsibility, my..." the governor stopped, his expression comically surprised. His mouth moved soundlessly, and the startled look in his eyes turned to desperation.

Adarin was watching Tagge intently, but without any apparent malice. He smiled gently and said, "You may not be responsible, Governor, but you are available."

Before this Han would've given quite a bit to see an Imperial governor turn blue; now he was willing to forego the experience. Adarin made the strangulation a slow process, drawing it out like a conductor with a particularly interesting piece of music.

Finally the governor collapsed, a heavy, graceless heap, and Adarin turned abruptly, heading for the opposite door. Han had barely had the chance for a relieved breath when the Sith Lord suddenly halted.

"You idiots!" Adarin turned slowly to point directly at the Corellian's hiding place. At the very edge of his consciousness, the Sith Lord had been aware of another presence. Now, when he had increased his perceptions for a fuller appreciation of Tagge's death, that presence was suddenly brought into focus. "There's someone in here!"

Ah, hell. Han bolted away from the pillar and ducked down a random corridor, his first instinct to lead them away from the princess. The troopers in the room were too startled to fire at first, but he could hear one of them shouting orders into a comlink. If they caught him, did they have enough information to identify him as the Corellian Adarin was looking for? Yeah, probably, Han thought.

More stormtroopers rounded a corner in front of him, and Han fired without stopping to take aim, ducking down a side passageway. It dead-ended into one large hatchway. The Corellian hit the release and found himself outside on a hopper pad under the clear night sky. There were no large vehicles on the pad, but a dozen or so speeder bikes were moored to the edge.

Han ran to the nearest bike, holstered his blaster and vaulted on to it. He pushed down on both footpads for power and the bike started to lift. He didn't see the stormtrooper or knew he had fired until the energy bolt glanced off the delicate machine and spun it right off the pad.

The warm wind tore at him; Han tightened up on both footpads, trying to keep his seat, and the repulsars stalled out. The bike dropped.

Somehow the Corellian held on as it tumbled end over end in darkness. He pulled on the handgrips, but the controls had frozen and the repulsars refused to kick back in. He caught a glimpse of the lights of the ground traffic below rushing towards him and realized he'd strike the sloping side of the complex long before he had a chance to hit the ground. There wouldn't be enough left of him or the bike to fill a trooper's helmet.

Desperate, Han held on with his knees and eased up on the pads. He felt himself slipping off but if he pushed down on the pads the damn repulsars would never come on. He wanted to yell, but there was no air left in his lungs.

The repulsars came on.

The bike slowed and the automatic stabilizers took over and righted it. Han leaned on the handgrips, tipsy from the adrenaline rush. "Hey," he muttered. "No problem."

He added power slowly and pulled on the grips, dropping altitude and curving away from the complex. He didn't switch on the bike's lights; they'd never spot him without infrared scanners. He glanced down at the energy scar on the bike's side, and saw that if the bolt had struck a little further forward, he could've lost his right leg along with most of his ass.

Then he realized the roaring in his ears wasn't just the rush of the wind. It was the hum of a large, powerful vehicle gliding somewhere ahead of him in the dark. Han corrected the angle of the bike and accelerated carefully, trying to pinpoint the craft's location. Energy bolts showered down off to his right suddenly and he turned away sharply, throwing a look back over his shoulder.

Two troopers on speeder bikes were above him, firing down, and Han guided the bike in a wider circle. All right, so they are using infrared scanners. Then a dark, bulky shape blotted out the building's lights ahead of him.

Cursing, Han took the only direction left and veered sharply downward. He never even felt the impact.

Princess Leia had picked the right corridor, yet she hesitated outside the Data Manager's office. She could hear the muffled arguing of the Imperials who had entered the large hall, but nothing that sounded like a Corellian pirate being seen and apprehended. Han knew where she was; he'd join her when he could, and then they would look for a way out. The important thing now was to find the data.

Leia used the code key Kantrell had given her and slipped into the dark, empty office. She let the door slide shut behind her and turned the lights up. It was a small room, in a strict, utilitarian style, but there was a cube of family holos on the otherwise bare desk. Yes, Kantrell said he had a family. He died for the Alliance and he wasn't even an official member, she thought. But then, neither is Han.

She sat at the terminal and switched it on. The Imperial circle flashed on the screen and dissolved into Imperial Administrative Dataflow, Clearance 88-23, ID required for access.

The Princess took a deep breath. If the bureaucrat had managed to get the information, if every alarm in the building didn't go off... If the gods didn't decide to end the universe tomorrow; speculation was useless. She typed in "Tantavie IV". A flow of jumbled characters crossed the screen and then the name "Rin Takeda".

"Takeda," the Princess muttered, aghast. "He's second in command of the outpost." Well, not when I get there.

She quickly scanned the rest of the file but nothing else seem to be of any real importance. She carefully erased the information and was about to turn off the terminal when she heard the first alarm out in the corridor. The screen flashed as the file reverted to the system opening and the words Request Status? appeared.

She typed "yes" and caught her breath as the computer helpfully answered, Intruder sighted on 42nd level, maximum security breached, attempted exit off lift pad 42D, skycruiser dispatched, anticipate apprehension.

They found him. I should have... I should have what? Started a firefight when it looked as though they wouldn't spot him? The Princess cleared the screen and sat there a moment, thinking hard. She would need help, access codes, a plan of the complex, if she was to do anything other than get herself captured. Kantrell had let them know in no uncertain terms that the Resistance would help them only so far. She could command him, but... But damn it all, the man was right. Her gaze fell on the holocube, and she picked it up, looking at it more closely. She had the answer.

Leia would wait until the corridor cleared, then make her way to the maintenance passageways and to the lower levels to find Danion Kev.

Waking up wasn't easy.

"Our daring rebel lives," a teasingly familiar voice said.

Barely. Han's eyes flickered open. His wrists were locked into binders suspended from the ceiling by a small retention field; he felt like he'd been run through a cheese grinder. His clothes were disarranged, as if he'd been thoroughly searched without a great deal of regard for his privacy. He licked his lips and tasted blood.

"Perhaps he regrets his opportuning."

Han blinked hard and the scene swam into focus. He was in a long stateroom, decorated with trailing orchid vines and furnished with conform loungers and low tables. It was lit by drifting lumas and a wall-sized transparisteel port, revealing a view of Commonport City in the early morning. He could see the curve of an airfoil at the edge of the port. Moving. Airfoil. I must be on that skybarge. The airfoil extended and I slammed into it. Han rolled his eyes to the ceiling. You're losing it, Solo. This would never have happened three years ago.

Adarin and a man with long blond hair were looking up at him. There were two black-uniformed Imperial troopers and an officer standing by the only door Han could see. Then the Corellian pirate found himself meeting the Sith Lord's

intense, hungry gaze. And he's afraid of Arandu. He's afraid of me because I saw Arandu and lived to talk about it, he thought. The contrast between the two Sith Lords was nothing short of incredible: Arandu had the air of a consummate strategist; Adarin was more like a rabid killer. They both conveyed a feeling of eminent danger, yet if there was any insanity in Arandu he had hidden it well. The older Sith Lord had seemed as if he was playing some private joke on the rest of the galaxy. Han would have bet a great many credits that Adarin's sense of humor was considerably more primitive.

The officer said diffidently, "Your shuttle is ready, m'lord."

Adarin hesitated a long moment, then snapped, "Take care of it, Barris." The officer followed him out of the room.

Barris smiled up at Han. "Well, I know I speak for both of us when I say how very glad I am to be here."

"It's the high point of my day," Han agreed. The Imperial was dressed in black, but he wasn't wearing a lightsabre; there was no other indication as to whether he was a Sith too or not. Suddenly Han realized why Barris was so familiar. He hadn't quite been able to place the voice, but the long hair prodded his memory. "The courier in the bar."

"The rebel in the bar."

"I didn't recognize you without your dirt." Han craned his neck to glance down. His feet were about a meter above the floor and the rich carpet was spotted with blood. The strain on his arms was terrible. He said, "You made a couple of mistakes, but you weren't so bad."

"How kind of you to say so." Barris began to pace, with a slight nervous twitch he had probably picked up from Adarin. "I'm an interrogator. I could make you tell me anything I wanted to know, given enough time. Including any information you have about the Rebel Alliance." He paused to look at Han directly. "And why you entered the complex."

You can try, the Corellian thought. And I'm sure you will.

"But my lord wants to know only one thing," Barris continued.

"I don't know where Arandu is," Han said. "I don't work for him." If they had captured Leia, Barris would have let on by now. No, she was out of the complex with the data. Which meant Han was the only one dying for no good reason.

"Oh, I believe you. I believe you completely. Lord Arandu won't be found, not by Lord Vader or by anyone else, until he's quite ready. However, my Lord Adarin

doesn't understand that, and no one is going to explain it to him. Unfortunately for you."

Keep him talking. Han's head was pounding and his hands were going numb. He said conversationally, "So Adarin was the one who sent Fett to attack Arandu's base."

"Yes. They've fought since the purge of the Jedi. It's been aggravated by certain... Occurrences. They got into a shouting match once and Arandu all but called m'lord a coward. His exact words -- I was there -- were, when will you challenge me, Lan, when? I'm the oldest Sith after the Dark Lord; what's it to be, lightsabres when I'm ninety? Are you waiting for my grandchildren to come of age?" Barris smiled, and it was not the nicest expression Han had ever seen. "And that's what gave me the idea. The best way for m'lord to strike at Arandu. Through his children, his students. Fett was hired to lead a shocktroop attack on Arandu's stronghold, and it was marvelously successful. Arandu left the capital world in a rage." Barris shrugged. "It will only prolong the inevitable. Arandu has already discovered Fett's part in the affair. And Emil Arandu was Darth Vader's first and best student; Adarin is a fool to believe the Dark Lord has totally withdrawn his support."

Han tried to move one of his wrists in the binders and bit his lip at the resulting pain. He said, "You think Arandu will win."

Barris frowned. "I'm certain of it. Adarin draws great power from the dark side, but Arandu has control. And that is what will count in the end. Of course," he added, "You won't be there to see it."

Han could tell his deliberately casual attitude was getting to Barris. It was the only weapon he had, and helped him hide the fact that the interrogator's presence made his flesh creep. As if the answer had no effect on him personally, he asked, "So what are you going to tell him?"

"Now that depends on you." Barris said, looking him over thoughtfully. "You must know something. You were on Fett's ship with Arandu. If you are only a rebel, why didn't he kill you?"

Han had no idea why Arandu hadn't killed him. Later, after he had saved the Sith Lord's life, he supposed gratitude might account for it, even though it wasn't something you expected from the man who had been Darth Vader's first disciple. But why didn't he kill me when he first found me on board Slave I? Because he didn't want to do Fett's job for him? Because he was bored and he wanted to talk? He said, "Maybe he'd made his quota for the day."

Barris smiled. "Let me assure you -- I haven't."

There was a sound, somewhere to starboard, of a smaller craft docking with the barge. One guard spoke quietly into a comlink, his expression confused. Barris glanced back at him, motioned him out of the room.

One guard left. That lifted Han's chances from impossible to merely improbable. He said, "If you let me down, I'll tell you."

Slowly, Barris said, "Very well."

The retention field switched off. Han tried to catch himself but his knees buckled and he collapsed in a heap. He was worse off than he had thought. The cuffs had marked his wrists terribly, and he tried to massage some feeling back into his hands.

Barris said, "Now tell me."

Han looked up at him, and thought hell, why not? "I saved his life."

Barris stared. "You what?"

Maybe I shouldn't have said that. Han watched Barris carefully, trying to judge his reactions. He didn't have anything like a coherent plan.

"You're telling the truth. You have no idea what you've done." The Imperial laughed. The door slid open and Barris turned minutely. Han surged to his feet and was suddenly facing a small deadly pistol.

Barris' voice grated. "How unintelligent of you."

Han met his eyes, thinking, you're fast, but you're no Sith. The returning guard stood uncertainly in the doorway, watching both men.

Barris was saying, "I confess, my original thought was to kill you and construct a convenient story for m'lord. But this is a matter he'll have to attend to himself. I'm afraid you'll be coming to Gyndine with us."

Gyndine was a territorial administrative world with an ammonia atmosphere and underground installations. One lone Corellian would have as much chance of escape there as on Kessel. And to be questioned by Adarin...

Then Han's subconscious informed him of something he should have seen immediately.

The guard in the doorway was familiar. In fact, he looked a lot like Danion Kev.

Han was too good a gambler to let his face betray anything. Barris was waiting for a reply. The Corellian said, "Ever notice how all Imps look alike?"

Barris' head jerked. In the second he was distracted, Han stepped out of the line of fire and struck him in the head with joined fists. The Imperial stumbled backward and fell, banging his head on a low table.

The guard by the door had done a foolish double take at Kev and died for it. The rebel was using a pellet gun with a silencer and the unlucky Imperial hit the ground with no more than a muffled thump.

Suddenly Leia Organa was in the room, opening Han's binders and demanding, "Are you all right?"

"Fine," Han told her.

She grimaced at him. "You don't look it."

Kev stood over Barris and nudged the unconscious man with his boot. "What are we going to do with him?"

Han thought of the fear in Adarin's eyes. "Leave him alive," he said. "That's the worst thing I can think of."

It was a short, uneasy trip down the corridor to the lock where the Princess and Kev had docked their stolen skyhopper. The barge was running with auxiliary crew, since most of the troops had left with Adarin. "How did you buy into this, kid?" Han asked Kev, remembering Kantrell's reluctance.

Reaching a corner, Kev took a cautious peek around it. "The man who found the name of the Imperial agent, the informer in the bureaucracy, was my father." He looked back at Han, his expression grave. "Kantrell can talk about risk and priorities all he wants."

They made it to the lock without incident.

Inside the 'hopper, Kev took the controls and disengaged the little craft, guiding it away from the barge and the complex toward the port. Han's innate caution wouldn't let him relax. Holding on to a stanchion, he asked, "How are you gonna lose this boat?"

"I'll land it in a section of the port where it'll be stripped before anyone can get to it. A couple of my friends in the guard will be delaying ground pursuit."

This kid was almost enough to make Han change his opinion about civilian cops. Reassured, he staggered over to collapse face down on one of the couches. Every muscle in his body was making a separate, individual complaint.

The Princess sat next to him, opening a medipack. She explained, "We used Kev's access to get the skyhopper. After Adarin left the system stopped asking for high-level clearance to dock with the barge." She found some salve and started to gently apply it to the bruises and cuts on his wrists.

"Good call, your holiness. Kev's all right."

"Yes," she agreed wryly. "I really know how to pick them. I'm sorry, Han."

Han opened one eye. "It's not as bad as it looks."

"It looks awful."

"You look beautiful."

"Stop that." Unable to help herself, and inwardly telling herself that she was only being maternal, she stroked his hair.

"Keep doing that."

Leia tried to dredge up some of her legendary iciness. "Don't flatter yourself, flyboy. I wouldn't leave anyone to the Empire. Even you."

"Yeah," Han closed his eyes, wanting to continue the exchange, but exhaustion getting the better of him.

After a moment, Leia said, "Adarin still believes you're Arandu's agent, doesn't he?"

"More than ever."

Leia shook her head. She asked softly, "What are you going to do?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

end

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