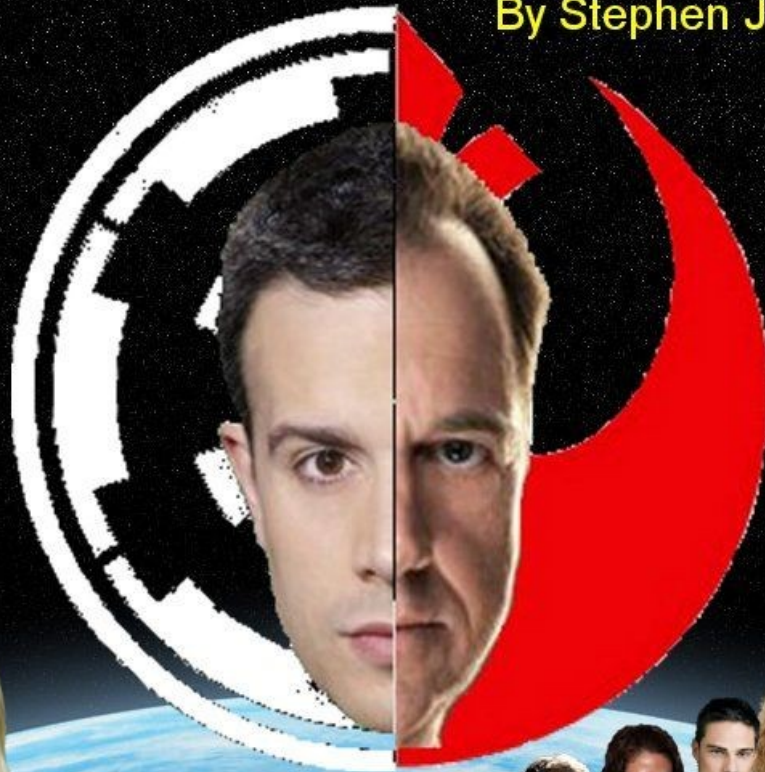


# STAR WARS

## 5-10: To Catch a Thief

By Stephen J Dutton



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Civil war turns father against son

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

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

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

## **TO CATCH A THIEF**

AN OLD ENEMY IS SPOTTED ON A REMOTE WORLD AND THE OCCUPANTS OF THE *SILVER HAWK* ARE SENT TO APPREHEND HIM. THE PROBLEM HIS HE COMMANDS A VESSEL FAR MORE POWERFUL THAN THEIRS AND MANNED BY A CREW OF VICIOUS KILLERS...

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

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# 1.

Even with thousands of ships available to patrol a single sector of space there were still numerous places that slipped through the cracks and went un-noticed. Mainly these were barren, devoid of anything of value. But occasionally settlements and outpost would be established in remote areas only to be abandoned and forgotten about. Forgotten by most that is, but not all and in some of these places new occupants moved in to take advantage of the infrastructure left behind. Sometimes these beings were refugees that would do their best to eke out a living far from whatever had driven them from their homes, but more often than not those who moved into these places existed outside the law and were simply looking for somewhere that they could evade justice. As time went on these hideouts would become known to ever more outlaws and their populations would grow until they became communities in their own right. Known as shadowports they were able to act as sources or suppliers of services to individuals unable to obtain them openly. Individuals such as rebel privateers.

The *Just Cause* had once served as an Imperial customs frigate, but under Captain Lorn Kruger it preyed on Imperial shipping instead of protecting it. Now with a hold laden with the spoils of a raid on a convoy that had mistaken his ship for it's escort Lorn had come to a shadowport to dispose of the items that the Alliance would not be laying claim to.

"Hey Carli!" Lorn shouted as he left the bridge and saw the Alliance's official observer aboard his vessel at the far end.

"Yes captain?" she replied with a smile.

"We've just touched down." Lorn told her, "I want to get drunk and get laid."

"Oh you're so romantic Lorn." Carli said.

"Would it help if I said please?" Lorn asked.

"Maybe." Carli replied, "Let me just get my wallet. If you get too drunk you may lose yours."

"Fine. Meet me outside, I'm going to find out what the best place to get a drink around here is."

"I'll see you there." Carli said and Lorn nodded as he then headed for the ship's access ramp.

At the bottom of this he found one of the locals offering to act as a guide to his crew to some of the seedier places in the area.

"Hey!" Lorn called out to the man and he waved him closer.

"Need a guide?" the man asked, "I know where to eat, where to drink and where to get women."

"I have a woman." Lorn told him, "What I need is to get food, drink and a room for us both. And the room better be good. The food and the drink just need to not taste like processed protein chains." And he held up a pair of coins.

Smiling the man made a grab for the coins but Lorn pulled them back.

"When I see the place." He said.

"Fine, fine. There's a place by the sensor tower. It's clean and the food is good." The man replied just as Carli came down the ramp behind Lorn.

"Who's this?" she asked.

"Our guide." Lorn said, "He's going to show us the best place in town to eat."

"You know Lorn, if this is the best place on this miserable rock to get something to eat then I'd hate to experience the worst." Carli said as she let the soup dribble from her spoon and back into the bowl.

"Yeah, the owner must be paying that guy a commission." Lorn agreed while he attempted to chew the lump of meat in his mouth.

"So how about we just skip to dessert and find out if the bedrooms are cleaner than this one?"

Lorn grinned and then turned aside to spit the half chewed meat against the nearest wall.

"Let's go." He said.

With their arms around one another they crossed the room, dodging the dropped food on the floor.

"Stang this is the worst meal I've ever had!" a man's voice called out and Lorn came to a sudden halt and looked around.

"Hey what's wrong?" Carli asked.

"Move!" Lorn hissed and he pushed her up against a supporting column.

"Hey!" she exclaimed, "What the hell are you playing at?"

"Remember Lazarus Shallak?" Lorn asked her.

"What that psycho who dumped his liaison officer in an escape pod and started hitting our own ships?" Carli replied.

"The very same."

"What about him?"

"Well he's sat right over there now." Lorn said and then both peered around the column and looked at a table in the centre of the room. In particular they looked at a man who wore the uniform of an Imperial Customs officer with captain's markings, "Now I do believe that the Alliance is offering a sizeable reward for the capture of that man and either the return of the encrypted communications unit he stole or proof of its destruction." Lorn added.

"Yes, but if you recall our intelligence suggests that he's running around in a customs corvette and your little frigate doesn't stand a hope in hell going up against that." Carli responded.

"Oh I'm not thinking about going up against his ship." Lorn replied, "Though I reckon that we'll still need help. His crew is bigger than mine."

"Fine." Carli said, "Let's get back to the ship and I'll call this in."

Lorn sighed.

"I guess I shouldn't have paid for that room in advance should I?" he said.

Major Vorn Larcus III walked across the hangar to the access ramp of the transport ship *Silver Hawk*. As he then proceeded up the ramp he heard the sound of voices coming from within and he recognised them as belonging to other occupants of the ship. Sure enough when he reached the top of the ramp and turned to the lounge area he found three men standing together. These were Mace Grayle, the *Silver Hawk's* owner and captain and sergeants Tobis Dorfus and Tharun Verser, the *Silver Hawk's* engineer and a former mercenary now part of Vorn's field unit respectively. When the three men became aware of Vorn's presence they instantly stopped talking and formed a line in front of him. Vorn stared at them and frowned.

"Why do I sense dissention in the ranks?" he asked as he sat down and the other three men exchanged glances, "Come on spit it out."

"It's about Kara." Mace said. Kara was another member of the team and also happened to be Vorn's wife despite being more than thirty years his junior.

"What about her?" Vorn asked, "If any of you had any problem with her starting her leave now-"

"It's not her taking time off to have the baby." Mace interrupted.

"Then what's wrong?" Vorn asked.

"Well, err, its just that she, err-" Tobis stammered, unsure of how to express the men's concerns.

"She's been talking about how great it is to be having a baby major." Tharun said. Then he looked at the other two and said, "There, I said it." Then turning back towards Vorn he added, "And it's been giving others ideas."

"Others like my daughter?" Vorn asked Tharun, who also happened to be Vorn's son-in-law, "Am I to take it that I won't be getting any grandchildren from you soon then?"

"It's not that I'm against the idea major." Tharun replied, "But you've seen our quarters. They're full of Lyssa's clothes and it's only got worse since I brought that stuff back from your old house on Estran for her."

Vorn then looked at Tobis.

"I'm guessing that you're not ready to have children with Jaysica yet then?" he said.

"Oh, err, well." Tobis began and then he suddenly added, "No."

"And you?" Vorn asked as he looked at Mace, "You're engaged to Malia."

"Oh it's not Malia major." Mace replied, "It's Cass. I'm still getting used to being a father and I don't want to be worrying about my eighteen year old daughter giving me a grandchild already."

"Boss!" a woman's voice called out from outside the ship and Vorn grinned.

"Ah, here's my beautiful bride now." He said to the trio in front of him, "You can all tell her your concerns yourselves." And the three men's faces fell as Kara entered the lounge.

"Well that's a great way to welcome me aboard." She said, then she began to slide onto the couch beside Vorn, "Move over boss." She added and then she kissed him on the cheek and looked back at the three men still standing in a line, "Dissention in the ranks?" she asked.

"That was exactly what I said." Vorn replied, "And yes, it seems there is."

"What's Jaysica broken now to annoy everyone except Tobis?" Kara said and she looked around, "I don't see any wreckage. Wait, where's Cass? Has the klutz glued her to the back of a starfighter?"

"It's not about Jaysica." Vorn said.

"Then what is it boss?"

"Actually it's you."

"Me? But I'm adorable."

"Yes, but would you please stop encouraging people that it's good idea to become parents when it can affect others?" Vorn asked her.

"No." Kara said and Vorn sighed.

"There." He told the three men, "I've done all I can. You're on your own." Then he looked back at Kara, "So why are you here anyway? I thought you were taking things easy."

"I was but I got bored so I went for a walk. Then I ran into Colonel Sallir who was on his way to give you this." And she handed Vorn a datapad, "He asked if I could bring it to you. I think it's a mission."

Vorn took the datapad and looked at it.

“Yes it is.” He replied, “An urgent one. Mace, Tobis, get the ship ready to go.” Then he paused before adding, “We need to find Cass and Jaysica quickly.”

“Oh I know where they are boss.” Kara said as she lifted herself back to her feet, “They’re with Lyssa looking at a catalogue of baby clothes.”

## 2.

The *Silver Hawk* dropped out of hyperspace above the planet where the shadowport was located and Mace turned to the communications system.

"So have you been here before dad?" the teenage girl sat beside him asked.

"Not to this particular shadowport no." Mace answered, "I did most of my smuggling between the Trade Corridor and the Shadow Worlds. I rarely ventured into the Mining Belt. Besides, from what I know about this place it's not up to much. There's not a lot for sale and what there is costs more than it ought to."

"So why does anyone come here?" Cass asked.

"Well not everyone knows the location of the only decent one in the sector, while others may have an issue with the hutt that runs it. Onell isn't one to forget an insult. Now go see if the others are ready while I look for the *Just Cause's* beacon." And without a word Cass got up and left the cockpit.

She found the rest of the team in the lounge area. They had felt the vibration of the ship as it exited hyperspace and were organising their equipment on the table. Given that the shadowport had no specific laws they could carry whatever they wished with them and so all of their weapons were being checked for use.

"Yes Cass, what is it?" Vorn asked when he noticed the girl.

"Dad wants to know if everyone's ready." She replied.

"Almost." Vorn told her, "Did he say how long until we land?"

"He's looking for a beacon." Cass replied.

"In that case I'll go give him a hand." Vorn said, "You stay here and help with the gear." And he headed for the cockpit.

"So do I get a bigger blaster?" Cass then said to Tharun.

"How much bigger?" he asked in response.

"Well bigger than that target pistol of mine." Cass said, "From what hear this place could be dangerous."

"I don't think that the major is keen on you having a weapon at all." Jaysica replied.

"Not so fast little lady." Tharun responded, "As a matter of fact the major and I had a little chat with the captain about this." And then he looked at Cass, "You're eighteen now so we figured that you ought to be able to take care of yourself in a fight. So since Kara's on leave you can use this." And he picked up a blaster carbine and unfolded the stock, "This is a DC-fifteen carbine." He explained, "It's older than you are but it works and it packs a punch. It's the forerunner to the standard issue E-eleven. Feel the weight." And he handed the weapon to Cass who took it and tried to copy the stance she had seen the other rebels adopt when firing a rifle, "See, you're a natural." Tharun added before the ship shuddered.

"Oh, err, I think we're entering the atmosphere." Tobis said.

"Then we'll be landing in a couple of minutes." Tharun said, "Everyone grab your gear."

Mace landed the *Silver Hawk* as close to the *Just Cause* as he could and as the occupants disembarked from the ship they found Carli and Lorn waiting for them.

"Captain Kruger, good to see you again." Vorn said, then he looked at Carli and nodded, "Lieutenant, the same goes for you of course."

"So this is what the Alliance sends then is it?" Lorn said as he surveyed the rebel field team and their vessel, "Six people, a couple of droids and a freighter? I've more manpower and firepower aboard my ship."

"You were perhaps expecting Colonel Collis and his entire special forces contingent?" Vorn asked.

"Of course not." Carli replied, frowning as she glared at Lorn.

"Well at least I know I can trust you not to try and screw me out of my bounty." Lorn said and then he nodded Vorn's team towards him, "Come on. You better come see what we've got."

Carli and Lorn escorted Vorn and his team through the streets of the shadowport until they reached one of the larger docking bays, one big enough to hold a vessel one hundred and eighty metres long. Most of the docking bays were free standing artificial structures, but the larger ones such as this were instead dug into the ground. This meant that by taking up a position at the edge of the hole it was possible to get a good view of the entire bay.

"A customs corvette?" Mace commented when he saw the ship in the bay, "I thought the *Renegade* dealt with Shallak's ship."

"Oh your girlfriend blew Lazaras' ship out from under him alright," Lorn replied, "but it seems that he's managed to get another from somewhere. Rumour is that he found a black market shipyard to build him one especially."

"It's fiancé now actually." Mace said as he took out a pair of macrobinoculars to study the ship more closely.

"Congratulations." Carli said smiling as she looked at Lorn.

"Don't even think it." He told her.

"That ship looks like standard Imperial issue major." Mace said, "Whatever shipyard put that together knew what they were doing."

"So if we assume that the internal configuration is the same as a standard ship that could mean that there's the best part of eighty people aboard." Vorn said as he too began to study the ship through macrobinoculars.

"And Lazaras probably knows every one by sight." Tharun said, "So I doubt that we'll be able to sneak aboard pretending to be part of the crew."

"Shallak doesn't stay aboard his ship all the time though." Carli said.

"No," Lorn added, "we spotted him in a cantina complaining about the food."

"But he wasn't alone." Carli said, "At least a dozen of his men were with him."

"Do, err, do we know why he's here?" Tobis asked.

"The usual." Lorn answered, "Refuelling, repairing and selling off whatever they've stolen."

"I think I know how we can get aboard." Vorn said, grinning.

"How?" Jaysica asked.

"As customers." Vorn answered, "We pretend that we want to buy what he's got. Or if we can find out if he's looking for anything himself we offer a trade."

"Lazaras knows me and Carli." Lorn pointed out, "If he catches sight of either of us then he'll never go for it."

"No, my people will have to go aboard alone." Vorn replied and before the privateer could protest he added, "Don't worry though, the reward will still be yours Captain."

"It better be. He's worth a lot to me. Alive or dead."

"What? Don't we get any of it?" Cass asked.

"Sorry kid. Welcome to field ops. No glory and no gold." Tharun said.

"Should have joined a privateer crew instead." Lorn told her.

"Oh she's just fine on the *Silver Hawk* with me." Mace said and then he lowered his macrobinoculars, "Okay then, I suppose the first thing to do is find out what sort of cargo is aboard that ship."

"I don't suppose you already know that do you?" Vorn asked, glancing at Carli and Lorn but both looked back blankly, "I'll take that as a 'no' then."

"I guess it's up to me then." Jaysica said.

"Oh, err, how?" Tobis asked.

"Come on Tobis. We haven't seen any women down there. That's a ship full of eighty guys who've been in space for weeks. I'm sure that a pretty woman can have them eating out of her hand." Jaysica said.

"True." Tharun said, "Where do we find one?" and both Cass and Jaysica scowled at him.

"That's enough sergeant." Vorn said, "Jaysica can try and get close to one of the crew. Just be careful corporal. Don't go aboard that ship under any circumstances."

"I should go with her." Cass said.

"Oh hell no!" Mace snapped.

"Dad I'm eighteen. You're the one who made sure I didn't get shipped off to some safe world school. Why did you do that if I'm never going to be allowed to do anything?"

"We'll be keeping a close eye on them anyway." Vorn said.

"You're really okay with this major?" Mace asked him in return.

"Cass does have a point Mace. She is an adult now and it was you that wanted her with us even before she was."

"That sounded like an 'I told you so.'" Carli said to Lorn softly.

"It was." Tharun said.

"Okay fine." Mace said, "But I'm going to be right there to make certain that she's okay."

A wide smile spread across Cass' face and she turned to Jaysica.

"So should we go get some of those fancy clothes from the *Silver Hawk*?" she asked.

"Oh that does it. No way." Mace exclaimed.

"What you're wearing now will do just fine I think." Vorn said, "As Jaysica pointed out these guys probably haven't seen many women recently. You could be wearing a vacc suit and they'd still hang on your every word."

"That sounds like an idea." Mace said, the look on his face suggesting that he still was not happy about this part of the plan at all.

The two men left the docking bay holding the corvette and headed towards the closest cantina. Behind them the rebels watched from the shadows.

"Okay they're moving." Vorn said and he turned to Jaysica, "You go first."

"With me right?" Cass asked.

"You're not going alone." Mace said, "Stick with Jaysica. She's more experience at this."



On the space station that served as the Alliance's headquarters in the sector Kara suddenly lifted her head and her eyes widened.

"I just got the feeling that I've missed something." She said to herself.

"Come on." Jaysica said, waving Cass along with her, "But leave the carbine."

"What? Oh yeah." Cass said as she took the weapon from her shoulder and handed it to Tharun, "I was just getting used to it as well. What about my pistol?"

"That'll be fine." Tharun told her, "Most of the people around here carry some sort of weapon. Just not ones this powerful." And he held up the carbine.

"Yeah, lots of disreputable people come here." Mace commented.

"Did he just insult me?" Lorn asked Carli and Vorn sighed.

"Jaysica, Cass, just go." He said and the two young women headed off after the pair of pirates.

"Captain," Tharun said, "you do realise that you just entrusted your adoptive daughter's safety to Jaysica don't you?" and Mace's face fell.

"You just had to say that didn't you?" Vorn said to Tharun.

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

Cass and Jaysica followed the pirates into the cantina and Cass coughed as a thick cloud of smoke drifted into her face almost right away.

"What's in that?" she said, "It smells funny."

"Perhaps best not to breath it too deeply." Jaysica replied, "I don't think that there is such a thing as a controlled substance here."

"I get the message. Now where are the guys we followed?"

"Err, probably by the bar." Jaysica said, "Yes look, there they are. Let's go."

The two women then began to push their way through the crowd towards the bar, both doing their best to ignore the crude advances made by several of the cantina's customers. Leading the way Jaysica took Cass right up to where the two pirates were being served.

"Are those any good?" she asked one of them, pointing to the drink that he had just purchased.

"Not bad." The man replied, "Are you new here or something?"

"First time." Cass answered and the two pirates smiled at one another.

"Then you must let us buy you ladies drinks." The same pirate then said and he waved the bartender back over, "Same again for these ladies." He said and the bartender just nodded as the pirate handed him a coin.

"So are you from that corvette?" Jaysica asked as two more glasses were placed on the bar and she picked one up. Beside her Cass picked up the other glass and stared into the murky fluid it contain and frowned.

Then she took an experimental sip and winced at the bitter taste.

"How did you know that?" one of the pirates asked in response to Jaysica's question.

"Oh we came from that direction," Jaysica told him, "and I thought that I recognised you as having come from there."

"Well then, yes we are part of the corvette's crew." The other pirate said, "The names Dorno and this is Stanz. What can we call you?"

"Jaysica." Jaysica replied, "And this is Cass. It's her birthday and we're celebrating."

The pirates grinned at one another.

"Well let's make sure we make it a party to remember." Stanz said.

"First tell me about your ship." Jaysica said as she positioned herself as close to Dorno as she dared, "I hear it's the biggest ship in port right now."

"It is." Dorno replied.

"And how long has it been since you were last in port?" Jaysica asked.

"About a month." Stanz told her.

"What's your cargo?" Cass then asked suddenly and both pirates stared at her.

"Why do you want to know?" Stanz asked.

"Oh we work for a smuggler." Cass said, "He's always on the lookout for a cargo that can make him some money."

"Well then," Stanz said as he wrapped an arm around Cass' waist, "Your boss may just be in luck. Because we happen to have a hold full of premium grade ion drive parts. There's always someone on the lookout for those."

Across the room Mace watched the pirate take hold of Cass and scowled.

"I'll kill him." he said, "I'll kriffing kill him."

"Not here you won't." Vorn said sternly, "Now just stay calm and we'll see what happens."



"Ion drive parts?" Jaysica repeated, "Those sound like something my captain would be very interested in." and then she raised the drink she had yet to touch to her lips and took a large gulp. Immediately that the bitter tasting liquid filled her mouth her eyes widened and she dropped the glass just moments before she spat it out again, spraying it all over Stanz.

"Hey!" the pirate exclaimed, "Look what you did. I'm a mess."

"I'm sorry." Jaysica said, "It was an accident."

"I don't care." Stanz said, "Now get out of my way you nerf herder. I need to go clean up." And he removed his arm from around Cass, "You wait here." He said, "I'll be right back."

While most of the watching rebels kept focused on their two female comrades and Dorno, Mace instead watched Stanz as he headed towards the bathrooms. Smiling, he slipped away.

He followed the pirate into the bathroom where he found the man rinsing his face to remove the sticky fluid. Seeing that there was no one else in the room Mace walked right up behind him and then just stopped and waited for the man to notice his presence, something that did not take long as he saw Mace's reflection in the mirror in front of him.

"Who the hell are you?" Stanz demanded as he stood up and spun around, his hand reaching for the blaster at his hip. But Mace reacted quickly and the moment Stanz's weapon was out of its holster Mace lashed out and knocked it from his grasp.

"The girl you had your arm around." Mace said, string into Stanz's eyes as the pirate clutched at his hand, "You should treat her with more respect."

"What? Oh, right I get it." Stanz replied, smiling and as his hand went into his pocket Mace stepped back and pulled his own heavy blaster pistol from its holster and let it hang beside him, "Hey! I'm cool." Stanz said and he slowly withdrew his hand to reveal the roll of banknotes, "So how much is she?"

Without any change of expression Mace suddenly butted Stanz in the face and as the pirate staggered back he followed this up with a blow to his stomach that caused Stanz to drop his money as he doubled over in pain and gasped for breath.

"Like I said." Mace said as he returned his blaster to its holster, "Respect." Then he bent down and scooped up Stanz's money and blaster, tucking them both into his trousers as he returned to the bar.

Rather than head back to the other rebels he then headed for Cass and Jaysica.

"Come on." He told Cass, "You're done."

"What?" Cass replied.

"Hey let go of her." Dorno said, "She's taken."

Mace turned to face the pirate and pointed a finger to his face.

"Stay out of it unless you want to end up like your friend in the bathroom." He said sternly.

"Sorry, I think I better go as well." Jaysica added and she followed Mace as he pulled Cass back across the room.

"Care to explain yourself captain?" Vorn asked when he reached the others.

"I'm kind of curious about what you were doing myself." Carli said.

"Sorry major, but I'm starting to have second thoughts about involving Cass." Mace replied.

"Stang Mace. You know you can't just go off like that. You could have blown everything." Vorn told him.

"It was going really well as well." Cass added, "We'd got them to tell us what their cargo was didn't we Jaysica?"

"Yes, ion drive parts." Jaysica said, then she looked at Cass and added, "But you shouldn't be so direct. They could have got suspicious."

"That's all we need major." Tharun said, "No harm done after all." And Vorn frowned.

"Maybe not, but it's pure luck." Vorn said.

"Err, what do we do now?" Tobis asked.

"I suggest we get out of here." Lorn said. Rather than focusing on Mace he had continued to watch Dorno and had seen the man head for the bathroom himself and that he had just now emerged with Stanz behind him. More significantly he had his blaster in his hand.

"Good idea." Vorn said as the pirates looked in their direction.

"You go on ahead." Carli said, "Lorn and I will follow."

"We will?" Lorn asked.

"Yes, we'll wait for those two nerf herders to follow the major's team and ambush them."

"Good idea." Lorn said, "Then that's two down already."

"That's the plan." Carli replied.

"Okay let's go." Vorn said, "And everyone keep an eye out for any more of their friends. The last thing we need is to get into a pitched fight against eighty pirates in the street."

Vorn and his team then left the cantina, keeping just ahead of Dorno and Stanz.

"It looks like there's six of them now." Dorno said as he and Stanz walked right past Carli and Lorn.

"I don't care." Stanz replied, "I just want that vacc head who broke my nose. And while I'm killing him I'll tell him how I'm going to enjoy myself with that little girl of his."

"Doesn't sound terribly pleasant does he?" Lorn said softly.

"No he doesn't." Carli replied, "I think we'll be doing the universe a favour by killing them both." And then they followed the pirates from the cantina.

In the street outside Dorno and Stanz hung back as they trailed the rebels, completely unaware that their quarry was just leading them on while they gave Carli and Lorn time to get into position to deal with them.

"Okay this should do." Stanz said as he and Dorno reached a corner and saw Vorn's team walking down a long street that offered nothing in the way of cover, "Can you make the shot from here?"

"Sure I can." Dorno replied as he pressed himself up against a wall and aimed at Tharun, "I'll take the big guy first. The one with the A-two-eighty."

Stanz snorted.

"Try not to damage that." He said, "It'll make a great souvenir."

Then there was the sound of a blaster shot and a look of confusion appeared on Stanz's face as he failed to see the energy bolt fly down the street.

"You missed." He said, turning to face Dorno before he became aware of the smell of burning flesh. Then his jaw dropped as he saw both Carli and Lorn aiming their blasters at him.

"Hey look, there's need for this." He said as he raised his hands and backed away.

"Yeah, there kind of is." Lorn replied before he shot Stanz in the chest.

### 3.

"So they're definitely both dead?" Vorn asked as Carli and Lorn arrived at the *Silver Hawk*.

"I know a dead man when I see one." Lorn replied.

"We pulled these from the bodies." Carli added and she set a blaster, two comlinks and a datapad down on the table, "I've not checked the datapad yet."

"Tobis, get Harvey to check it out." Mace said.

"Err, yes captain." Tobis replied and he picked up the datapad and headed for the ship's workshop.

"Okay, so let's go over what we found out before Cass and Jaysica were interrupted." Vorn said and Mace became aware that everyone in the room glanced in his direction as Vorn finished his sentence.

"They're carrying engine parts." Cass said.

"It'd be handy if we could grab some of those." Lorn commented, "The Alliance pays well for them."

"Yes that thought occurred to me as well." Vorn replied, "But there's also the issue of the ship itself."

"You think we can take it major?" Tharun asked.

"I'm not sure. A crew of eighty is a lot to overcome." Vorn answered, "I was actually thinking where it came from."

"Huh?" Cass commented.

"Oh, err, I think the major means the shipyard." Tobis said as he reappeared from the workshop without the datapad.

"Exactly." Vorn said, "The shipyard."

"Of course." Mace said, "If there is a black market shipyard out there then the Alliance could do with finding out where it is. Destroy it and we cut off a source of ships for criminals, or capture it and we gain a facility to build more ships for our own fleet."

"Ships we desperately need." Vorn added.

"So what else do we know?" Carli asked and she looked at Jaysica, "Did that second guy say anything else while his friend was getting beaten up?"

"He mentioned that their ship is damaged." Jaysica said.

"Yeah," Cass added, "They took a hit from an Imperial cruiser that knocked out the fire control for their turbolasers and they need new parts. They're hoping to sell some of the ion drives to get enough money for them."

"Problem is that no one seems to have a spare computer that's compatible with their ship." Jaysica went on.

"So we tell them we've got what they need, right?" Tharun asked.

"Exactly." Vorn said, "We'll offer to buy their entire cargo but at a lower price than they're asking. Then as part of our haggling we'll offer them a targeting computer for them."

"Oh, err, but where do we get a military targeting computer from?" Tobis asked and both Carli and Vorn looked towards Lorn.

"Oh no." he said, "You are not pulling my ship apart. What about the *Silver Hawk's* targeting computer?"

"It's only designed to run a single laser cannon." Mace replied, "Not a full array of turrets."

"Err, the system aboard your ship should be compatible with the one aboard a customs corvette." Tobis added, looking at Lorn.

"The Alliance will compensate you for any loss." Vorn said."

"Assuming there is any." Carli said, "Come on Lorn, think of what you stand to gain. The bounty on Shallak, his ship and maybe even the shipyard itself." And a hint of a smile appeared on Lorn's face.

"Okay... you've got yourself a deal." He said.

Tharun and Vorn headed to the docking bay that held Shallak's vessel by themselves and armed only with pistols. As soon as they entered the bay they were noticed by one of the pirate crew and the man immediately alerted the rest of the group he was working in.

"Here we go." Vorn said softly as they came rushing towards the two rebels and he raised his hands, "We're here to do business." He said out loud.

"Business?" the lead pirate replied, "What business do you think we've got with you?"

"The sort where I pay you money for something you have that I, or rather my employer wants." Vorn said as he eyed the blasters the pirates were holding. Then a quick glance at Tharun informed him that the former mercenary currently had his hand resting on the blaster holstered on his leg but had not drawn it so as not to provoke the pirates into opening fire.

"Go on." The lead pirate said, lowering his blaster.

"I've heard that you have a cargo hold full of ion drives that you're looking to get rid of." Vorn said.

"And how would you know that?" the pirate asked.

"Your crew have been visiting the local cantinas. They've talked and people have heard them." Vorn said, "Now do you have ion drives for sale or not?"

"Come with me." The pirate replied, then as both rebels took a step forwards the pirate held up his hand for them to stop, "Not him." he said, pointing at Tharun, "Just you old man and no blasters."

"I think you should remain here." Vorn said to Tharun, "We don't want any trouble."

"Of course not." Tharun replied.

"I'll leave my blaster with you as well." Vorn added and he reached into his jacket and pulled out the compact pistol he kept there, handing it to Tharun. Then he turned back to the pirate, "Do please lead the way." He said to the man.

Holstering his on blaster, the pirate led Vorn into the corvette. The entryway used was not the ramp into the hold so Vorn could not confirm what the ship's cargo was but as they walked through the ship's corridors Vorn saw just how well the black market shipyard that had built the vessel had done in reproducing the original craft. He also saw that a large portion of the crew wore Imperial uniforms, complete with correct rank and divisional markings. This told Vorn that Shallak was probably sticking with the tactic he had favoured while working for the Alliance, approaching a target vessel claiming to be a genuine customs patrol and demanding to be allowed aboard. Only when a force of heavily armed pirates was storming their ship would their victims discover the pirates' true identities. Vorn was led up into the control tower of the corvette as far as the main bridge where the pirate halted and looked towards the captain's chair.

"Sir, there's someone here who's interested in our cargo." He called out while Vorn took the opportunity to look around. The bridge seemed typical of corvettes of this class except for one detail. Wired into one of the consoles at the front was the Alliance encryption unit that allowed the crew to listen in on Alliance communications and plan their raids using the information they gained.

"Oh really?" the figure in the captain's chair replied and then the chair turned to reveal Lazaras Shallak, still wearing the full uniform of an Imperial Customs captain, "Well do show him in."

"My name's Vorn," Vorn said, "and as I explained to your man here my employer has a need for ion drive parts."

"Is that so?" Lazaras asked, "And why can't your employer simply purchase them on the open market?"

"Let's just say that some of the paperwork that he would have to submit to certain official agencies could hold things up indefinitely." Vorn said and Lazaras grinned.

"Ah, I see." He said, "So how much are you offering me for this fine merchandise?"

"Your hold, is full yes?" Vorn said, "That's five hundred tonnes?"

"That's right. At twenty tons per drive gross that comes to twenty five drive units." Lazaras told him.

"Type?" Vorn asked.

"Kuat Drive Yards. Mark twelves. Manufactured locally under licence by Kurrad Industries. The crates still have the factory seals on them. Though I doubt that the warranty will be of much use to your employer." Lazaras said.

"No. Putting in a claim would be problematic." Vorn said.

"So what are you offering?" Lazaras asked again.

"How does two hundred per tonne sound?" Vorn asked and Lazaras snorted.

"You know I may have stolen those drives but that doesn't mean I'm going to let you steal them from me." He said.

"My employer has authorised me to negotiate" Vorn said, "Within limits of course."

"I want two thousand per tonne." Lazaras said and Vorn frowned.

"That would be beyond my limit." He said and he paused, "Though perhaps we can still come to some accommodation."

"How?" Lazaras asked.

"Well perhaps I can assist you in procuring certain items that would be useful for keeping this ship of yours running and those items could be used to offset part of the cost. Say half." Vorn suggested.

"These would have to be some pretty impressive parts." Lazaras said, leaning back in his chair.

"A targeting computer." Vorn replied and Lazaras' eyes widened, "Taken from a Imperial Customs frigate. Fully compatible with your ship I believe."

"And what makes you think I'd be interested in that?" Lazaras asked.

"Because some of your crew can't keep their mouths shut when they drink." Vorn told him, "I understand that your weapons are currently non-functional because of the lack of fire control and until you can replace the targeting computer this ship is just a very expensive example of a militaria collectable."

"Do you have it with you?" Lazaras asked.

"Of course not." Vorn answered, "When we have a deal I can go and get it. I can even have a tech install it for you."

"I have people who can do that." Lazaras replied, "But I am interested."

"Then we have a deal." Vorn said.

"Not yet. I can't let you have the drives for a thousand per tonne."

"Then how much?" Vorn asked.

"Let's split the difference. Fifteen hundred." Lazaras suggested and Vorn made it look as if he was considering the offer.

"I'll have to run it by my employer." He said, "But I think he can be convinced to agree. I'll be back with the targeting computer and a crew to handle the drives."

"My people will unload them after I've seen the computer." Lazaras said, "I'm not having a bunch of strangers wandering around my ship."

"Fair enough." Vorn replied, "I'll be in touch. The money will be payable on collection."

"Excellent." Lazaras said and he looked at the pirate who had shown Vorn in, "Show our guest out." He said and the pirate nodded.

"This way." He said to Vorn and he escorted the rebel from the bridge.

When they were gone Lazaras got up from his chair and approached one of the crew stations.

"There's something familiar about that guy." He said, "Like I've met him someplace before. Try and get me a subspace connection to anywhere I can run him through. Oh and I'll need an image to use. See if he walked past any of the cameras."

"Okay it's on." Vorn told the rebels assembled in the *Silver Hawk*, "Captain Shallak is expecting me to let him know if we're agreeing to his price and take him the computer."

"So we can't bluff this out without the computer then?" Lorn asked.

"No, sorry." Vorn replied, "He wants to see the computer and then the ion drives will be unloaded for us to pick up."

"You're planning on disguising an assault force as the labourers I guess?" Mace said.

"Correct." Vorn replied and then he looked at Lorn, "How many men can you offer me?"

"About a dozen." Lorn replied, "Those are the ones Lazaras doesn't know."

"Oh, err, we could disguise you." Tobis pointed out.

"That's right." Carli agreed, "A few simple masks ought to do the trick."

"My full crew's twenty-one." Lorn said and looking at Carli he added, "Not including you."

"Okay so we've got twenty eight all together." Vorn said, "Assuming that everyone gets involved." And he looked at Mace.

"If you're talking about Cass I'm okay with it if she is." He replied then he in turn looked at Cass and added, "But you stick with me young lady. Understood?" and Cass nodded.

"I've taken part in a raid before remember?"

"Really?" Carli commented, "You took a kid on a raid."

"I helped steal some TIE fighters." Carli told her proudly.

"We didn't really have a choice." Mace said.

"I'll take the computer to Lazaras with Tharun and Tobis." Vorn said, "I'll insist that they come aboard with me."

"Why do you need Tobis major?" Jaysica asked.

"Because I want him to double check the cargo." Vorn replied, "If there's anything up with it I want him to tell me so I can call Lazaras out on it. It's essential he believes that we're on the level."

"Err, aren't we pretending to be criminals?" Tobis asked.

"What do you mean pretending?" Lorn asked in turn, "The Empire's probably got a price on everyone in this room."

"He needs to believe that we're serious." Vorn said, "So he may try and test us. Tobis knows engines so he's the best one to spot anything wrong. Once we're aboard we'll try and take Lazaras into custody and lock down his ship."

"In that case I'm going with you as well." Lorn said, "I'll wear a mask so he won't recognise me, but I want to make certain that the arrest is credited to me."

"Okay." Vorn said, "But you better make sure that he can't tell its you."

"Are we limiting ourselves to sidearms again major?" Tharun asked.

"No." Vorn replied, "This time we go in ready for action. Full weapons and armour."

"What if Lazaras ahs a problem with letting you aboard his ship like that?" Carli asked.

"Then we tell him the deal's off and walk away." Vorn said, "I doubt he'll want to risk that. He has too much to lose."

"Are you certain we can find our way around the ship?" Lorn asked.

"It shouldn't be a problem." Vorn replied, "I saw the communications unit on the bridge and I believe that the datapad you recovered from those two crewmen you killed held a deck plan." And then he looked to where his gold coloured protocol droid was standing beside a red R5 astromech, "Isn't that right Jeeves?"

"Oh yes sir Major Larcus." The protocol droid replied and it looked down at the astromech beside it, "Harvey was able to download a full deck plan." Then the astromech bleeped excitedly, "Yes Harvey I was just getting

to that. Major Larcus sir, Harvey was also able to download a repair schedule. He can provide you with the status of every system aboard the corvette should you need it."

"Well that's good to know." Vorn said, "Because I think we could do with every edge you can give us."

The connection to the sector's public data network was poor, but Lazaras was patient enough to wait while the data downloaded. One part of the monitor in front of him showed an image of Vorn taken from the memory of a droid that the rebel had walked past on his way to the bridge. The rest was dedicated to searching through wanted notices issued both by the Empire and various planetary governments.

It was at times like this that Lazaras missed his original ship, the one he had captained while still part of the Imperial Customs Service. The computer aboard that vessel had given him access to several low level restricted databases even after he had deserted with his ship.

"Who are you?" he said to himself as he stared at the image of Vorn. Then he noticed that the automated searches he had been running had come to a halt, producing the names of several individuals who matched the details Lazaras had entered. He opened each of these up, positioning the reports in a row across the top of the screen so that he could compare each one to the image of Vorn below. One by one he then closed them as details or pictures failed to match. That was until he came to two identical search results, one issued by the planetary authorities of Estran and the other by the Empire itself.

"Of course!" Lazaras exclaimed as he realised that he had seen the news reports of Vorn's defection to the rebellion and had probably seen him in passing during his time operating under an Alliance letter of marque, "I knew I'd seen him before! Well Vorn Larcus the third, I think you'll be making me a tidy profit as soon as I figure out a way to turn you in for this reward."

## 4.

Tobis and Vorn walked between Lorn and Tharun, these two men looking somewhat imposing in the armoured vests they wore and carrying blasters at the ready. Lorn's features were concealed behind a breath mask that covered his nose and mouth while a pair of dark goggles and a cap served to hide most of the rest of his head. The fact this made him look anonymous only served to make him look even more intimidating. Meanwhile Tobis and Vorn kept their weapons holstered and slung while Tobis carried the case containing the targeting computer.

Of course their appearance attracted the attention of the pirates rather rapidly as soon as they entered the docking bay.

"What the hell is this?" one of them demanded, starting to reach for his blaster until Lorn and Tharun aiming theirs at him convinced him to stop.

"What? Did you think that I'd just walk in here alone with the computer?" Vorn asked, "Now either you can show us aboard or you can tell your captain that we're here. But if you don't then you can tell him how you personally blew this deal." And the pirate turned around and rushed aboard the corvette.

"Okay I count eight men out here." Tharun said softly as he looked around at the remaining pirates, "Light arms only."

"That shouldn't be a problem." Lorn said, "So long as we can lock down the ship and keep the rest in small groups as well."

"Oh, err, what if we can't?" Tobis asked nervously.

"Then we'll just have to hope that they all form one long line so that Tharun can shoot through them all at once." Vorn replied before the pirate he had sent to deliver the news of their arrival reappeared from out of the corvette.

"The captain says you can come aboard." He called out and he waved them towards the entrance to the cargo hold where a ramp was lowered.

"Okay this looks good." Vorn said, "Tobis be ready to inspect the cargo."

"Err, yes sir." Tobis replied and the group advanced towards the ramp.

As they walked up the ramp the rebels could see that the hold was in darkness, its lights having been shut off.

"Major I've got a bad feeling about this." Tharun whispered as he braced his rifle against his shoulder.

"Me too." Vorn replied, "Everyone watch out for-" and then the lights in the hold suddenly came on.

"Open fire!" a voice yelled and the air was suddenly filled with flashes of blue as the pirates positioned on top of the crates inside the hold opened fire on the rebels with their blasters set to stun.

Surprised by the sudden onslaught and with nowhere to take cover the rebels were helpless and after only a few seconds all four were lay unconscious on the deck.

"Cease fire!" the same voice yelled and from behind a stack of crates a pirate emerged and approached the rebels, keeping his blaster trained on them just in case any were not quite as helpless as they seemed.

Kicking each of them gently to test that the stun blasts had done their job he then knelt down and opened up the case that had fallen from Tobis grasp and inspected the computer it held. Then he looked up at the other pirates on top of the crates, "Okay they're done." He called out, "Get them moved while I tell the captain we've got the computer."

"Major? Major are you awake?" Tharun asked as Vorn began to regain consciousness. As his eyes flickered open and he lifted his head he attempted to raise his arms as well only to find that they had been bound to the chair in which he was sat with plastic ties. Looking around he saw that Lorn, Tharun and Tobis were likewise restrained and that they seemed to have been left in an otherwise empty storeroom with shelves lining the walls.

"What happened?" Vorn asked.

"Well I'm guessing that Shallak had plans other than those he agreed with you." Lorn commented, "So do you have any bright ideas for getting us out of here?"

"It might help if we knew where 'here' was." Tharun said, "Do we know we're still aboard the corvette? And if we are then is it still at the shadow port?"

"Oh we're on the ground alright." Lorn said, "Can't you tell?"

"Sorry captain, but I've not spent as long aboard starships as you have." Tharun replied.

"Okay, so from the looks of the walls I'd say we're still aboard the corvette and they've not taken off yet."

Vorn said, "Which begs the question of why?" but before anyone could come up with an answer the door slid open to reveal Lazarus flanked by a pair of his pirate crew.

"Awake then I see." He said as he strode in.



"I don't know what you think you're up to but you won't get away with this." Vorn said, "We have powerful friends."

"Oh yes Major Vorn Larcus the third I am well aware of who your friends are." Lazaras replied, "Shall I begin with these two maybe? Tharun Verser, former member of a private military company blacklisted by the Estranian government and Lorn Kruger."

"That's Captain Lorn Kruger to you." Lorn interrupted.

"Yes of course, Captain Lorn Kruger. Alliance privateer. What's the matter Lorn? Too scared to be a real adventurer to risk going out without a letter of marque to hide behind?"

"Untie me and we'll see who the coward is Lazaras." Lorn hissed.

"What? And risk my reward? All three of you have prices on your heads and the only reason you're still alive is that I'm still trying to figure out how to turn you in and who to turn you in to so that I get the biggest reward. So don't worry, none of you will be harmed. Not unless I can make more money by doing it anyway. So just you wait here and I'll go and make all the arrangements." And then Lazaras turned and walked out of the room.

"Shallak you nerf herder!" Lorn yelled, "I'll kill you for this!" but Lazaras did not reply before the door slid shut once more.

"Well that went well I thought." Tharun said, "He explained pretty much his entire evil scheme."

"Oh I'm so glad about that." Lorn said, "It makes me feel so much better about being tied to this chair."

"Don't worry, we've got out of worse." Vorn said.

"When?" Lorn asked.

"Well there was the time that I was shot by my own son and spent months being held in a military hospital." Vorn said.

"Or the time that guy who blamed me for the death of his unit tried to beat me to death." Tharun added.

"And there was that bounty hunter who came after me on Estran." Vorn said.

"I got chased into the *Silver Hawk* by a mob of zombies." Tharun commented.

"Zombies?" Lorn asked.

"Oh they weren't really zombies." Vorn responded.

"Err, I was frozen in carbonite with Jaysica once." Tobis said softly.

"And of course when the little lady's sister was used to lure us all into a trap." Tharun suggested.

"Don't forget how I got caught while we were stealing the *Ocean Queen*." Vorn said.

"Really? That many times?" Lorn said before Tharun or Tobis could come up with anything else, "You guys really ought to consider a different line of work you know."

Not far from the entrance to the docking bay Mace stood with Cass and watched for any sign of the rebels who had gone in there.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." He said to Cass.

"Why?" Cass asked in response.

"They've been in there just too long. All they needed to do was hand over the computer and call us to let us know the arrangements for the pick up."

"So what do we do dad? Should we try and contact them?"

"No." Mace replied, shaking his head, "If they are okay then the call could give them away."

"Then what?"

"Follow me." Mace said before Cass could finish her question and he led her away.

"Where are we going? The *Silver Hawk* isn't this way." Cass asked.

"I know. We're going to take a look at that docking bay." Mace told her.

Mace led Cass out of the shadowport's docking complex and to the edge of the hole that had been excavated for the bay holding the corvette. Approaching the edge, Mace ducked and crawled the last few metres to minimise the chance of him being spotted from within. Then he took out his macrobinoculars and began to survey the docking bay.

"Do you see anything?" Cass asked as she lay down beside him.

"Nothing out of the ordinary." Mace replied, "And that's not good."

"Why not?"

"Because if things were going as they were supposed to then the pirates would be unloading their cargo right now. But they're not, it's still sat in their hold and the only activity I can see is a small ground crew performing basic checks. Wait, hang on."

"What's wrong?" Cass asked him and he passed her the macrobinoculars.

"Look down there." He said, pointing to the far side of the docking bay, "What do you see?"

"I see one of the crew." Cass answered as she peered through the macrobinoculars and zoomed in on the figure.

"What's he armed with?"

"A blaster rifle."

"Yes but what sort?"

"I don't know." Cass answered and Mace sighed.

"You're going to have to get better at recognising different weapons you know." He said, "That is a Blastech a-two-eighty. It's one of the most powerful blaster rifles in the galaxy. They put fist sized dents in AT-ATs."

"But why does that matter?" Cass asked.

"Because we've not seen any of the pirates armed with one before." Mace pointed out, "I think that that rifle is Tharun's."

"But he'd never give it up." Cass said.

"Not willingly no. I think that this pretty much proves that something's gone wrong." Mace said before there was the sound of a motor running and as he looked at the corvette he saw one of its turbolaser turrets moving, "Stang, I think they're installing the computer. Come on Cass, we've got to move." And Mace grabbed hold of Cass and pulled her back from the edge of the docking bay and began dragging her along with him as he rushed back towards the *Silver Hawk*.

## 5.

"What's wrong?" Jaysica asked as Cass and Mace ran up the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp.

"Excuse me Captain Grayle sir," Jeeves asked as they then headed into the lounge, "but why have we not heard from major Larcus?"

"We think they've been captured Jeeves." Cass replied while Mace continued towards the cockpit. Once there he sat down and activated the communication system while Cass and Jaysica followed him in and also sat down.

"But what about Tobis?" Jaysica asked, "Is he alright?"

"They must have got him as well." Cass replied.

"*Just Cause* this is *Silver Hawk*. Do you read me?" Mace transmitted.

"Go ahead *Silver Hawk*." Carli's familiar voice replied, "Why aren't you watching the docking bay?"

"Because the advance team's been made. I'm guessing that they're being held inside the corvette." Mace answered, "Now I need to know if Lorn's crew will follow you."

"Why wouldn't they?" Cass asked.

"Because she's an Alliance officer and Captain Kruger and his crew technically aren't part of the Alliance." Jaysica explained.

"I think so." Carli replied to Mace, "If they're helping rescue their captain anyway. I don't think that there's anyone here looking to take over his post."

"Right then." Mace said, "Get over here now and bring as many of his crew as will come. We need to move fast because I've got the feeling that Captain Shallak won't be hanging around for much longer."

With more than twenty people crammed in, the *Silver Hawk's* lounge was extremely crowded as Mace looked around at the concerned faces.

"Okay you know the situation." He said, "Major Larcus, Captain Kruger and Sergeants Dorfus and Verser are being held somewhere aboard the pirate corvette and it's up to us to rescue them."

"How do we know they're even alive?" one of the privateers asked.

"Don't say things like that." Jaysica responded, "My Tobis isn't dead."

"That's the theory we're working with." Mace said, "Unless anyone can prove otherwise that is. Now the obvious problem is that Shallak's got a much bigger crew than us and I don't think we've got time to call in reinforcements. So the first thing to do is try and thin out their numbers a bit."

"Okay so how do we do that?" Carli asked.

"We've seen them heading off to cantinas in small groups." Mace said, "We need to take down a few of these quietly. Get rid of the bodies and let the pirates think they've either deserted or are busy sleeping off drinking sessions." Then he looked directly at Carli, "Can you handle that? Take a group of about five or six."

"I think so." Carli replied, "But how do we know when the pirates go drinking?"

"Jaysica we'll need Penny." Mace said, "She can feed visual scans of the pirates to Lieutenant Sentis as they leave."

"Okay, so we take out a few pirates but what good does that do us then?" Carli asked.

"With any luck it'll cause them to send out more to try and find them." Mace said, "I don't see them just leaving until they know for certain that their crewmates aren't coming back. That's when we strike. Captain Kruger's crew are to attack the docking bay openly. Don't worry about getting aboard the corvette though, just make sure that the pirates know you're there and keep their attention fixed on you. That'll give us the chance to get aboard unnoticed."

"How?" Jaysica asked.

"From the roof of course." Mace replied, "The docking bay is below ground level. We'll fire a line from the surface and slide down it to the upper hull. Then we override the upper hatch and get into the ship that way. Once there we'll locate the major and the others and release them. Then we'll see if we can just continue with our original mission, that is seize the ship, detain Shallak and either recover or destroy the communications encryption unit he has."

"Is that all?" Carli asked.

"Not quite." Mace replied and he looked towards Jeeves and Harvey, "Can you access the shadow port's traffic control system?" and Harvey let out a string of chirps.

"I believe that Harvey is confident that he can Captain Grayle sir." Jeeves answered.

"Good. Then get started now." Mace said, "Because I think that Shallak's crew are installing the targeting computer and if they do decide to make a sudden break for it then I want them kept on the ground. Make sure that they're denied clearance."

"But Captain Grayle, what if they take off anyway?" Jeeves asked, "I'm only an interpreter, I can't possibly stop them from taking off."

"Threaten to shoot them down." Mace said.

"But sir, my programming won't allow me to engage in such action." Jeeves pointed out.

"I know that." Mace replied, "But they won't know you're not really giving an order for them to be fired on. Or at least I hope they won't."

"You hope?" Carli asked, "Oh I'm starting to get a very bad feeling about this."

Jaysica set her mouse droid, known as Penny, down near the entrance to the docking bay. The boxlike droid gave a single chirp and rolled back and forth as it waited for instructions.

"Go on Penny." Jaysica said, "Get over there and keep watch. We need pictures of everyone that comes out and the direction they're heading in." and she pointed towards the docking bay. Obediently the droid chirped once more and rolled off, vanishing into the shadows near the docking bay, "Oh I hope she'll be alright."

Jaysica said.

"She'll be fine." Mace replied, "If anyone gets close to her she'll let us know." And then he lifted his comlink to his mouth, "Okay lieutenant, our lookout is in place. I'm taking Cass and Jaysica up the side of the bay."

"Understood captain." Carli's voice responded, "We'll be waiting."

Carli was positioned under a bridge about a hundred metres from the docking bay with a group of Lorn's privateers and it was only a few minutes after Mace had called her that the datapad she had plugged her comlink into beeped. Looking at it she saw Penny had transmitted an image of two humans leaving the docking bay and heading almost straight towards her position.

"Okay boys this way." She said, pointing towards a side street that looked to be the one that the two pirates had taken.

The street was one that had various businesses backing onto it from both sides, meaning that it was empty as the privateers positioned themselves in alcoves and behind trash cans just in time before the two pirates came wandering up the street.

"I'm telling you," one of them said, "Grover said that this place is-" but before he could get any further a figure lunged at him from behind a corner and wrapped an arm around his throat while his other hand clamped over the man's nose and mouth.

"Stang!" the second exclaimed as he reacted by reaching for his blaster. But before he could draw the weapon two more men appeared from behind him and took hold of his arms. Then before he could cry out one of them drove a knife between his ribs and twisted it, opening up his chest and stopping him from making a sound as he died. The first pirate meanwhile was too focused on trying to break free of his assailant to have noticed this, but was starting to feel light headed from the lack of oxygen. The man holding him increased the pressure of his grip and there was a soft 'crunch' as he broke the pirate's neck.

"Okay get rid of them." Carli ordered as she beckoned the privateers back into cover, "But search them and make sure that they've nothing useful on them."

Lazaras walked onto the bridge and frowned.

"Where's Koller?" he asked one of his crew.

"He went into town." The man replied.

"That was hours ago. Isn't he back yet? I need him to take a look at this computer. His techs can't get it synched with the sensor array properly." Lazaras said, "Raise him." and the crewman nodded.

"Koller? Koller can you hear me?" the crewman transmitted using the ship's communication system, but there was no reply. Scowling Lazaras stormed over to the comscan console and activated the transmitter himself.

"Stang Koller just get back here." He said sternly, "And that goes for the rest of you as well. I want us ready to launch in an hour so I'm cancelling all shore leave." Then he shut off the transmitter and looked at the operator, "If anyone tries calling you with any excuses just tell them that in one hour they'll either be aboard or left behind." And he turned and marched off the bridge.

Holding a pirate's comlink in her hand, Carli smiled as she listened to Shallak's order and she detached her own comlink from her datapad.

"Okay Captain Grayle," she transmitted, "I don't think there's going to be any more of them coming out here."

"Then hook up with the others and start your assault." Mace replied, "We're all ready up here."

From his position overlooking the docking bay Mace picked up the line thrower that he had borrowed from the privateers and aimed it towards the rear of the corvette's control tower.

"Do you know how to use that dad?" Cass asked as she fastened a harness around her body. All three rebels were equipped with an identical harness.

"Of course I do." Mace replied.

"So how come the safety's on?" Cass said.

"It is?" Mace said as he looked at the side of the line thrower.

"No, but you had to check." Cass said and Mace frowned and took aim again.

"Come on Carli." He muttered, "Where are you?"

The door to the docking bay was blown from its frame as the charge applied to the outside and the pirates within the bay watched in amazement as it flew into the hull of the corvette. Taking advantage of the momentary distraction the first few of Lorn's privateers burst in, firing.

Initially Lazaras' men dived for cover but it did not take long for them to gather their senses and return fire, the first casualty amongst the privateers being one who was unlucky enough to be caught in the doorway as he tried to enter the docking bay.

"Covering fire!" Carli yelled from outside at the privateers already within the docking bay, "Don't worry about hitting them, we need to get everyone in there!"

The privateers obeyed the instruction and put less effort into aiming, instead increasing their rate of fire to force the pirates to stay behind cover while Carli waved more troops into the fight, following them in at the end.

On the bridge of the corvette the handful of pirates watched the battle through the viewports.

"What's going on?" Lazaras demanded as he rushed onto the bridge himself.

"We're under attack." One of the crew replied, "From the looks of it I'd say it's the rest of Kruger's men. I've ordered another squad out there."

"What about the other rebels?" Lazaras asked as he joined his crew by the viewports, "Seal the ship." He said.

"What?"

"I said seal the ship. Let the men already out there deal with those rebel scum. If they can't manage that then have the rest of the crew concentrate on defending the entry points. In the meantime get us ready for launch."

"But what about the men we're still waiting for?"

"They're dead." Lazaras said, "The rebels have obviously been picking them off to try and reduce our numbers. Now get to your stations, there's work to be done."

## 6.

Mace saw the access ramp closest to his location retract and the hatch slide shut.

"Looks like they're getting ready to leave." He said.

"Without those men?" Jaysica asked.

"Looks like it." Mace said and then he fired the line thrower. The magnetic clamp sailed through the air in an arc, and came back down to impact against the rear of the control tower. Mace then fixed the thrower itself to a hook he had already driven into the ground beside him and reeled in the slack of the syntherope line until it went tight, "Okay, here we go." He said and he looked at Jaysica, "You first." He told her.

Jaysica nodded and hooked her harness to the line. Then she ran forwards and jumped from the side of the docking bay, sliding down the syntherope towards the corvette at the other end. However, rather than releasing her harness when she was over the hull of the corvette she allowed herself to keep sliding forwards until she struck the side of the control tower.

Cass gasped and covered her mouth with her hands.

"Is she okay?" she asked.

"Oh she'll be fine." Mace replied, "That young lady has a tendency to bounce. You next. Just don't forget to drop from the line and roll when you're over the ship. Alternatively try to land on top of Jaysica."

Cass hooked herself up to the line and approached the edge of the docking bay before peering over.

"Dad, I'm not sure I can do this." She said as the reality of the height struck her.

"Sure you can." Mace said and he pushed her over the edge. Then he drew his blaster and aimed it into the docking bay, watching for any sign that the pirates had become aware of Cass as she slid over their heads.

"Cass get ready to let go." Jaysica said as she watched the teenager approaching at the same time as she unslung her carbine and also watched to see if the pirates below had seen them.

Remembering what Mace had told her, Cass released her harness from the line as soon as she was over the corvette and she rolled as she landed beside Jaysica before fumbling to untangle her own carbine from the harness.

"What about dad?" she asked.

"He's coming right now." Jaysica replied and she pointed to where Mace was rapidly sliding towards them. Like Cass he detached himself from the line before hitting the corvette's control tower and rolled across the upper hull.."

"Everyone safe?" he asked and both Cass and Jaysica nodded, "Okay then. Let's get inside this thing.

Jaysica, the hatch is over there." He added as he removed his harness and unslung a bulky weapon that was similar in length to the carbines Cass and Jaysica carried but wider and with a flared muzzle.

Jaysica ran to the hatch and pulled a lump of explosive from her backpack that she began to press around the edge of the hatch where it met the hull. Then she pressed a timer-based detonator and fuse into the explosive and pulled the pin.

"Down!" she yelled as she ran back from the hatch just quickly enough to get away before the explosive was triggered.

"They can't have failed to have noticed that." Mace said, "Let's go!" and he ran forwards. Pointing his weapon down into the corvette he paused just long enough to confirm that there were no pirates waiting right underneath before he jumped down, "Okay the coast is clear." He called back out through the hatch as he peered out of the airlock and first Jaysica and then Cass followed him down, "This way." Mace then said, picking a direction at random and he ran down the corridor with his weapon held at the ready.

Turning a corner Mace found himself facing a trio of pirates, all of who reached for their blasters when they saw him. But Mace was ready for this and he pulled the trigger of his own bulky weapon. The deck sweeper was designed for engagements exactly like this, short ranged and in confined spaces. The energy pulse it fired was similar to a stun shot from a regular blaster but it lacked the containment, instead spreading out to fill the entire corridor and enveloping the pirates to render them all unconscious in one go. However, the drawback with the weapon was its low rate of fire with the circuitry requiring a full ten seconds to recharge before another shot could be fired and in this time a fourth pirate appeared right in front of Mace.

As the pirate attempted to draw his blaster Mace swung the butt of his own weapon up under his chin and knocked him backwards, then he struck again to deliver a blow to the side of the pirate's head and he fell to the deck.

"Cass! Give me your blaster!" he snapped and as his daughter stepped closer he reached out and pulled her lightweight pistol from her belt. Then he pressed the muzzle to one of the pirate's knees and fired. The pirate howled in agony, "Tell me where the prisoners are or I blow off the other kneecap!" Mace shouted and he moved the blaster to point at the other knee.

"No don't!" the pirate shouted, "Deck three, starboard side storage."

"Thanks." Mace replied and then he shot the pirate in the chest before handing the blaster back to Cass, flicking the safety catch back on, "Let's grab some of these blasters." He said, pointing to the pirates' weapons, "I get the feeling our people will need them."

"Can anyone tell me what the hell is going on aboard this ship?" Lazaras demanded.

"There seem to be rebels aboard sir." One of his crew replied, "The upper hatch has been blown and we've got men down. Shall I lock down the ship?"

"No, we need to be able to move our own men about. Those rebels still outside may still make it to us. Just warn everyone to keep an eye out." Lazaras said and then he drew his blaster and checked it was loaded.

"Okay there are two guards." Mace whispered as he pulled his head back around the corner, "One of them is the guy with Tharun's rifle as well."

"Can you get them with that?" Jaysica asked as she pointed to the deck sweeper.

"I think so." Mace replied, "But be ready just in case I can't." and then without bothering to look he held the deck sweeper around the corner and fired.

There was a flash of blue light followed by the sound of something heavy hitting the deck. Peering around the corner again Mace saw both guards now lying unconscious on the floor.

"Come on." He said, waving Cass and Jaysica forwards, "Okay Jaysica get this door open." He said as he slung the deck sweeper over his shoulder again and picked up Tharun's heavy rifle.

Jaysica looked at the control panel for the door and she simply pressed the button to open it, causing the door to slide upwards.

"You mean it wasn't even locked?" Mace exclaimed.

"Tobis!" Jaysica yelled when she saw him tied to one of the chairs in the storeroom and she rushed to embrace him, "What have they done to you?"

"Oh, err, nothing really." Tobis replied.

"What took you so long captain?" Vorn asked as Mace entered the room.

"We ran into some company who insisted we stop and chat." Mace replied as he pulled out a knife and began to cut through the plastic ties holding the four men to the chairs, "Here," he said to Tharun, "I think that this is yours." And he handed him the rifle.

"Ah, that's very good of you sir. I was worried I'd never see it again." Tharun replied.

"Dad! Behind us!" Cass suddenly yelled out as she saw a group of pirates appear in the corridor outside and she opened fire, spraying blasts from her carbine towards them.

"Give me one of those." Lorn said as he grabbed one of the blasters Jaysica had sticking out of her backpack and he joined Cass in firing at the pirates.

"Let me." Tharun said and he braced himself against the doorframe and fired down the corridor. The powerful rifle blew chunks from the walls, producing fragments of heated metal that drove the remaining pirates further back and made them easy targets for the rebels. One tried to flee around the corner they had appeared around but another shot from Tharun's weapon punched right through the wall and struck him anyway.

"Okay now for the bridge." Vorn said, "I know the communication unit is there and I'm guessing that Lazaras is as well."

"They'll be coming for me." Lazaras muttered as his crew delivered word that the rebel prisoners had been released, "Me and that." And he looked at the encrypted communication unit wired into his ship. Then he looked at the helmsman, "Are we ready to launch?" he asked.

"We're ready, but I can't get clearance sir."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that there's just some droid who keeps telling me that if we take off we'll be shot down."

"Shot down? This place doesn't have anything that could harm us. Take off now."

"But sir." Another crewman protested, "What about our people outside?"

"We can replace them. I want all the men we've got guarding the entry points to gather around the bridge. This is where the rebels already on board are heading for."

"The ship's taking off." Lorn said as there was the sound of the repulsorlifts powering up.

"Then we need to hurry." Vorn replied, "We need to get to the bridge before the ship can make it to hyperspace. Tharun, you're on point."

"Yes major." Tharun replied and he darted ahead of the others, holding his rifle at the ready.

The two pirates standing guard outside the bridge were easily cut down, Tharun fired a single shot into each before they could react. But the sound of the shots attracted the attention of those on the bridge itself.

"Seal the door!" Lazaras yelled and one of the crew ran towards the door to close it.

Mace fired his pistol and the pirate screamed as he fell, tumbling across the floor.



"Shallak you're mine!" Lorn yelled as he dived through the still open doorway and he fired at Lazaras twice, both shots going wide.

Rather than draw his own blaster, Lazaras dived back at Lorn and the two men collided with enough force to knock the blaster from Lorn's grip before they landed in a heap, grappling with one another.

"The comms unit!" Vorn yelled as he reached the doorway, "Try to get to the comms unit." And he and the others pressed onwards, taking cover behind consoles as the bridge crew returned fire.

Amongst all this Lorn rained blows down on Shallak, punching him repeatedly in the face. But from the corner of his eye he spied movement back out in the corridor.

"More of them!" he yelled and Lazaras took advantage of the brief distraction to punch Lorn with enough force to push him away.

A blaster bolt sailed close by Tharun's head just as he was about to charge closer to the communication unit and he looked around to see that the pirate reinforcements were now at the door.

"We've nowhere to go major." He called out.

"Yes we do." Vorn replied and he pointed to the escape pod at the side of the bridge, "But we can't leave while the comms unit is still intact."

"Understood major." Tharun said and he took aim at the console that the unit was connected to and opened fire with his rifle set to fully automatic. The console exploded as the powerful blasts tore it open and incinerated the circuitry inside.

"No!" Lazaras yelled as he rushed to pull the comms unit away before it too was completely destroyed. But as he picked it up there was a shower of sparks as the blasts from Tharun's rifle caused a malfunction that sent a surge of power from the console into the communication unit.

"Okay we're done here." Vorn called out, "Everyone into the pod."

"What about that nerf herder Shallak? And what about my targeting computer?" Lorn demanded.

"Forget them." Mace replied and he shoved the privateer towards the escape pod.

Tharun fired on automatic again, this time spraying shots around the bridge to provide cover as the rebels withdrew. He was the last one into the escape pod and as soon as he was inside Tobis slammed his hand down on the control to seal the hatch and then without waiting for anyone to get strapped in Vorn pulled the release lever.

Instantly the pod lurched violently as it was propelled away from the corvette and the rebels inside were all thrown towards the hatch at the back. Still inside the atmosphere the escape pod tumbled for a few brief seconds before the onboard computer assessed the situation fully and activated the repulsorlift engines, bringing the pod down to the ground with enough force to then throw the occupants towards the front of the pod. This was followed by the sound of an explosion as the bolts holding the hatch closed were released by preset charges and the hatch itself was thrown clear.

Dazed the rebels lay still for a while. Then Lorn raised his head.

"Larcus, you better be right about the Alliance replacing that computer." He said.

Back aboard the corvette, now safely into space and heading out of the planet's gravity well Lazaras inspected the damage to the communications unit.

"It looks fried captain." One of the crew said.

"It is." Lazaras replied, "Or rather a lot of it is. But the vital part, this bit here." And he pointed to a part of the unit that was not charred or scorched at all, "This is what does the actual decryption and it's intact. Give me some time and I'll have this working again, just you see."