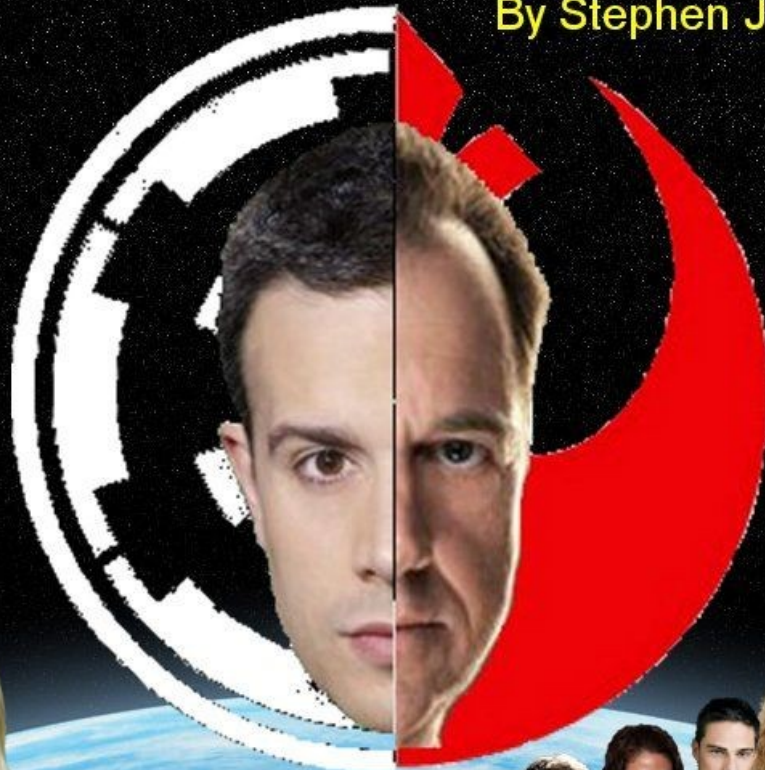


STAR WARS

8-10: A Deal With the Devil

By Stephen J Dutton



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Civil war turns father against son

IT IS A TIME OF CRISIS. REBEL FORCES FIGHTING AGAINST THE EVIL GALACTIC EMPIRE ARE OUTNUMBERED AND OUTGUNNED BY THEIR FOES. THEY MUST INSTEAD RELY ON GUERRILLA WARFARE AND HIT AND FADE STRIKES BY SMALL GROUPS AGAINST STRONGER FORCES.

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

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

A DEAL WITH THE DEVIL

THE GROWING PIRATE ALLIANCE IS THREATENING NOT ONLY THE LAW ABIDING CITIZENS OF THE SECTOR, BUT NOW IT IS ALSO BECOMING A THREAT TO THE BUSINESS OPERATIONS OF ONELL THE HUTT AND HUTTS DO NOT TAKE KINDLY TO SUCH THINGS. THEREFORE, ONELL REACHES OUT TO THE ONE PERSON HE TRUSTS TO DEAL WITH THE SITUATION. MACE GRAYLE, OWNER OF THE *SILVER HAWK*...

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

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1.

"I've got a bad feeling about this dad." Cass Grayle said when the YT-1300 class freighter *Silver Hawk* dropped out of hyperspace near to the sector capital Estran.

"You did just fine." her adoptive father, Mace, replied. Since the flight was a simple run from the Alliance headquarters in the sector to Estran he had allowed Cass to fly the ship as practice.

"No, I mean look at all those Imperial ships out there." Cass said and she pointed through the canopy to the space around Estran.

Looking up from the console where he had been monitoring Cass's performance Mace saw that the teenager was right and that the number of Imperial warships orbiting the planet that were outside of the massive structure that was the Imperial Navy's own headquarters in the sector that orbited the planet as well.

"The Empire's taking security pretty seriously." Mace said, "Try not to get too close to any of them.

Remember that you're in Imperial records as a fugitive so we don't want them coming aboard. In fact let me take over." and he took hold of the co-pilot's control column just as Cass let go.

Mace continued to fly the ship towards Estran, weaving in and out of the various streams of traffic heading to and from the planet. Just as they neared the upper atmosphere an Imperial customs ship abruptly changed course towards them.

"Attention YT-thirteen hundred. Identify yourself immediately." a stern sounding voice demanded.

"This is the freighter *Grey Ghost* operating out of Tarlen. I'm delivering a cargo then heading home." Mace replied. *Grey Ghost* was a fake identity that Mace used to conceal the true identity of his ship. Although despite several years of working with the Alliance to restore the Republic had not seen either Mace or his ship placed on any Imperial wanted lists he still preferred to operate under a false identity whenever he was dealing with the Empire.

There was a delay in the customs corvette responding to this but when it came, the reply was simple.

"Confirmed *Grey Ghost* Be advised that surface checks are in effect at all ports."

"Dad, is that going to be a problem?" Cass asked nervously.

"Not where we're going." Mace reassured her, "Balve's got the customs inspectors on his payroll."

Mace continued past the customs corvette, maintaining a course that took him into the atmosphere of Estran and once the *Silver Hawk* had completed its entry into the atmosphere he turned it towards the starport he generally frequented while on Estran. Rather than the planet's primary starport located in the capital, the one Mace used was located in a slightly smaller city elsewhere on the same continent. Most of the traffic here consisted of private charter flights and many of the vessels were transporting goods illegally. Fortunately for the crews of these ships a number of the customs agents here were easily bribed and the individual that Mace had come to Estran to see had more than half of them on his payroll. Therefore, when he found a pair of armed customs officers waiting for the *Silver Hawk* as it set down Mace was not overly worried.

But just because he knew that the customs officers would not pay too close attention to either him or his ship, Mace knew that there was a limit to what they would let pass and so as he and Cass walked down the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp they each carried only a sidearm in a holster rather than risking carrying rifles as well.

"ID." one of the agents said and Mace smiled when he recognised the man.

"Here you go." he said, holding out two identity cards. His was genuine whereas the card that bore Cass's image was a fake created by the Alliance. However, the agent looked only briefly at each of these before returning them.

"Be on your way." he said and then before either Mace or Cass could move the two customs agents turned to leave the docking bay ahead of them.

"That always makes nervous." Cass said quietly as she and Mace left the docking bay as well and she glanced at the two agents.

"I know what you mean." Mace replied, "It only takes one of them to not be bought off and we could find ourselves in the middle of a fight. Never mind though, a drink will calm you down. Once I've given Balve his money for this month we can hang around a while longer. It's not like it's busy back at headquarters right now. The colonel and Kara are spending time with their son, Tharun's helping Lyssa redecorate her quarters aboard the *Golden Empress* and Tobis and Jaysica are - well they're doing whatever it they do when they're alone." and Cass winced.

"I'm not sure I want to know." she said, "Kara said that Jaysica borrowed her recording rod once and when she returned it the memory was still full of-"

"Never you mind." Mace interrupted.

"So will we get chance to go shopping afterwards? I've been saving my money and I'd like to see what's available." Cass said.

"Sure why not?"

"Oh and we can talk about how long it's going to be before you and mom give me a baby brother or sister." Cass added with a grin, "Seriously, if you two don't hurry up I may just need to have one of my own instead." and Mace's eyes widened at the thought.

"Or maybe I ought to keep you locked away for a few years. The rubber thing you got yourself tied up in ought to do to keep you under control."

"Okay I get the point." Cass said as they reached the cantina that was their destination and Mace held the door open for her to enter first.

The interior of the cantina was gloomy and the room was filled with beings from a variety of species. Mace and Cass moved through the crowd to the bar and when they were approached by one of the staff Mace placed a bundle of banknotes down in front of him.

"My payment for the month." he said, "Give to Balve and then get us a couple of beers."

"Give it to him yourself." the barman replied, "Mister Balve left instructions that you are to be sent through to see him." then he glared at Cass, "The kid can stay here though."

"I don't think so." Mace replied, "If Balve wants to see me then he can see her as well." and he grabbed hold of the money again and started to walk towards the door that led to the office belonging to the cantina's owner.

"You don't think he's going to try and buy me again is he?" Cass asked.

"I wouldn't put it past him. Not that it's going to do him any good." Mace replied and then he halted in front of the muscular figure standing outside the door, "Balve sent for us." he said and the man nodded before knocking on the door, which promptly slid open to reveal the man sat behind a desk in the office on the other side.

Odras Balve did not specialise in any particular criminal activity. Instead he got involved in anything that would make him money. To Mace he had been source of funds as a loan shark and of employment as someone with illegal goods that needed to be moved quietly. But these were just two of the activities that Odras would involve his organisation in. Mace knew for a fact that he dealt in slaves sometimes, hence his repeated offers to write off some or all of Mace's debt in return for the women that accompanied him and this was the main reason why Mace was unwilling to leave Cass alone in the bar. He could not be absolutely certain that she would still be there when he came back. Behind Odras stood his wookiee bodyguard and the massive humanoid stared at Mace and Cass, focusing on the blasters they carried.

"Ah Mace, do come in." Odras said with a smile, "Oh and I see you've brought that charming young daughter of yours along as well. Take a seat the pair of you, I'll have drinks brought in."

"Thanks." Mace said as he sat down, "Now what do you want this time? If you're trying to sell me something then you ought to know that my payment to you is all I have at the moment, aside from a bit of loose cash of course."

"Mace I want to offer you a job. A well paying job that ought to be right up your alley." Odras said and Mace frowned.

"I hope you're not expecting me to deliver someone else to you that you can torture them with a mind probe." he said.

"No, no not the mind probe." Odras replied, "In fact I'm just acting as an intermediary here. The actual job is for someone else who has a passing familiarity with your work. I take it that you know Onell the Hutt?"

"That fat slug?" Mace exclaimed, "I thought he had his hands full running that shadow port."

"Oh he does. That's why he wants to use you for this." Odras said.

"Use me for what?" Mace asked.

"It would seem that a number of pirates have banded together." Odras said and Mace sighed, "Oh I see you are familiar with them. Mister Deller said you would be."

"Anzar? What's he got to do with this?" Mace asked.

"Nothing other than I asked him what he thought you'd say and he thought it was perfectly suited to you as well." Odras said.

"He turned the job down didn't he?" Mace said and Odras smiled again.

"He is somewhat more risk averse than you and your associates are." he said, "In fact I was rather hoping that more of them would be here with you now. It would make the likelihood of success that much better."

"Just tell me what the job is Balve."

"Very well, since you insist. This group of pirates has been avoiding the more settled areas of the sector, instead hitting targets in the Shadow Region and Spire Worlds where there are fewer Imperial patrols."

"They've been keeping out of the way of the Alliance fleet as well." Mace added.

"On the other hand they have not been ignoring the ships heading to and from Onell's shadow port." Odras said, "In fact they appear to be exploiting its location to lay ambushes where they know there won't be any Imperial response and Onell is not happy about this. He wants them dealt with. He could hire mercenaries with their own ships to keep the routes to his port clear but he'd rather go with something a little more proactive if you take my meaning."

"He wants them killed." Mace said.

"He wants them to stop raiding ships that he makes money from. If asking them nicely would do the trick then Onell would be quite satisfied with you doing just that. So will you help deal with them?"

"How much are we being paid?" Cass asked before Mace could respond.

"Ah, straight to business. I like your daughter Mace, you know that. I wish she was my own. Then I'd have someone to leave all this to." Odras said, "Let's just say that after I've taken my very modest commission for finding you this job you won't need to worry about your payments to me for the next three months."

Mace then turned to Cass and smiled.

"I'm sorry Cass," he told her, "but I'm afraid that we're going to have to put off that shopping trip."

2.

Onell the Hutt's shadow port was located in the Spire Worlds region of the sector. This group of stars was located between two arms of the nearby nebula and only sparsely populated, making it an ideal place for people who wanted remain hidden to head for. Having been warned that the recently formed pirate alliance was specifically targeting traffic heading into and out of the shadow port meant that the *Silver Hawk* needed to be prepared to repel an attack should it be unlucky enough to be targeted and this posed a difficult issue for Mace.

"Cass you're going to have to pilot the ship on your own when we drop out of hyperspace." he told Cass as they sat in the *Silver Hawk's* lounge and she looked up from her drink.

"Me?" she replied, "But what if the pirates are waiting for us?"

"That's why I need you to fly. I need to be in the turret ready to return fire. Now we'll be dropping out of hyperspace as close as possible to the shadow port but that's no guarantee that there won't be trouble so you need to be ready to dodge any incoming fire. Can you manage that?"

"I don't know. I've got a bad feeling about this dad." Cass said and Mace smiled at her.

"Don't worry, I'm sure you'll do fine. After all you've had a great teacher."

"Yeah I know. But he's back at headquarters with Jaysica so I've got to do the flying." Cass said and Mace frowned, "Hey, I was joking." Cass added, shoving Mace.

"Yeah, well I'm starting to think it was a mistake letting you out of that rubber thing." he muttered as he got to his feet, "Go strap in. we'll be coming out of hyperspace in a few minutes and we can't afford to be caught unprepared."

Mace headed for the nearby ladders and climbed up into the *Silver Hawk's* only turret while Cass made her way back to the cockpit and sat down in the pilot's seat. Taking hold of the control column she then waited for the tunnel of light outside the ship to coalesce back into the distinct points of light of realspace. As soon as this happened Cass reached out to raise the *Silver Hawk's* shields. Mace had been able to obtain an extremely powerful shield generator that was capable of absorbing heavy fire and this represented the *Silver Hawk's* most impressive line of defence against attack.

"Okay shields are up." Cass said into the intercom, "I'm heading for the planet now." and the *Silver Hawk* accelerated forwards. But as Cass studied the console she became confused, "There's no beacon." she said, "How am I supposed to know where to fly?"

"Just take us down." Mace responded from the turret, "Use the sensors to search for metallic mass. That ought to guide you to a landing zone."

"Okay." Cass said and she looked at the sensor readout in front of her. This showed several other craft in the vicinity of the *Silver Hawk* but none of them were on an intercept course. The ship shook as she guided it into the atmosphere and then lurched as she flew it into a thick cloud bank.

"What's happening?" Mace asked when he felt this.

"Looks like the weather's not so great." Cass replied.

"That's pretty normal for this place. Keep going." Mace told her.

Descending further the *Silver Hawk* dropped out of the clouds and Cass saw the barren terrain of the planet below. This was criss crossed by deep grooves and from her previous time here Cass knew that the shadow port itself was at the bottom of these where the frequent dust storms on the surface would cause less damage. Just as Mace had suggested she checked the sensors for metallic contacts and she saw a large return coming from the west of the ship's current location. This prompted a change in course as Cass headed for the source of the reading. By this point the *Silver Hawk* was at a sufficiently low altitude that an attack was unlikely, but it was not impossible to believe that the pirates would shoot down a ship so they could then pick over the remains.

Cass brought the *Silver Hawk* to a halt over one of the deep gouges in the surface, right above where she had detected the metallic mass and was relieved to see that this had indeed been caused by a number of starships all landed in docking bays carved out of the base of the canyon. Spotting a vacant docking bay she gently lowered the *Silver Hawk's* altitude, deploying the ship's landing gear she set the ship down in the docking bay and breathed a sigh of relief that they had made it down safely.

"Okay we're down." she said into the intercom.

"Great, nice flying." Mace replied, "Now go grab your carbine. I'm not wandering around this place with just a pistol if I can help it."

When Mace and Cass came walking down the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp they saw a small group of armed figures approaching. This was not unusual, but unlike the customs agents at ordinary starports Onell's men did not care what cargo ships were carrying. They only cared that their employer was paid for providing a safe landing area far from Imperial eyes.

"Four hundred credits." one of them said before Mace could say anything.

"Four hundred?" Mace exclaimed, "It wasn't that much last time."

"Well now it is. Haven't you heard? Pirates are attacking ships coming here so supplies are harder to come by."

"But we aren't buying supplies off Onell." Cass said, "In fact we-"

"What my young apprentice here is trying to say," Mace interrupted, "is that we were personally invited here by Onell the Hutt. My name is Mace Grayle and I was sent by Odras Balve on Estran."

The leader of the squad of Onell's men walked away while the rest of his unit kept watch over Mace, Cass and the *Silver Hawk* and Mace saw him speaking into a comlink. Then the man glanced back towards the *Silver Hawk* and nodded before returning and looking straight at Mace.

"The mighty Onell the Hutt is expecting you." he said.

The palace of Onell the Hutt was located some distance from the docking bay where the *Silver Hawk* was located so Onell's troops gave the two rebels a lift in their transport. They made no attempt to disarm either Mace or Cass and they were shown into Onell's throne room still armed. However, given the number of armed guards and other lackeys present it was clear that any attempt to cause trouble would have rapidly fatal consequences. In particular Mace noticed Lae Chen, Onell's human chief enforcer among the crowd armed with a deck clearing blaster. Mace owned a similar weapon himself, but whereas his deck sweeper was designed to emit a disabling stun pulse Lae Chen's weapon would fire a cone of lethal energy that would take out a large portion of the beings in the room if his master was threatened in any way.

"Mace Grayle of the rebellion to see you my lord Onell." the leader of the group that had brought Mace and Cass to the palace said and he bowed in front of his employer before stepping aside.

Onell the Hutt then began to speak, but he did so in his own language and it was not until the protocol droid stood beside the bulbous hutt translated his words that Mace and Cass understood what was being said to them.

"The mighty Onell the Hutt bids you welcome on your return to his sanctuary." the droid said, "In addition he expresses his hope that an arrangement can be made that will see the scourge of the pirates plaguing this system dealt with."

Mace could not help but smile at the thought of this. Many of the people who came to Onell's shadow port were themselves pirates looking to dispose of the property they had stolen, often violently. But now that Onell's shadow port was threatened with losing its reputation as a safe place to do business the hutt wanted these particular pirates dealt with.

"So why me?" Mace asked, "I'm sure Lae Chen over there and few of his goon squad could put together a boarding party."

"The mighty Onell's forces are more than capable of defeating any threat." the droid said as Onell responded to Mace's question, "But each ship would have to be dealt with individually and their fleet grows with every passing month. On the other hand, if the pirate's base of operations could be located then they could all be destroyed in one fell swoop."

"Or at least they could if you had a suitable force of warships at your disposal." Mace pointed out, knowing that although Onell owned a number of armed starships none of them were true military capital ships, "It seems to me like you need my expertise to track the pirates to their base and then the Alliance fleet to take it out. I am I correct?"

Mace didn't need the protocol droid to tell him that Onell did not appreciate his response as the alien let out a roar and lashed out at a nearby lamp, knocking it over.

"The mighty Onell is willing to make a very generous financial offer in order to secure the assistance of your associates in the Alliance." the droid said when Onell spoke again.

"The Alliance doesn't need his money." Mace said simple and he felt Cass press up against him.

"Err dad, you do." she whispered.

"Shush honey, I know what I'm doing." Mace said.

"Yeah, pissing him off." Cass muttered as Onell growled.

"The mighty Onell wishes to know what you would consider a fair deal to accept the challenge he puts before you." the droid said when Onell calmed down enough to speak again and Mace smiled.

"Two things." Mace said, "First you stop permitting the dealing of slaves here. Secondly you permit the Alliance to refuel and resupply here openly."

Onell growled again, obviously displeased at the suggestion that he should turn business away.

"The mighty Onell does not see why his loyal customers should be subjected to rule by the rebellion." the droid translated.

"They wouldn't." Mace said, "But surely he must see that the presence of Alliance warships in the system will act as a deterrent to the pirate activity he wants to be rid of. Surely losing a handful of slavers as customers is worth the security that would bring."

Onell's immediate reaction to this was silence and Mace quickly checked on the positions of his guards,

wondering whether he had just overplayed his hand. But when Onell spoke again he did so in tones that Mace took as being agreeable.

"The mighty Onell the Hutt accepts your offer Mace Grayle of the rebellion." the protocol droid said, "In return for providing protection to traffic in this system, vessels belonging to the rebellion may seek shelter and support here without additional fee.

"You did it." Cass said to Mace.

"Maybe." Mace replied, "Of course I still need to find out what the Alliance will think of this. This deal could be a non-starter if Admiral Aphanar decides she doesn't like it. Mon calamari can barely tolerate the fact that we use privateers."

"Of course," the droid added as Onell continued to speak, "this would be an alternative to the previous financial offer made." and Mace's face fell.

"What's the matter asked?" Cass asked, "It was only three months payments."

"Plus Balve's share." Mace pointed out, "Which you can bet was bigger than that. He knows we're making this deal so he's going to want his money whether it comes from Onell or from me. I think I just agreed to pay him out of my own pocket."

3.

Jacen Karn was the nearest thing that the Alliance had to an official representative in Onell's shadow port. He ran a store that traded in used goods and from here he would purchase items that could be of use to the Alliance as well as selling on goods that had come into their possession that were considered surplus to requirements. He had dealt with the occupants of the Silver Hawk on several occasions before and so when Mace and Cass entered his shop he smiled at them.

"Captain Grayle." he said, "What brings you here today?"

"Pirates." Mace replied, "Or to be more precise the pirate alliance that sleemo Lazaras Shallak set up."

"Ah, you know that they've been hitting ships around here? Looks like they're trying to knock Onell off his position as the major crime lord in the sector." Jacen said.

"Yeah, that's why we're here." Mace said and then he noticed that Cass was no longer stood right beside him and he looked around to where she was searching through the items on offer in Jacen's store, "Cass, what are you doing?" he asked.

"Just looking." she answered, "I couldn't go shopping on Estran so I've still got money to spend."

"Tell you what, I'll do you ten percent off anything in the store." Jacen told her, "Fifteen if you're paying in Imperial credits. I can move them easier."

"Thanks." Cass said, smiling at him.

"Nothing that'll wake me up in the middle of the night though, okay?" Mace said, "And that includes anything that will annoy Kara."

"Annoying Kara would need more than a fifteen percent discount." Cass muttered as she continued to browse through Jacen's stock.

"Onell wants us to deal with the pirates." Mace said, turning back towards Jacen, "He wants us to find out where the pirates are based and then bring in the fleet to knock them out."

"Stang, he's expecting a lot." Jacen said in amazement, "What makes him think that the Alliance would agree to that?"

"Because dad told him they would." Cass said. Then she patted a crate marked with the Imperial emblem, "What's in this?" she asked.

"Personal effects of the captain of the gladiator-class cruiser that was captured a couple of months back. I haven't gone through it yet but thirty credits and it's all yours. Crate as well." Jacen replied and Cass shrugged before opening it. Then Jacen looked at Mace and added, "What the hell were you thinking of making a promise like that?"

"Onell needs the pirates dealing with and so do we. In case you've forgotten Shallak was one of ours for a while. Having an ex-privateer running around the sector isn't good for our image. Besides the deal I can get us gives the Alliance full access to this place, the fleet can dock here for resupply. All we need to do is agree to provide protection after dealing with the pirates. Onell's even agreed to stop anyone dealing in slaves here as a gesture of goodwill."

"I take it you want me to pass on this offer to the Alliance, right?" Jacen asked and Mace nodded.

"Yeah, you can give them a better impression of what the pirates are up to and what we can gain from this." he said.

"Sure, I'll pass it on to support services. Shyla Nerrin will likely go for it but I'm not giving you any guarantee that General Kain or Admiral Aphanar will agree with her."

Jacen then headed into a room at the back of his store where he kept a long range transmitter that he used to keep in contact with his superiors in the Alliance, leaving Mace and Cass alone. Looking towards Cass, Mace saw that she was still rummaging through the crate of items that had belonged to the Imperial captain and quietly he crept up behind her.

"Anything interesting in there?" he asked suddenly and Cass let out a squeal of surprise as she tossed what she had been looking at back into the crate before her father could see what it was and slammed the lid down.

"Don't do that." she said and Mace frowned.

"What's in there anyway?" he asked and he reached out to open the crate again.

"Nothing worth-" Cass began before he opened the crate and saw what had held her interest.

"Wow." he said as Cass winced, "That captain had some interesting tastes didn't she?" and Cass blushed.

"I-" she said but was unable to think of anything else to add.

"Oh well, at least I wouldn't have to worry about you getting pregnant using that." Mace said.

"What? You'd let me buy this stuff?" Cass asked.

"Sure. Why not? As you're fond of reminding me you are eighteen now and it's your own money. Of course I'd advise that you not Kara find out about it. She's likely to think it funny to coat it in glue and even telling

someone that you need it removed is going to be pretty embarrassing. Let alone having the procedure actually carried out."

"I think I'll give it a miss." Cass said.

"Good idea." Mace replied before Jacen returned.

"I heard a scream. What happened out here?" he asked.

"Cass just wasn't expecting you to have such a wide variety of stock, that's all." Mace replied and Jacen just stared at him.

"Well Shyla's going to put the deal to General Kain." he said, "Nothing's confirmed yet but she's happy with the deal. So what's your plan?"

"I was thinking of putting together a subspace beacon that we could trigger as soon as we found the pirates' base and use it to bring in the Alliance fleet." Mace said.

"So you'll put the beacon in a cargo and hope the pirates take it?" Jacen asked.

"Sort of." Mace answered, "They could pick up an active beacon so I was thinking of stowing away in the cargo myself. That way I could trigger the beacon only when I get to the pirate headquarters. With a little modification maybe it could be rigged to let me send some data as well, let the Alliance know what sort of defences are present."

"Could work. But I don't have the parts for anything like that." Jacen said, "But I'd bet that Travakka could put something like that together for you."

"The wookie outlaw tech?" Mace commented.

"Yeah. Plus all wookies have a thing about slavers. He'll probably cut you a deal."

"In that case I'll head over and see what he has to say." Mace said and then he looked at Cass, "Are you coming or staying here to continue browsing?"

"I think I'll stay here." Cass replied and Mace nodded.

"Be good." he said as he left the store.

Cass watched him leave and then turned towards Jacen.

"Can I ask a question?" she said.

"Sure, go ahead."

"Would you tell my dad about anything I bought from you?"

Travakka's workshop was filled with various items of machinery in differing states of repair. Some of these were projects the outlaw tech was still working on while others were being kept purely as sources of parts. The wookie himself was working on the engine of a speeder bike when Mace walked in and he looked up and let out a growl when he noticed the human.

"I've got a job for you." Mace said, "I need a subspace beacon."

Travakka walked towards Mace, letting out another string of growls in his own language.

"You can help then?" Mace asked and the wookie nodded.

"Good. I need something that has a range that will reach across the sector that I can carry with me. Ideally I'd like to be able to add on a data transfer."

Travakka shook his head and growled again.

"It won't work? Why not?" Mace said and Travakka looked around and reached out to pick up a nearby power cell before letting out another growl, "So you don't think that anything handheld would be powerful? What can you recommend then?"

Travakka let out a more inquisitive growl and cocked his head to one side.

"I'd probably be using it aboard a starship." Mace replied, "Or possibly in some sort of command and control facility." then when Travakka growled again he added, "No, not Imperial. Onell the Hutt has me hunting down the pirates. In return I'm getting him to stop slavers operating here."

All of a sudden Travakka reached out and grabbed Mace, pulling him closer and hugging him.

"Whoa there!" he gasped before Travakka let him go and growled again, "Thanks, getting it for free is great, but what good is it if anything you make is too heavy to move?"

Travakka looked around and then walked across his workshop to where a battered looking datapad sat on a workbench. Picking it up he held it out towards Mace.

"Slicing?" Mace said after Travakka growled and he shook his head, "No, I'm no slicer. Neither is Cass. Tobis might be able to do that but I don't have him or any of the others with me on this op."

Then Travakka growled and shook his head again.

"Oh, you're going to do the slicing. How will that work?" Mace asked and Travakka pointed to a computer terminal on the far side of the workshop.

"Oh I get it. You'll write us a program and all we have to do is plug a datapad into whatever starship we're on and run it." Mace said and he smiled, "Yeah, I can go with that. Now how long is it going to take?"

Mace's next port of call was Onell's palace. Only this time he was not there to see the hutt himself, instead his business was with Lae Chen and he found Onell's chief enforcer in his quarters with a woman that did not

look much older than Cass.

"You've got some nerve, you know that Grayle?" Lae said when he saw Mace standing in the doorway.

"Hey, I didn't mean to interrupt anything." Mace replied, "But your boss thinks that this is kind of important."

"I'm not talking about now." Lae said as he climbed out of his bed and picked up his trousers from the floor. Then after he'd pulled them on he walked over to a chair and sat down, "I mean standing in front of Onell the Hutt, the most powerful crime lord in the sector, if not this entire region of space and telling him what he can and cannot do in his own place of business." he added.

"What's the matter Lae? Worried you might not be able to get as many dates if you can't buy them?" Mace said and almost immediately wished that he had not as Lae snarled.

"Listen to me Grayle, deal or no deal, keep disrespecting me and I'll let you live long enough to watch me slice up that girl of yours before I do the same to you." he said, "Now what do you want?"

"The Alliance is considering the deal and I've got someone working on the beacon now. But I need to know that I can deliver it. Has there been a pattern to the pirate attacks that we could use to predict what sort of cargoes they're likely to hit?"

Lae shrugged.

"As far as I know they've hit all sorts of cargoes and the attacks have been at irregular intervals. But they are able to jump in and hit the transports then get out again before our fighters can get into space to intercept them so it's likely that they have a mole somewhere on the planet." he explained.

"Which given the questionable background of everyone here means it could be almost anyone." Mace said,

"Do you at least have a record of the attacks that I could look at?"

"Of course we do. You think Onell's just going to pretend it's not happening? He's had his accountants recording every loss and every kilogramme of fuel consumed. They wouldn't dare miss anything out."

"Great." Mace said, "So which of his bean counters do I need to speak to?"

4.

When Mace finally returned to Jacen's store he found the man there alone.

"Where's Cass?" he asked.

"Oh she wanted to head back to your ship." Jacen replied.

"And you let her just walk out of here?" Mace exclaimed, "Stang Jacen, she's a kid."

"She's eighteen. You said so yourself." Jacen said, "Which is why she was smart enough to ask for a ride rather than just walking the streets alone." and Mace breathed a sigh of relief.

"Okay sorry, I should have known I could count on you." he said.

"And next time you will." Jacen said, "Oh and when I got back here was a message waiting for me. General Kain has come through and got Admiral Aphanar to agree to deploy a fleet unit at short notice so I hope you've got something up your sleeve to make all this worth it."

"So do I." Mace said and he held up a mem-stick, "This has details on every shipment that's been hit so far and with any luck there'll be something on it that will tell us when the pirates will launch another attack. So unless there's anything else you've got to add I'll be getting back to the *Silver Hawk* as well."

"I'll see you later then. Oh, and you may want to knock before you just march aboard your ship. She wouldn't admit it but I think Cass was a bit nervous about being left alone. I'd hate for her to shoot you by accident." Jacen said.

"I'll be careful." Mace said.

"You'll be dead if you're not."

When Mace returned to the *Silver Hawk* he opened up the access ramp and walked aboard without announcing himself first but he did not find Cass lying in wait for him with a blaster. Instead as he walked into the lounge he saw no sign of her, though he did think that he heard a low groan from the direction of the crew cabins.

"Cass is that you? Are you okay?" he called out, walking towards the cabins. Then Cass suddenly opened the door to her cabin wearing a robe.

"Dad, I wasn't expecting you back so early." she said.

"Are you okay? You look a little flushed." Mace said, placing a hand on her forehead to check her temperature, "You know I can do the rest of this on my own if-"

"No, I'm fine. I was just tired so I came back to try and get some sleep. You woke me."

"Fair enough. Well the mission is on and there's an Alliance task force standing by. Travakka's putting together a means for us to signal them and Onell's accountants have given me the details of every ship the pirates have hit in the system so far. With any luck we'll have everything we need."

"We're putting our faith in accountants?" Cass commented.

"I know. But it could be worse."

"How?"

"It could be lawyers. Now you go lie down if you want. I'm going to go though the mem-stick they gave me."

Mace said and he walked off towards the *Silver Hawk's* cockpit. Once there he sat in the pilot's seat and plugged the mem-stick into the console to access the information it held. As expected this was in the form of a basic database that summarised the details of each attack in terms of time and place along with the nature of the cargo and whether the vessel attacked had been on approach to the shadow port or leaving it. There seemed to be no clear pattern to how the transports were being targeted and Mace was starting to think that it could only be a mole on the surface picking out likely targets. But then he remembered the lack of any formal traffic control, meaning that there was no regular schedule for incoming flights or advance details of their cargoes. Therefore, an agent on the surface could only provide details about outgoing flights.

To try and get around this issue Mace looked at how the targeted transports had been attacked and here he did see an obvious pattern. The notes attached to the database explained how on every occasion the transports were attacked while they were still within the gravity well of the planet where the shadow port was located. In each case the attacking vessel would suddenly drop out of hyperspace and either block a departing transport's route or strike at an approaching ship from behind, often targeting its ion drive to prevent it from reaching the atmosphere of the planet. Then the pirates would board the transport and take whatever they could before Onell's limited starfighter force could get into space to strike back at them. On almost every occasion the ship carrying out the attack had been an Imperial customs corvette and Mace remembered how Lazaras Shallak himself had commanded such a vessel.

It occurred to Mace that the pirates must have been in possession of up to date intelligence on where the transports would be in order to target them so precisely, again something almost impossible to explain in the case of ships that had only just dropped out of hyperspace themselves.

Almost but not completely impossible.

Mace smiled as he realised that the pirates must be using a real time sensor array, one located close enough to the planet that it would be able to pick up approaching and departing ships but that was not detectable by them. The requirement for the monitoring system to be invisible ruled out an orbital sensor and conditions on the surface of the planet meant that it could not be down there. However, the planet possessed two small moons and Mace quickly turned to the *Silver Hawk's* navigation computer. Although the shadow port lacked any sort of traffic control Onell's organisation did monitor the system for potential hazards to navigation so that ships could travel to and from it more easily. The information gathered included the positions and orbital patterns of the two moons and it did not take long for Mace to back track these to determine that every time a transport had been attacked it had been in direct line of sight of the innermost of the planet's two moons.

"I have you now." Mace said to himself.

"You have who dad?" Cass asked from behind him as she entered the cockpit, now fully dressed again and sat down next to him.

"Shallak I hope." Mace answered, "I think it's his ship that's been attacking the transports and I think I know how he's targeting them."

"How?"

"He's placed a remote sensor system on the surface of one of the planet's moons. Whenever this picks up a ship it will let him know via a subspace link and he brings his corvette in to attack."

"So all we need to do is hide on a freighter that launches in full view of the moon and he'll come along and pick us up?" Cass said and Mace grinned.

"As easy as that." he said.

"Almost too easy. I've got a bad feeling about this." Cass commented.

"Hey, It's me. My plans always work." Mace said.

"The colonel's plans always work." Cass replied, "Are you sure that we shouldn't just call in the rest of the team? I'm sure they'd come if you asked them to."

"No, let them have their rest. They deserve it. This isn't a combat mission, just a scouting one. Rear Admiral Aphanar's people will do all the heavy work."

"We're still taking our weapons with us though, right dad?" Cass asked.

"Of course we are. Anyone messing with the Grayle family is going to regret it." Mace replied.

The starship chosen to carry Mace and Cass was a battered looking gallofree-yards medium transport. Ninety metres long, the class was slow and lacking in manoeuvrability but able to carry thousands of tonnes of cargo and was often regarded as 'pirate bait'. The Alliance used them as support ships but only because they had been able to acquire the vessels cheaply and had little alternative. One feature of the class was that it held a significant amount of its cargo in externally mounted containers located on the underside of the hull and it was to be one of these that Mace and Cass would be concealed inside when the ship took off.

"Are you serious?" Cass said when she saw the crate and considered how little protection it would give.

"It's air tight and the plating is thick enough to protect against micro meteor impacts and most common life form detectors." Lae replied.

"It'll do." Mace said and then he handed Cass a datapad, "Here," he told her, "we've got one of these each. Travakka says all we need to do is plug them into the computer network and the program will automatically upload into the ship's computer. It'll access the nav system to determine where we are and transmit that along with the ship's transponder code and a snapshot taken from the ship's sensors back to the Alliance."

"Very neat." Lae said, "Your friends will know where you are and what opposition they can expect when they jump in."

"Plus they know which ship we're in so they won't just shoot us down with the rest." Mace said and Cass frowned.

"How will we get back to the Alliance dad?" she asked.

"Oh I'm sure that they've got a plan for that sweetheart." Mace answered.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Cass said, still frowning.

"What about the crew?" Mace asked.

"Slaves." Lae replied and Mace scowled at him, "Hey, I know you've got a big thing about slavery but we couldn't find anyone willing to volunteer for this stupid operation. Onell bought himself a crew and told them that they'll be freed when this mission is done. They're not starship crew so the ship will be flying on autopilot. But the lack of a crew might make the pirates suspicious so they'll be aboard to give the impression that the ship is fully manned. Then as soon as the pirates make their move the crew will abandon ship. I doubt that the pirates will waste time firing on an escape pod when there's cargo to be stolen."

"No, you're probably right." Mace agreed and then he looked down at Cass, "Okay Cass, let's get this over with." he added.

The two rebels then climbed into the crate and behind them Lae slammed the door shut. Though the crate had been modified to ensure that its occupants would remain safe and undetected no attempt had been

made to provide for their comfort and this included lighting. Therefore, Mace fumbled in his pockets until he found his glow rod and activated it.

"There isn't even anywhere to sit." Cass complained.

"Yeah, I get the feeling that Lae Chen may have done that on purpose to annoy us." Mace said, "We'll just have to make do with the floor." and he went and sat in the corner, setting his rifle and decksweeper down beside him. Cass then did likewise, sitting down at the opposite end of the container from Mace, "You may want to come over here and sit by me." Mace told her.

"Why?" she responded.

"Do you see any heaters?" Mace asked, "The inside of this crate could get pretty cold so huddling together to share body heat is a good idea."

Cass groaned.

"I'm liking this plan less and less all the time." she said as she got up and walked over to where Mace was sat and sat down again beside him.

Just then the crate lurched as it was lifted up off the ground to be attached to the hull of the medium transport and Cass grabbed hold of Mace. The sound of the container being magnetically clamped to the ship echoed through it and then there was silence up until the point where the transport finally took off.

"Dad, how long is this going to take?" Cass asked.

"Hopefully under an hour. Why?" Mace responded.

"Oh just wondering how much air there is in here." Cass said and Mace smiled.

As the transport gained altitude the temperature inside the container fell rapidly and Cass snuggled up against Mace as the two rebels became able to see their breath in the air each time they exhaled.

"Here," Mace said, "this ought to warm things up a bit." and he picked up the deck sweeper from beside him. Pointing the weapon across the interior of the container he fired a single blast and the container was momentarily filled with blue light. The stun blast was incapable of inflicting any damage on the container itself, so there was no chance of an accidental decompression. However, the energy of the blast was absorbed by the container's walls and this was subsequently radiated back out as heat that made conditions inside more tolerable.

"Now we just need to wait." Mace said.

Located in the outer reaches of the system, hidden from view of any ships travelling to and from the shadow port a ship of the same type as an Imperial customs corvette waited. Sat in his seat at the centre of the bridge Lazaras Shallak, former customs officer and rebel privateer now turned pirate leader sat and watched his crew at work. Even without targets to engage there was plenty of work to be done monitoring communications between other ships of his pirate alliance and collating the information their informants were gathering. But when the sensors placed on the moon orbiting the shadow port picked up a transport leaving the planet laden with cargo all their attention turned towards this.

"Assessment." Lazaras said sternly.

"Galofree medium transport captain. Signs of significant external cargo."

"Good, our first catch of the day. Take us in." Lazaras ordered.

The jump through hyperspace to the shadow port from here was well practised and the co-ordinates were already stored in the corvette's navigational computer. This meant that all the helmsman needed to do to take them there was engage the hyperdrive.

The stars visible outside the corvette merged into the bright light of hyperspace for just a few seconds before the corvette returned to realspace and the planet on which Onell's shadow port was located was visible through the view ports instead.

"Target dead ahead. Half a million kilometres." the corvette's comscan operator announced.

"Maximum acceleration." Lazaras said, "We need to intercept that ship before it can turn around."

"Escape pod launch detected." the comscan operator then called out, "Looks like the crew is abandoning ship."

"Ignore them. It's the cargo I want. Take us in close and open up our cargo bay, we'll rip it right off their hull."

5.

The container in which Mace and Cass were hidden lurched suddenly downwards and Cass gripped her father tightly. The containers mounted on the outside of the transport were still within the ship's artificial gravity field to protect the contents from the extreme forces that even a relatively slow moving ship like a gallofree medium transport could produce. But now something had obviously ripped the container free of this and the two rebels found themselves thrown across its interior as something else became the dominant source of gravity.

"What's happening?" Cass cried out in alarm.

"This is it I think." Mace replied, "The pirates are using a tractor beam to drag us into their hold."

Cass then reached for the carbine she had slung over her shoulder.

"Okay I'm ready." she said as she checked the power cell.

"What for?" Mace asked, "We still need to wait a little longer yet."

All of a sudden the tractor beam ceased to hold onto the container and it dropped to the deck of a ship with a loud 'Clang!' that made both of the rebels flinch and left them with a ringing in their ears.

"Okay we're aboard their ship." Mace said, "Now we just need to wait for them to enter hyperspace."

"Captain, cargo master is reporting our hold is full." one of the bridge crew said.

"Multiple contacts, surface launches all heading this way." the comscan operator added.

"The worm is launching his fighters again. Hasn't he learnt not to waste his time yet?" Lazaras said, shaking his head, "Oh well, we have what we came for. Let's get out of here. Navigation lay in a course for home. Helm get us outside the gravity well so we can jump before those fighters get here."

Mace smiled when he felt the characteristic shudder of a ship entering hyperspace.

"That's it." he said, "They've made the jump."

"Now can we get out of here then dad?" Cass asked hopefully.

"Sure. We just need to make sure that the coast is clear." Mace said as he walked over to the container's doors.

Onell's men had fitted a lever to the inside of the doors that would gently release the seal and allow the rebels inside to open them without attracting attention. Mace shut off his glow rod and then slowly pushed one of the doors open and peered out through the gap.

"What can you see?" Cass whispered.

"We may have a problem." Mace replied, "There's another container right in front of the door. I think we can get out but from the look of the angle we won't be able to get out from behind it. The gap's wider at the other end but it's against a wall."

"So what do we do?"

"We'll have to climb." Mace said as he looked upwards, "We'll get on top of the containers and jump back down."

Squeezing out of the container, Mace reached up to drag himself up onto the top of the adjacent container and looked around. He smiled when he saw the general design of the vessel he and Cass were now aboard was Imperial, though he did notice some variations that suggested it was one of the black market reproductions of Imperial customs corvettes known to be built by criminal shipyards.

"Hey, how about a hand up dad?" Cass asked from below and when Mace looked back down at her he saw her jumping up and down in an attempt to get a handhold on the top of the container Mace was stood on.

"Sure." Mace replied, "Just this once I'll overlook the fact that you didn't say 'please'." and then he crouched down to help her up onto the container with him.

"Thanks." Cass said, "So where do we go next?"

"Over to that viewport." Mace answered, "The hold's on the outside of the ship so we may as well make use of it to check on when we come out of hyperspace. The pirates may not head straight for their home base and we don't want to trigger the beacon too early."

The two rebels dropped down from the container and headed for the viewport. They were alone in the cargo hold and the stolen containers ensured that should any of the pirates enter the compartment they would hear the sound of the door opening before the pirates would be able to see them.

Leaning her back against another of the containers, Cass sat down and looked out of the viewport and stared at the light of hyperspace.

"So how long do you think this will take?" she said as Mace sat down beside her.

"Customs corvettes aren't especially fast but I doubt that the pirates will be based outside the sector. More likely they're operating from somewhere else in the Spire Worlds. Navigation's tough here but this ship has

probably made the same run often enough for the crew to be used to it.”

“So it could be quite quick then?” Cass said and Mace nodded.

“On the other hand they could be taking a roundabout route to make sure they aren't followed. If that's the case then we could be in for a long haul.”

“More sitting and waiting then.” Cass said and she leant her head against Mace, “Good job I'm used to it by now.”

Mace and Cass sat silently, watching through the viewport until all of a sudden the ship shuddered slightly and the tunnel-like light of hyperspace shifted into the stars of real space. However, apart from the bright specks of starlight there was nothing else to be seen.

“Dad, where are we?” Cass asked.

“I don't know. My guess is that the pirates have come out of hyperspace in interstellar space to prevent them from being tracked back to their base. We'll probably jump back into hyperspace any moment.” Mace said and moments later the stars outside shifted, indicating that the corvette had begun to turn to a new heading, “Here we go.” Mace added.

However, instead of jumping straight back into hyperspace the crew of the corvette pointed their vessel towards a cluster of other ships also present. These were of various classes and looked to be either transports modified with extra weaponry or light warships, exactly the sorts of ships used by pirates.

“The other pirate ships.” Cass said, “What are they all doing out here in the middle of nowhere?”

“I don't think it's just a co-incidence.” Mace said, “Look over there.” and he pointed towards a distant shape that was barely visible through the viewport.

“What is it? Another ship?”

“That's no ship. That's a space station.” Mace said, “Use your scope.”

Cass lifted her carbine to her shoulder and looked down the built in optical sight. Though it was not intended to be used in this manner it still provided enough magnification that Cass could just about make out the downward pointing central core and ring of eight superstructure modules located at the top of the space station.

“What is it?” she asked.

“It's a haven-class medical station.” Mace replied as he studied it through the scope of his own rifle, “During the Clone Wars the Republic built them close to the front lines to provide medical support to their armies. This one must have been used to support the troops fighting the separatists in the nebula.”

“It looks like it's falling apart.” Cass commented as the poor condition of the station became more obvious.

“Probably battle damage. I'm not up to speed on every battle of the Clone Wars in the sector but I seem to remember a news report about a surprise droid attack on a Republic station in the sector.”

“So the station was just abandoned after the war?”

“Sure. The Empire had no need of it and it would have cost more than it was worth to recover all the parts. The pirates must have stumbled across it and patched it up enough to be usable as a base.”

“Like what the Alliance did with that old jump beacon?” Cass asked, referring to the fact that the headquarters of the rebellion in the sector was located aboard an ancient navigation beacon that had been abandoned thousands of years earlier.

“Probably. It wouldn't surprise me if it was Shallak's idea. He used to work for the Alliance until he decided he could do better as an independent operator.” Mace said and then he got to his feet.

“Where are you going?” Cass asked.

“To find a computer terminal.” he answered, “Or had you forgotten why we came here?”

“All ships present and accounted for captain.” the corvette's comscan operator announced.

“Excellent.” Lazaras responded, “Put em through to the station.”

“Opening a channel for you now sir.”

“Captain Shallak,” a voice announced from the space station, “good to see you back again.”

“How are things going over there?” Shallak asked.

“We've got two of the modules repaired well enough that you can go into them without a suit but the seals on the third have failed again. The reactor's still giving us problems as well, it's limited to about fifty percent output.”

“That'll do for now.” Lazaras said, “Concentrate on getting more of the station usable before increasing reactor output. It's not like we'll need to power the shields or weapons. Now we've got a hold full of cargo that needs checking out. Get some droids to the docking port to unload it.”

“Yes captain. I'll have-” the voice from the space station began but then the channel was unexpectedly cut off and there was only silence.

“What happened? Get him back.” Lazaras said.

“I'm not sure what happened captain, but the problem's definitely at our end. Something's interfering with the communication system.” the comscan operator replied. Then as he checked his instruments he added,

“Sensors as well. Something just carried out a full active sweep of the area and has uploaded the data into

the transmit buffer. Wait, the subspace transmitter just activated, we're transmitting.”

“Transmitting what? And where?” Lazaras demanded.

“It's repeating, captain I think someone's hijacked our own communication system to use as a beacon.”

“Find out where they are. I want them brought to me alive. If we're going to have company then we need to be ready.” Lazaras ordered.

6.

"Do you think it's working?" Cass asked as Mace stood hunched over the computer terminal with one of the datapads given to him by Travakka connected to it via a trailing cable.

"I think so. Travakka didn't have much time to put this together but the program seems to have uploaded properly. Of course, whether or not it's running as intended is another thing altogether." Mace replied.

The sound of an opening door then made Mace drop the datapad, leaving it dangling at the end of the connecting cable as he unslung his decksweeper and pointed it down the corridor just in time to see a pair of the corvette's crew come rushing around the corner.

Mace fired his weapon and the energy pulse rapidly expanded to fill the corridor an envelope the two pirates, both of whom instantly collapsed.

"Run!" he exclaimed, looking at Cass and he began to back up, still pointing his decksweeper down the corridor just in case the two pirates had not been alone.

Meanwhile Cass ran in the opposite direction, rushing up to another doorway and slamming her hand down on the control to open it. But as the door slid upwards she suddenly found herself face to face with a heavily scarred man and she gasped at the sight of him. Then she remembered her carbine and started to raise the weapon. But before she could aim it at the pirate he lashed out and knocked it from her grasp. Stepping backwards she reached for the sporting blaster pistol she had holstered on her belt but the pirate reached out and grabbed hold of her before she could draw it and she screamed.

"Dad! Help!" she cried out and Mace turned towards her, pointing the decksweeper in her direction.

From where he was Mace could see not only the pirate holding on to Cass but also two others as they came through the door behind him. The decksweeper was capable of taking out all three with one blast, Mace knew. But the problem was that Cass would also be caught in the area of effect. The stun blast would permanently injure his daughter but she would be incapacitated by it and Mace would then have to carry her himself.

For a moment Mace hesitated before he took his right hand off the decksweeper's trigger and reached for his heavy blaster pistol instead. But one of the pirates saw this and produced a knife that he held to Cass's throat before Mace could get his hand to his sidearm.

"Don't!" the pirate snapped and Mace froze. Even if he shot the man with the knife before he could use it there was a chance that he would cut Cass's throat as he fell, "Now drop it." the pirate called out and Mace snarled as he dropped his decksweeper to the floor and raised his hands.

"Dad no." Cass called out.

"I'm sorry honey." he replied as two more pirates appeared from behind him and rushed up to finish disarming him.

The pirates used tape to bind Mace and Cass's hands behind their backs, wrapping them entirely in the tape to ensure that neither could unpick the other's bonds. Then the two rebels were dragged through the corridors of the corvette until they reached the ship's bridge and they were brought before Lazaras.

"Captain Shallak." Mace hissed, "I thought I recognised your foul stench the moment I came aboard."

Lazaras smiled back at him and then nodded to one of his men and the pirate used the butt of his rifle to strike Mace in the abdomen, winding him and causing him to drop to his knees. Only being held by the pirates either side of him stopped Mace from falling face first to the floor.

"Captain Grayle." Lazaras replied, "How nice to see you again. How long has it been?" but Mace was still attempting to get his breath back and could not reply, "As for you," Lazaras went on, looking at Cass, "I don't believe we've been introduced. I'm Lazaras Shallak, the captain of this ship and commander of the newly formed Free Pirate Alliance."

"I know who you are. My dad told me what a nerf herder you are." Cass said.

"Dad?" Lazaras commented, smiling and pointing at Mace, "Why Captain Grayle I never knew you had a family. What an opportunity this presents, I'm sure that you'll tell me exactly what I need to know in order to foil your little plan if it means keeping your daughter safe."

"Kriff off." Mace gasped.

"Oh come now," Lazaras said, "my men haven't found any more of your little band aboard my ship so I'm guessing that the *Silver Hawk* must be on its way. So when do they arrive and what approach pattern are they planning on using to avoid detection?"

"Dad don't tell them anything." Cass said, "They can't kill me or they'll lose their leverage."

"Oh I don't intend to kill you young lady." Lazaras said and then he looked at one of the pirates holding her, "Tape her up. Face and feet." he ordered and the pirate grinned as he produced the reel of tape again and wrapped a length around her ankles to bind her legs together and then wrapped another around her head so it covered her mouth and sealed it shut. Then the pirates dragged her across the bridge and dumped her at

Lazaras's feet.

"Lay a finger on her and I'll kill you." Mace said, glaring at the pirate leader but Lazaras just grinned and crouched down beside Cass.

Grabbing hold of the teenager's hair he lifted her head off the floor and placed a finger next to one of her eyes.

"And now Captain Grayle we will discuss the location of the *Silver Hawk*." he said. However, before Mace could say anything the corvette's comscan operator called out.

"Captain! I'm picking up a hyperspace window. We've got a ship coming in."

"Is it the *Silver Hawk*? A YT-thirteen hundred?" Lazaras asked.

"Negative captain, it's-" the comscan operator answered but all of a sudden he stopped and gasped.

"What? What's out there?" Lazaras said, letting go of Cass and turning towards the viewports at the front of the bridge.

"Captain it's a star destroyer. Imperial-class." the comscan operator announced.

"Impossible." Lazaras said in disbelief.

"Two more vessel exiting hyperspace. Gladiator-class cruisers." the comscan operator added as two smaller vessels, each one still five hundred metres long appeared either side of the star destroyer.

All of a sudden there were flashes of green turbolaser fire as the three newly arrived warships opened fire on the pirate armada. Caught by surprise and at anchor, the lightweight vessels were easy prey for the star destroyer and its escorting cruisers. Just a single hit from one of the warships' turbolasers was enough to demolish a pirate vessel and as they closed in the cruisers unleashed a volley of concussion missiles towards the space station. But out of all the pirate vessels present, not one shot was fired at Lazaras's corvette.

Instead of opening fire on the corvette, the star destroyer headed towards it at maximum speed, its imposing presence growing ever larger through the bridge viewports.

"Get us out of here." Lazaras ordered and the corvette's helmsman started to turn the ship away from the massive warship. But before he could get the corvette out of range it lurched suddenly.

"Sir! They have us in a tractor beam." the helmsman called out, "They're pulling us in."

"Looks like the Empire doesn't like your little organisation." Mace said, smiling at Lazaras.

"Smile while you can Mace," he replied, "but how do you think they'll treat you and your daughter here?"

"Pretty good actually." Mace answered, "Haven't you heard? I'm a personal friend of Lady Lynn Sharva of Estran. Are you?"

Lazaras scowled.

"Captain, they're taking us inside their hangar." the helmsman yelled and looking around Lazaras found himself looking at the inside of the star destroyer's hangar. Then there was a dull 'crump' from somewhere else on the ship.

"Captain! We're being boarded. Spacetroopers have breached the hull."

"Looks like they really don't like you." Mace commented, knowing that zero-gravity stormtroopers, or spacetroopers as they were also known were among the galaxy's finest fighting troops.

"Well we're not going down without a fight." Lazaras said defiantly and he drew his blaster, "Seal the bridge."

Leaving the two rebels bound on the floor, the pirates fell back from the doorway and took cover. The first sign of trouble was the sounds of screaming from beyond the doorway before all of a sudden there was a flash of light from near the top of the doorway as the spacetroopers on the other side began to cut through. The door lasted only a few seconds against the powerful cutting torches built into the spacetroopers' armour and the moment that the door fell inwards there was a volley of blaster fire from the pirates directed through the hole.

The small arms that the pirates were armed with stood little chance of harming the heavily armoured spacetroopers, however and Mace saw the first of them shrug off several direct hits as he stepped into the bridge. Raising one of his arms the trooper returned fire with the blaster cannon built into his armour. The volley ripped through one of the control stations that was being used for cover by two of the pirates and both men were killed as more spacetroopers lumbered through the hole and opened fire.

Mace watched as all around the bridge pirates died in a hail of blaster fire that left only Lazaras alive as the spacetroopers formed a circle around him.

"Lazaras Shallak," one of the spacetroopers announced, "you are under arrest for high treason. Surrender now."

For a moment Mace thought that the pirate would carry out his promise to go down fighting, but faced with an entire squad of spacetroopers and having seen his entire bridge crew killed was enough to take the fight out of him and Lazaras threw his blaster to the floor.

"Just get it over with." he said but the spacetroopers held their fire.

One of them then turned and looked down at Mace.

"Captain Grayle, are you injured?" he asked.

"No, no I'm fine." Mace replied. Then he looked at Cass, "Are you okay?" he asked and she nodded at him.

"Colonel the bridge is secure." the spacetrooper then said, obviously speaking into his armour's comlink, "Lazarus Shallak is in custody and two hostages are safe." the trooper paused then, waiting as he received a reply that Mace could not hear. After which he looked back down at Mace and added, "Someone will be down shortly to untie you."

The colonel arrived just over a minute later and unlike his men his was not wearing armour that encased their hands and meant that they could not release Mace or Cass. But the officer was not wearing the grey of an Imperial colonel, instead Colonel Max Collis wore an Alliance uniform. Colonel Collis was the head of Alliance Spec Force for the sector and amongst his men were a handful of marines trained to use the limited number of spacetrooper suits that the Alliance had been able to capture from the Empire. The colonel was accompanied by a pair of ordinary fleet troopers who rushed to take Lazarus into custody.

"Don't get up captain." the colonel said, looking at Mace.

"Thanks colonel." Mace replied. Then he looked at the heavily armoured marines and added, "Your boys did a good job. Though I have to say I wasn't sure that they were ours until you appeared."

"Sometimes it's better if your enemy doesn't know who's attacking them." Colonel Collis told him, "If my men had stormed in here with Alliance markings all over their armour then you and your daughter would have been at risk of being used as human shields."

Just then Vorn Larcus, the leader of the rebel team assigned to the *Silver Hawk* entered the bridge along with his young wife Kara. Finally behind them came Captain Lee Kase, the commanding officer of the Imperial-class star destroyer *Night Wraith* that Vorn and Mace had captured for the Alliance several years earlier.

"Just in the nick of time captain." Mace said to Captain Kase.

"No point being any earlier." he responded.

"Having fun down there Mace?" Vorn asked, smiling.

"Oh yeah, just great." Mace replied, "Any chance of someone cutting me loose?"

"Sure." Kara said as she crouched down behind Mace and started to cut through the tape, "So I take it that your trip went well."

"As well as can be expected." Mace said. Then he glanced in the direction of Cass and keeping his voice low he whispered, "Just don't expect Cass to show you the new toy she thinks I don't know she bought."